



Flock of military macaw (*Ara militaris*) flying over the Awacachi Corridor. Credit: Juan Pablo Moreiras/FFI

SECURING THE AWACACHI CORRIDOR IN THE CHOCÓ RAINFOREST OF ECUADOR

A HALCYON LAND & SEA CASE STUDY

In 1999 Fauna & Flora International (FFI), with the support of Halcyon Land & Sea, began an ambitious project to secure a vital corridor between the two most important reserves in Ecuador's Chocó rainforest. The project was groundbreaking in its ambition, requiring 57 separate land purchases to piece together the corridor, and was achieved in an environment of poor land registration and untried legal frameworks.

The Awacachi Corridor now represents one of the first and largest privately-owned reserves in Ecuador, with land held in perpetuity for conservation, and ownership and management vested in a local institution. Eighteen years on from its inception, we look back on what this project has achieved to date, and the lessons learnt from this uniquely challenging initiative.



Roadside orchid in Esmeraldas province. Credit: Evan Bowen-Jones



Map showing the location of the Awacachi Corridor connecting two reserves in the Chocó rainforest of Ecuador. The Awa Rio Bogota Reserve is titled to an indigenous community and managed as part of the corridor. Inset: location of the Awacachi Corridor within Ecuador's Esmeraldas province.

BACKGROUND

Running from Panama through the western coast of Colombia and into north-western Ecuador, the Chocó rainforest is one of the most biologically rich habitats on Earth, noted for its high number of endemic species. It is also home to many people, both indigenous tribes and Afro-Ecuadorians. Poverty in the area is high, with communities living on subsistence agriculture, hunting and other forest products.

The Chocó rainforest is under immense pressure. Conversion of forest for agriculture and large-scale logging has had significant impacts over the last 100 years. More recently, the growth of the palm oil market has driven further forest clearance, and today less than 6% of Chocó rainforests now remain. In Ecuador alone, an estimated 100-250 km² of Chocó rainforest is destroyed each year. Land purchase offers from oil palm companies are one of the few opportunities for most of the communities in this poverty-ridden region to access cash. However, once their land is sold, they can no longer access it for subsistence, and have few opportunities other than to work for the oil palm companies.

In 1998, the forests connecting the Cotacachi-Cayapas Ecological Reserve and the Awa Ethnic Reserve – considered the best lowland Chocó forest remaining outside Ecuador's protected areas system, and a vital ecological connection between the two reserves – were under direct threat of sale to oil palm and logging companies. Selling to these companies would have inevitably seen these vital forest remnants being cleared. The forests are located in

Esmeraldas Province, the poorest in Ecuador, and companies were actively buying up land rights in these areas from both individuals and communities. In the same year, FFI was approached by a small Ecuadorian NGO with the aim of securing the forest corridor before it was too late.

Following a scoping trip to establish the escalating pressures from oil palm companies in the area, a grant was secured from Halcyon Land & Sea (then known as the Arcadia Fund). It was agreed that land purchase was the only option to directly compete with the companies when key blocks of land were offered for sale, but it was vital to ensure that communities selling their land were not disadvantaged by the project, and that subsequent management of the land was embedded in a local, in-country institution.

In view of these considerations, the objectives for the Awacachi Corridor project were to:

- **Purchase and maintain a core corridor** of land directly linking the two protected areas
- **Ensure communities in the corridor area were not disadvantaged** as a result of the project, and where possible gained additional benefits through sustainable income-generating activities, environmental education programmes for schools, and development support
- **Implement an effective protection strategy** for the corridor to prevent illegal resource extraction at local and commercial levels
- **Develop necessary in-country institutions and processes** to ensure the sustainable management of the Awacachi Corridor in the long term.

SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENTS

12,489 ha of Chocó rainforest secured from wide-scale logging and conversion to agriculture, ensuring ecological integrity for a total area of 350,000 ha

Land purchases were planned using local knowledge of which communities within the proposed corridor region were considering selling their land to oil palm companies, and therefore where land was at risk. Despite complexities relating to competing and uncertain land claims, a developing Ecuadorian land registration system and escalating conflict in the region, the project succeeded in making 57 separate land purchases to piece together the corridor. The majority of the land making up the core of the corridor was purchased in the first two years of the project. These acquisitions have enabled FFI to gain significant experience and knowledge about land purchase in rural Ecuador that few other international organisations have acquired to date.

