

Saving our biodiversity

Local nonprofit fights to save vanishing rainforests

By Laura Petersen

With only seven percent of the Andean mountain tropical forests left, saving the rainforest is a critical and seemingly futile mission.

"It's not too late," said Ivan Gayler, a Del Mar resident. "Ours is the last generation that has a chance to save the variety of life on our planet."

Logging and burning have annihilated one of the most biologically diverse and rich regions of the world, the different types of rainforests in Ecuador and Peru.

This is bad news not only for local biodiversity, but also for global warming. About 20 percent of the carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere is released from burning rainforests.

After seeing the billowing clouds of smoke for himself, Gayler, the former chair of the San Diego Museum of Man, founded Nature and Culture International (NCI) in 1996. The nonprofit organization is proving it's entirely possible to preserve existing rainforests and reforest destroyed areas left to rot.

Case in point: the United Nations Environmental, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) announced the creation of a 2.8 million acre biosphere reserve in southern Ecuador on March 28.

NCI spearheaded the four-year effort, coordinating the support and involvement of indigenous groups, local universities, conservation groups and governments, including the national ministries of Environment, Defense and Foreign Affairs.

Biosphere reserve certification is granted only to such valuable natural heritage sites as the Galapagos Islands and Yellowstone National Park.

Certification does not guarantee preservation; many private properties within the reserve are still in danger of logging and burning. NCI plans to buy these properties to maintain connectivity between the lowlands and mountains, so species threatened



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The Shaur indigenous culture survives in an Amazonian biosphere reserve.

by global warming can move up the mountain as their habitats change to survive.

To help purchase this land, NCI has launched the Living Forest Offset Program. Anyone interested in offsetting his or her carbon footprint can buy forestland for \$80 an acre.

"NCI provides for a way to really do something that gives back," said Doug Sheres, former Solana Beach mayor and NCI board member. "That can, with very limited resources, have a tremendous impact on the future of the world. It's critically important these ecosystems are saved and grow."

It's probably one of the cheapest ways to combat global warming too. Rainforests are ridiculously inexpensive, especially in South America where one U.S. dollar can instantly grow into \$10 dollars.

"The \$80 million used to enhance the (San Dieguito) lagoon — it's a very important project — but that \$80 million in South America would buy millions of acres of land," said David Winkler, Gayler's business partner of 30 years and NCI board member.



The annual \$3 million budget is stretched even further with extremely efficient operations. Only 1.6 of the organization's 70 employees works in the U.S., eliminating costly overhead.

Talented local staff navigates the natural, political, cultural and legal issues that arise with identifying and preserving land, be it through community or municipal reserves or outright purchasing as a last resort.

They have been extraordinarily successful. The new biosphere brings the total

amount of land NCI has purchased or helped protect to 5.8 million acres. Millions more are targeted.

The secret to their success is respect for and involvement of local communities.

"What makes us absolutely unique is we never go in saying, 'You should do this, you should do that,'" Gayler said. "We always go with a question in hand: 'What do you need to satisfy your dreams of saving your ecosystem?'"

Land preservation is one element of a four-pronged approach, which also includes education, human aid and sustainable development.

NCI partners with local groups and agencies to educate children and the public about the biodiversity of their region. They have reached 200,000 students to date.

NCI also built the largest tropical mountain research station in southern Ecuador, where up to 100 scientists, half of whom must be Ecuadorian, are studying ways to sustain and reforest the region.

The nonprofit also helps indigenous people develop new ways to make a decent living using the land in sustainable ways.

While they live close to nature and appreciate its wealth, these populations have cut and burned the forests to feed their families, Gayler explained. They sell the raw timber, clear areas for cattle to graze and plant crops for two short years before the land goes fallow.

NCI helps locals rehabilitate existing pastures and learn new trades so they do not need to continue cutting away at what little forest remains.

Gayler will give a lecture about Nature and Culture International at the Solana Beach Civic and Historical Society meeting on Fri., April 11 at 5 p.m. in the Fletcher Cove Community Center, 133 Pacific Avenue. The public is invited to attend.

"If people are able to attend the event and understand the scope and magnitude of what the organization is doing, they'll find tremendous integrity and utilization of resources," Winkler said. "If we're going to turn this thing around, preserve the globe for our children, it is incumbent on all of use to start doing something positive. NCI is a great way to make a donation and see it achieve maximum results."

For more information, go to natureandculture.org.