

The project “Rainforest of the Austrians”

El proyecto “Bosque de los Austriacos”

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Abstract: How did Austrian activities in the Golfo Dulce region begin in the first place? What is the meaning of „Rainforest of the Austrians“? What was the original idea? And what is the ultimate goal of the project? Michael Schnitzler, the founder of the NGO “Regenwald der Österreicher” (Rainforest of the Austrians), and „father“ of all Austrian projects in the vicinity of La Gamba and Piedras Blancas National Park describes the project „Rainforest of the Austrians“ from 1991 until 2007. The themes covered include a chronology of Austrian fundraising activities and conservation efforts in the Esquinas rainforest, a description of protection efforts and reintroduction projects for endangered species, the origins and history of the Austrian ecotourism project „Esquinas Rainforest Lodge“ and a summary of regional development projects in the village of La Gamba.

Key words: conservation, Esquinas rainforest, La Gamba, Rainforest of the Austrians, Piedras Blancas National Park.

Resumen: En primer lugar, ¿cómo se iniciaron las actividades Austriacas en la región de Golfo Dulce?. ¿Cuál es el significado de “Bosque de los Austriacos”? ¿Cuál fue la idea original?. Y ¿cuál es el último objetivo del proyecto?. Michael Schnitzler, el fundador de la NGO “Regenwald der Österreicher” (Bosque de Los Austriacos) y “padre” de todos los proyectos austriacos en la vecindad de La Gamba y el Parque Nacional Piedras Blancas describe el proyecto “Bosque de los Austriacos” desde 1991 hasta el 2007. Los temas analizados incluyen una cronología de la movilización de fondos y de los esfuerzos de conservación en el bosque lluvioso Esquinas, una descripción de los esfuerzos de protección y proyectos de reintroducción para especies en peligro, el origen e historia del proyecto de ecoturismo Austriaco “Albergue Bosque Esquinas” y un resumen del desarrollo de los proyectos regionales en el pueblo de La Gamba.

Palabras clave: conservación, bosque lluvioso Esquinas, La Gamba, Bosque de los Austriacos, Parque Nacional Piedras Blancas.

Introduction

How did Austrian activities in the Golfo Dulce region begin in the first place? What is the meaning of „Rainforest of the Austrians“? What was the original idea? And what is the ultimate goal of the project? In order to answer these and other questions, I must go back to my first trip to Costa Rica. Although a classical musician by profession, I am an avid nature fan, and I always had wished to visit Costa Rica. In February 1989, my wife and I toured the country for the first time and were fascinated by the beauty of its tropical rainforests and cloud forests, its active volcanoes and pristine beaches, and its trees, plants, and animals. We fell in love with Costa Rica and its friendly people, the „Ticos“, and I became obsessed with the thought of making Costa Rica my second home. It didn't take long before we returned and purchased a little house at the edge of the rainforest. It was on Playa Cacao, near the old banana port of Golfito on the Pacific coast (Fig. 1).

It took us a while to learn how to live in a tropical environment. Our house was only accessible by boat,

had a roof made of palm fronds, and was completely open. We got used to the climate and the insects, the nocturnal visits by strange animals, and waking to howler monkeys instead of an alarm clock. We learned to recognise the exotic fruits and vegetables. Our hikes into the surrounding rainforest fulfilled us with awe: colourful butterflies and birds, monkeys, snakes, and an endless array of trees and plants we had never encountered before. It seemed quite logical to want to learn more about the Golfo Dulce and the biodiversity of its forests, and it didn't take me long to find out that the forest to the north of Golfito was severely endangered. Among the thousands of species of plants and animals in the „Bosque Esquinas“ were numerous species of tropical hardwood trees; many of the landowners had obtained logging permits („planes de manejo“) and were extracting as much timber as possible during the dry season.

Conservation

In 1991, I had the opportunity to meet Alvaro Ugalde, director of the Costa Rican National Park Sys-



Fig. 1: Michael Schnitzler, violinist and conservationist.



Fig. 2: Satellite photo of Piedras Blancas National Park

tem and a pioneer in conservation. I immediately developed great respect for the man whose dedication has made Costa Rica the country with the highest percentage of protected areas in the world. One of his foremost goals was the consolidation of a biological corridor around Golfo Dulce connecting Corcovado National Park and the Osa Peninsula with the Golfito Wildlife Refuge. In August 1991, the "missing link" in this corridor – a 140 km² area of largely untouched rainforest – was declared "Corcovado National Park, Sector Esquinas" by official presidential decree. However, since law did not allow expropriation of landowners in favour of protected areas, the new park was no more than a "paper park" and the only way to prevent the continuation of logging was to purchase the land (Fig. 2).

Alvaro Ugalde issued an appeal to NGOs throughout the world asking their help in rescuing the last unprotected lowland tropical rainforest on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica. Few organisations reacted to Don Alvaro's appeal, and he asked me whether I could try to raise money in Austria. Even though many landowners had valid logging permits, they were willing to sell their land instead of cutting trees. However, they were not prepared to wait. My concern for the future of this unique ecosystem prompted me to found the non-profit organisation "Regenwald der Österreicher" (Rainforest of the Austrians) with the goal of purchasing properties and then donating them to the Republic of Costa Rica. A race against time began. Would we be able to purchase the land before the owners made use of their "plan de manejo"? With help of friends, relatives and acquaintances, we were able to raise the first USD 100.000 within half a year. In January 1992, "Rainforest of the Austrians" and the Costa Rican Ministry of Environment (MIRENEM, now MINAE) signed a formal agreement and the first properties were purchased. The name of the new national park was changed to Piedras Blancas National Park.