Not only has this work protected an impressive 12,489 ha of forest from clearance, it has also maintained connectivity between Cotacachi-Cayapas Ecological Reserve and the Awa Ethnic Reserve, ensuring the ecological integrity of a much wider area, covering some 350,000 ha. Surveys carried out within the corridor have recorded 285 bird species. This includes globally threatened species such as the great green macaw (*Ara ambiguus*, EN), and 50 bird species which are endemic to Chocó rainforest, some of which are also globally threatened.

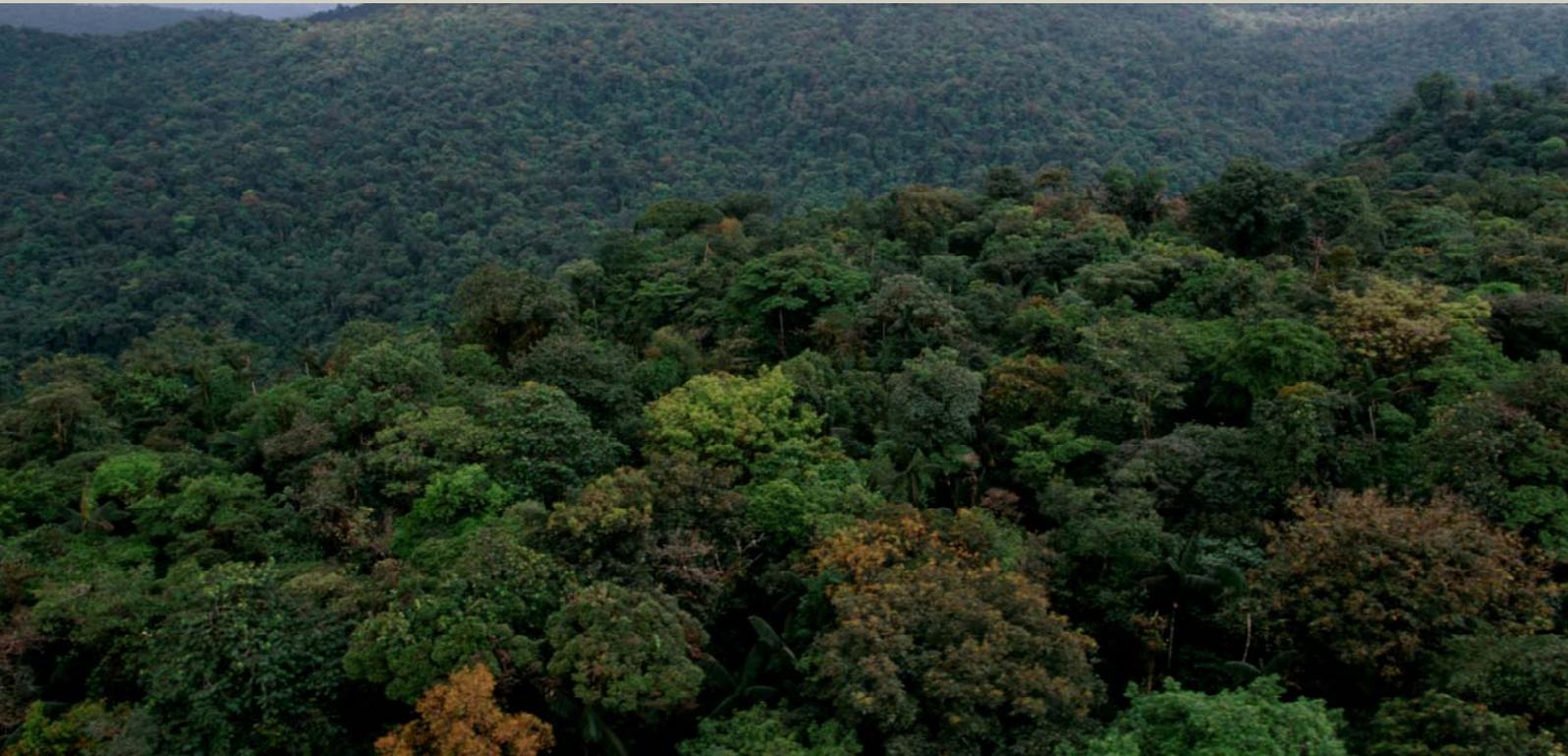
The corridor was designated an Important Bird Area in 2004. The forest also supports 69 mammal species, including the iconic jaguar (*Panthera onca*, NT) and giant anteater (*Myrmecophaga tridactyla*, VU).

