

El Imposible National Park, El Salvador: Biodiversity and Community Livelihoods

1. Cover slide
2. Right in the middle of Central America is a small country called El Salvador. El Salvador is actually the smallest country in Central America. And it has the highest number of people per area—or the highest population density—of any country in the region.
3. In part because of the tremendous population pressures that El Salvador faces, there is very little forest left. The forests that once covered the Pacific coast of the country and the highlands have long since been cleared to grow food or build homes. Because of its small size, the land was needed to grow food to eat and to sell. Nearly 20 percent of El Salvador's foreign income comes from agricultural production, making farming one of its most important industries.
4. Like all of Central America except Belize, El Salvador was colonized by the Spanish. It gained its independence from Spain in 1821. When the Spanish arrived, they found a country rich in culture and tradition. The ancient Maya, who once covered southern Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Belize, had a very developed culture and social structure. Although Spanish is the official language of El Salvador, many of the people speak other languages. The most common indigenous group is the Maya.
5. El Salvador, like all of Central America, was once covered with a variety of tropical forests, including rainforests in the middle and lower elevations, cloud forests at the highest elevations, coastal forests, and tropical dry forests. But El Salvador has lost 98 percent of its forest cover. This has left the country very susceptible to drought, desertification and natural disasters such as floods.
6. As you can imagine, the remaining two percent of forest cover is precious to conservationists, because it represents the last morsels of habitat for wildlife in the country. Much of the forest cover that still remains in El Salvador is found on private land, not in national parks or reserves.
7. El Salvador is a crucial link in the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, a forested chain of protected areas and parks that links North and South America. The Corridor allows populations of certain species, like jaguars, to continue to interact with each other—a crucial component of their long-term conservation. Jaguars have long since disappeared from El Salvador. But conservationists hope that programs like the Corridor project may help to bring them back to a large portion of their former range. Imagine, for a moment, a string of beads all strung together by thin threads. Well, protected areas are very similar. Scientists are trying to tie together a series of separate parks, reserves and private lands like beads, to make them all into one long strand. If animals are separated into small parks or reserves without the freedom to migrate and meet other individuals of their species, too much inbreeding will cause them to become extinct. Connecting the parks is the only hope for protecting many of the animals in Central America over the long term.
8. Along the northern border of El Salvador lies its first national park, called El Imposible (pronounced “EL im-pose-EE-blay”). El Imposible means “The Impossible” in Spanish. The name refers to a high mountain pass that was once used by traders entering El Salvador from Guatemala. The traders had to traverse the steep terrain of the “Impossible Pass” with their mules loaded with goods, making it very dangerous.
9. Today there are roads that connect El Salvador and its neighbor, Guatemala. But El Imposible is still very important for the country. Created by government decree in 1996, after years of work by local and international conservationists, the park is one of the last places in El Salvador where you can still find abundant wildlife. Many of the animals that once roamed throughout the country are making their last stand in El Imposible. The king vulture shown here is the largest bird found in the park, and one of the largest found in Central America.
10. Although most of the large rainforest animals that were once found in El Salvador are now gone, like jaguars, pumas and tapir, the park is the last refuge for many smaller species. Among them is the ocelot. Ocelots, like jaguars, are good climbers and swimmers. They eat small animals, lizards and even fish. Ocelots spend much of their time in trees where they are able to avoid their biggest predator—humans—who have hunted them for their beautiful coats.
11. Other species, like the great curassow, are only found in El Imposible—nowhere else in El Salvador.

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- These large land-loving birds forage for seeds and insects in the dense undergrowth of the park. Once common in El Salvador, the birds have declined sharply in numbers because of pressure from local hunters and loss of habitat.
12. But some of the most interesting animals found in El Imposible might also be found in your own local forest. Every year, thousands of migratory birds travel south during the fall to spend the winter in tropical forests. Tanagers, warblers, raptors and even butterflies make the long journey to their forest in Central America. The Baltimore oriole travels more than 3,000 miles from the eastern coast of the United States to spend our winter in the warm forests of Central and South America.
 13. Increasingly, these migratory birds are finding that their habitat is gone. Imagine flying 3,000 miles—the same as flying across the United States—only to discover that your favorite place has been turned into a cattle ranch, with no trees and no food for you! That happens all too often. Central America alone loses a million acres of forest each year. That is the equivalent of 114 acres of lush tropical forest cut down or developed every hour.
 14. El Imposible National Park is surrounded by coffee farms. In fact, there are still working coffee farms along and within the park's boundaries. Before the government of El Salvador created the park, some of the park land was being used to grow coffee as well. While many of the farms were bought by the government to add to the park, others continue to produce coffee within the boundaries of the protected area. Although that might seem strange compared to Yosemite or Yellowstone in the United States, many of Central and South America's protected lands are completely surrounded by farms. And coffee farms can be great habitat for wildlife if they are grown in the shade of trees.
 15. The middle elevation forests are rich in biodiversity and are also very productive landscapes. Their soil is high in nutrients and the climate is neither too hot nor too cold to farm. This land is very valuable for growing coffee, cocoa, corn, beans and other foods. In a small country like El Salvador, every acre of land is seen as an opportunity to grow more food or produce more agricultural products for export.
 16. Coffee, which evolved in the rainforests of Ethiopia, has been grown in harmony with the forest since its introduction to the New World in the 16th century. Coffee trees are well-suited to grow under the protection of majestic rainforest trees. The trees protect the coffee bushes from the harsh rays of the sun, and birds help to protect the coffee bushes from insects that might attack the plants' flowers.
 17. But there is much more to El Imposible than coffee farms. El Imposible is the source of eight of El Salvador's major rivers. These rivers flow toward the Pacific coast, where they not only provide drinking water to a large portion of the population of El Salvador, but also maintain important coastal mangroves. The rivers and streams feed into lakes, lagoons and estuaries that themselves maintain a rich diversity of wildlife. Not to mention these rivers provide food to many area residents.
 18. About 60 percent of the population of El Salvador lives in rural areas and more than 80 percent of these are small farmers who depend on small plots of land to grow food for their families and generate money for other expenses. Coffee plays a very important economic role for these families. It accounts for nearly half of all agricultural earnings. The very poor families directly around the park earn, on average, less than \$100 per month. It is important to help these families find a way to earn a better living, while enabling them to protect the forest.
 19. SalvaNatura, the Rainforest Alliance partner in El Salvador, has been working to protect El Imposible since 1996. SalvaNatura is helping to ensure that farmers are able to maintain traditional farming practices—growing shade coffee using few, if any, pesticides. Together with communities around the park, SalvaNatura is helping to start sustainable businesses that give people a way to earn money that is not harmful to the forest.
 20. SalvaNatura is also teaching local kids about the value of the park. Through classroom visits, walks in the forest and educational programs, SalvaNatura teaches the kids that El Imposible is a special and important place and that their future and the future of the wildlife depends upon them acting responsibly.

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21. Wherever we live, we have a responsibility to help protect our environment. The people who live outside of El Imposible are doing that by learning how to use sustainable farming practices, developing businesses that are good for the environment and protecting animals from hunting. How can you help them protect El Imposible? What are some of the things that you can do to help protect your environment?