Although faced with numerous and ongoing land invasions and legal challenges, our local partner Fundación Sirua has stewardship of all of the corridor lands, the majority of which are under direct conservation management. Some of the lands are managed by other institutions: for example, a strategically important piece of the land in the centre of the corridor was titled to an indigenous community after it had been bought by the project, and has since been maintained as forest by this indigenous group.

Forty families from two communities have received steady income from sustainable livelihood activities

FFI and Fundación Sirua have been committed to enabling communities to find sustainable livelihoods around the forest block that would not have been feasible if the land had been sold to oil palm or logging companies. Sustainable livelihood initiatives have explored novel uses of community land, including butterfly farming, native bamboo nurseries and cacao plantations. Agroforestry based around organic cacao has been particularly successful.

Aerial view of the rainforest in the Awacachi Corridor. Credit: Juan Pablo Moreiras/FFI





Local children learn about the bird species found in their forest. Credit: Juan Pablo Moreiras/FFI

Forty families from two communities have received steady income from the cacao plantations – something that few of these communities had previously experienced. There has been considerable community interest in extending the plantations, with some families planting their own cacao after observing the work carried out through the project.

The Awacachi Corridor project has also provided indirect support to communities, for example in the form of legal advice in the case of land invasions. Fundación Sirua has run a range of education and awareness activities in the area, including a focused environmental education programme for local schools. Five communities, approximately 1,460 people, participated in these awareness raising events.

Although engagement with communities surrounding the Awacachi Corridor has been highly challenging at times, by 2010 three communities, representing almost half of the local population, had become very supportive of project activities.

In spite of multiple and escalating threats, over 80% of the corridor remains as native forest, and its ecological integrity has been maintained

Rangers were recruited from local communities from the inception of the project, to deter outsiders from logging and other illegal activities. Ranger training included a two-week course by the International Ranger Federation and training in biodiversity monitoring. In 2007 the community rangers were officially given the same powers as government rangers in terms of enforcement. This included powers of arrest – a crucial mandate given the lawlessness of the region.

Rangers continue to patrol the corridor in the face of the deteriorating security situation across the region, although escalating threats to the corridor and increasing dangers to all staff mean that patrols have been scaled back and are now more focused on parts of the corridor with the highest number of illegal incursions. Remote sensing data indicate that over 80% of the corridor still comprises native forest, in spite of the escalating threats, and so the corridor's integrity continues to be maintained.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

In the course of establishing the Awacachi Corridor FFI has encountered significant challenges, some of which have been overcome, and some that remain to be resolved. We document these challenges here to share our experiences and the lessons learnt through implementing this project.

LAND PURCHASE

Securing an area with so many land parcels, all with uncertain and competing claims and in a country with no established land registration system, was an extremely ambitious aim. Land titling turned out to be more expensive, complex, and time-consuming than anticipated due to bureaucratic and legal systems which were still relatively underdeveloped for such a task. With the benefit of hindsight we would be much more cautious about embarking on such a monumental task, but we were motivated by the knowledge that maintaining the integrity of this key corridor was crucial to the ecological integrity of the wider Chocó rainforest.

This was one of FFI's first land purchases, and – by providing valuable lessons for FFI in regard to complex land purchase arrangements – has directly informed our approach to land purchase initiatives in other countries and regions. We learnt the importance of getting in-country lawyers with knowledge of the national and local context involved from the start. We gained a valuable insight into how to navigate differences between local rights and titling processes (including levels of registry and transparency of ownership), which affect the progress of land purchase in different ways depending on the country. We have also learnt that in projects involving land purchase, where the enabling environment is highly changeable, processes need to be in place to ensure we can respond quickly to new opportunities or challenges. For example, ensuring the availability of sufficient flexible funding (for both purchase of the land itself and for

associated legal and administrative costs) is essential for engaging quickly and effectively on the ground.

TACKLING THREATS

Protecting the Awacachi Corridor has proved challenging in the context of the unstable political and security situation in this lawless border region of Ecuador. The dollarization of the Ecuadorian currency just after the start of the project caused a dramatic rise in land prices and living costs. This, together with other national-level changes (including a government coup, increasing corruption and civil strikes), meant that land conflicts increased sharply in the project area, with a range of actors attempting to capitalise on land deals (both legal and illegal). As the amount of forest in the region decreased, the Awacachi Corridor inevitably became a target. The police and armed forces have provided back-up to the rangers in cases of armed conflict and incursions into the corridor, but these issues present an ongoing threat.

The situation in Esmeraldas Province is volatile, with frequent outbreaks of violence linked to illegal activities such as commercial logging and mining. Government-licensed mining has also been a major threat to the corridor. In 2011, the Ecuadorian government granted a gold-mining concession to an Ecuadorian mining company which covers 100% of the corridor and overlaps with several protected areas. Together with the Ecuadorian Ministry of Environment, our local partner Fundación Sirua lobbied heavily against this decision, but the concession was upheld with the condition that gold-mining could only take place with permission from Fundación Sirua as the land owner. However, gold-mining operations (both illegal small-scale artisanal mining and legal government-sanctioned activity) have continued along the corridor's rivers, despite the action taken by Fundación Sirua at national ministerial levels.

Heliconia species found in the forests of Ecuador. Credit: Juan Pablo Moreiras/FFI





Logging is one of the major threats to the Chocó rainforest. Credit: Juan Pablo Moreiras/FFI

In recent years, this hazardous operating environment has started to take its toll on other project activities. In the last two years, the security situation at the project site has deteriorated further, and most conservation groups have withdrawn from the area. FFI and Fundación Sirua are among the only NGOs left operating in the region, which in turn has increased pressure on already limited resources. The need to allocate resources to address escalating threats to the corridor has meant that work with communities on sustainable livelihoods has been scaled back and biodiversity monitoring temporarily put on hold. Future plans to address the situation involve handing the lands over to the government to become part of the Ecuadorian protected area network. Fundación Sirua is also linking into larger schemes for landscape conservation across the wider Chocó rainforest, including initiatives run by international NGOs and by Esmeraldas Province. The importance of Awacachi as a key corridor for landscape connectivity in the wider landscape has been recognised by these initiatives, and it is likely to be integrated into them as and when they move forward.

ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITIES

Relationships with communities local to the Awacachi Corridor have not always been straightforward. This was the case particularly at the beginning of the project, when FFI was perceived to be the purchaser of the land rather than a long-term project partner. Some stakeholders had misconceived ideas of what the project would deliver, leading to complications when their perceived benefits failed to materialise.

Some community projects were less successful than had been hoped - for example, substantial investment was made into a transport system, but without a coherent sustainability plan to ensure it was well maintained. The enterprise was subsequently abandoned. In retrospect,

better consideration of the sustainability of such investments would have been more effective than just reacting to community requests for assistance.

Despite efforts to ensure that people completely understood the implications of selling their land, albeit for conservation and with them remaining in place, FFI did not fully appreciate the need to continually reinforce this message in order to confirm an appropriate level of understanding among all stakeholders. As undeveloped land became scarcer and land prices increased, communities felt they should be recompensed for the subsequent differential in land prices – a perspective that FFI had not anticipated at the start of the project. This underlines the importance of clarity in any free, prior informed consent processes that engage communities; in this case assumptions were made about the local understanding of such transactions which were not upheld.

Cultural identity has also been an important factor influencing engagement with communities in this project. Communities surrounding the Awacachi Corridor comprise a diverse range of ethnic groups, each with different needs and perceptions of issues such as land ownership, tenure, resource use and income generation. The majority of the land had been claimed by Afro-Ecuadorian settlers as a result of limited opportunities on the coast that had driven them inland. This meant they did not have strong cultural ties to the land, and there was a strong likelihood that these non-indigenous groups would relocate back to the coast with their sale proceeds. This rather undermined some elements of the community programme. More rigorous socio-economic baseline surveys would have revealed this cultural variation upfront, and would have generated a better understanding of the subsequent patterns of emigration by some community members.

In 2009, FFI's livelihoods programme evolved into the Conservation, Livelihoods and Governance programme, to better reflect an increasing emphasis on stakeholders' rights and responsibilities in achieving positive biodiversity and wellbeing outcomes. This programme provides technical support to projects as well as staff training on issues concerning livelihoods and human rights, including free, prior, informed consent for communities. Projects such as the Awacachi Corridor highlighted the need for having these core skills in-house, rather than relying on outside partners and consultants.

WORKING WITH LOCAL PARTNERS

In the first few years of the project, FFI encountered difficulties and a subsequent breakdown in relations with the first local partner we worked with. As this was our first engagement in Ecuador, we did not have the usual network in place to help our in-country understanding, and as a result we did not fully appreciate the unstable local political landscape and the role of our initial partner within it. Moreover, the urgency of the interventions did not allow for the gradual development of a relationship and build-up of trust with the partner. Learning from these difficulties, FFI has since developed clear guidelines for due diligence on potential partnerships.

Following a termination in the relationship with the first partner, FFI supported the establishment of Fundación Sirua. Fundación Sirua became the legal owner of the corridor lands, and was the first organisation of its kind in Ecuador to have representatives of Ecuadorian as well as foreign organisations on its board. This change in the institutional basis of the project was critical to its long-term sustainability, and enabled FFI to concentrate on building local governance and conservation capacity through Fundación Sirua.

During the course of the project, Fundación Sirua has demonstrated increasing independence, developing and

managing its own projects and applying successfully for funding proposals with gradually reduced technical input from FFI. The knowledge and expertise in sustainable livelihood strategies that Fundación Sirua has built means that the organisation receives requests for technical assistance from communities outside the corridor. However, personnel and funding issues, combined with ongoing conflicts within the corridor and a challenging legal operating environment, have necessitated FFI's ongoing active support to Fundación Sirua and the Awacachi Corridor project. Combined with a recent upsurge in threats to the corridor, the current situation means that Fundación Sirua needs ongoing financial and institutional support to adapt to what is a dynamic and dangerous operating environment.

Experiences in the Awacachi Corridor project have also produced valuable lessons surrounding management of project information. Communication between partners must be fully integrated into the project – in some cases there was a delay in translating some key project documents into the operating language, Spanish, leading to disputes over the project's direction in subsequent years. The project has also seen a high staff turnover, which has proven problematic because, in a project as complex as this, consistent and frequent record-keeping is essential to ensure that the nuances of project development and operations (and associated learning) are not lost when a staff member leaves.

Basic in-country operating systems have improved significantly over the lifetime of the project, but there is still an ongoing risk of loss of institutional knowledge and project-level understanding. At an institutional level, FFI has established and continually improves its systems for consistent and frequent record-keeping. Records include details of project milestones, significant changes in project strategy and direction, and when key staff changes occurred.

Great green macaw (*Ara ambiguus*). Credit: Evan Bowen-Jones





Dusk in the Awacachi Corridor. Credit: Juan Pablo Moreiras/FFI

CONCLUSIONS

Despite an extremely challenging operating environment, the Awacachi Corridor project has achieved its main objective: securing a corridor of land that would otherwise have been lost to conversion, thus preserving the ecological integrity of 350,000 ha of one of the most biodiverse habitats on Earth. Many of the lessons learned from the challenges faced in this project have been applied to subsequent FFI projects, and in particular informed our approaches to land purchase and partner engagement.

The Awacachi Corridor continues to face mounting pressures from a number of quarters. FFI and Fundación Sirua are committed to continuing work in the region to address these threats, and to working towards securing a more sustainable future for people and wildlife in and around the corridor.



Credit: Juan Pablo Moreiras/FFI

FAUNA & FLORA INTERNATIONAL

FFI protects threatened species and ecosystems worldwide, choosing solutions that are sustainable, based on sound science and take account of human needs. Operating in more than 50 countries worldwide, FFI saves species from extinction and habitats from destruction, while improving the livelihoods of local people. Founded in 1903, FFI is the world's longest established international conservation body and a registered charity.

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HALCYON LAND & SEA

Halcyon Land & Sea is a fund established in 1998 by Dr Lisbet Rausing to find innovative and entrepreneurial ways to secure threatened habitats. Through Halcyon Land & Sea, FFI secures areas of critical biodiversity through a number of diverse approaches, developed to fit the needs of individual sites and projects. These include site purchase or lease, developing local land stewardship or site management agreements, and putting in place conservation management where this has been absent or weak. We always work in partnership with local conservation agencies and local communities. Halcyon Land & Sea is supported by Arcadia (a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin) and Hugh Sloane.

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