The Austrian Academy of Sciences, the University of Vienna, the Vienna Museum of Natural History and a large newspaper supported our initial efforts and helped to inform the broad public about our project. Thousands of individuals, including schoolchildren of all ages, donated money to save a rainforest in a country they hardly knew about. Lectures, magazine articles, radio interviews, TV reports, and private initiatives by institutions as varied as a discotheque, a karate club, or a pharmacy brought donations from all parts of the country. By 1995, Rainforest of the Austrians had purchased more than 1.500 hectares, the Costa Rican government itself had purchased 2.200 hectares, and a "carbon-offset initiative" by the American energy company Tenaska had enabled the purchase of 2.100 hectares. The Austrian government awarded me its highest environmental medal, "Konrad Lorenz Prize", and the Costa Rican government made me honorary member of the National Park Service.

A change of government in Costa Rica caused Alvaro Ugalde to resign from his position as director of the National Park Service in 1996. The new government showed little interest in preserving the country's environment. Rainforest of the Austrians, together with NGOs such as WWF and Greenpeace, successfully fought against the construction of a large paper mill on the north end of Golfo Dulce, only a few miles from the border of Piedras Blancas National Park. Our conservation efforts were not acknowledged; the Ministry of Environment didn't even take notice of our existence. It took up to seven years before the donation of properties

were accepted by the government. Adding to our frustration with Costa Rican bureaucracy, prices for partly inhabited land on the border of the park were two or three times higher than prices we had paid for primary forest. The reason was that official evaluations also included houses, fences, corals, and every single fruit tree on the property. To an environmental organisation dedicated to saving pristine rainforest, it appears paradox that land which has already been logged costs twice as much as untouched forest in the centre of the park, but there is no way to avoid paying the official price set up by the government (Fig. 3).

Despite these barriers, we continued our fundraising efforts in Austria, resulting in new initiatives by newspapers, schools and companies. In 2000, Rainforest of the Austrians was awarded a prestigious, CHF 50.000 environmental prize by the Binding Foundation in Liechtenstein, which was matched by another CHF 50.000 from a private Swiss donor. By January 2007, we had transferred USD 1,730.000 to Costa Rica for land purchase. A co-operation agreement with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) resulted in a USD 425.000 match by the Robert E. Wilson Foundation, bringing total donations to USD 2,155.000 and total land purchase to almost 35 km². Since 2004, TNC has been in charge of negotiations with landowners and informs Rainforest of the Austrians when properties are legally clean and ready to purchase. Nobody is expropriated and all land owners are highly interested in selling their. Checks are issued directly to land owners, after which the National Park Foundation takes over the task of donating the property to the Republic of Costa Rica. With the help of donations from other organisations and the Costa Rican government, 66% of the Esquinas rainforest had become part of Piedras Blancas National Park by the beginning of 2007.

Protection

At the beginning, our foremost concern was to prevent the Esquinas forest from being destructed and we used all donations to purchase land. We knew, however, that conservation alone was not enough. Illegal logging and hunting within the national park prevailed, and the only way to curb these activities was to employ enough park wardens. The National Park Service was only able to employ six guards for all 140 km² of Piedras Blancas National Park. Since rangers work in two-week rotation cycles and always patrol the forest in pairs, this meant that only two rangers were available for the whole park. Although hunting is forbidden, many young men support their families by selling illegally hunted meat on the black market. They enter the forest with dogs and rifles and search for agoutis, pacas and peccaries; howev-

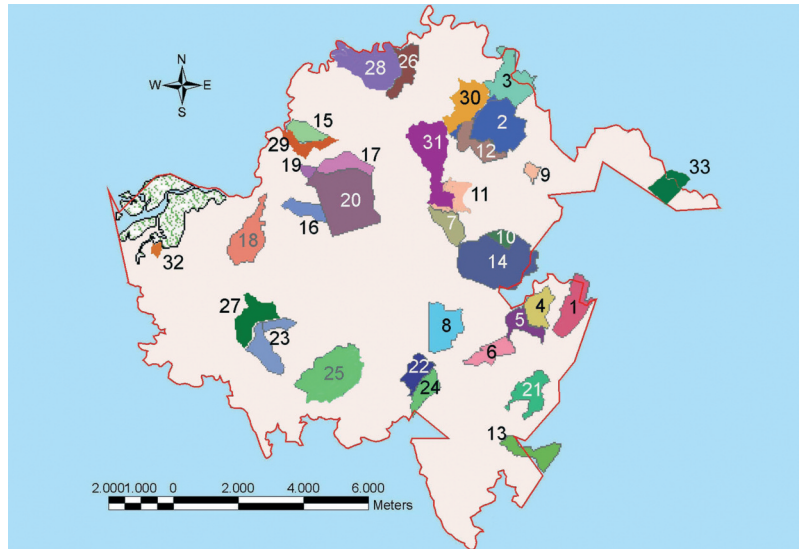


Fig. 3: Properties purchased by Rainforest of the Austrians 1991-2006.

er, they also shoot at anything else that moves because hunting is a traditional sport in Costa Rica. One of the most vulnerable areas was the coastline on Golfo Dulce, where hunters landed with boats during full moon to catch spawning needlefish and enter the forest to shoot whatever animal they could find (Figs 4, 5).

Starting in 2003, Rainforest of the Austrians has been paying the yearly salaries for two park wardens. The funds are managed by the Corcovado Foundation, which passes them on to the National Park Service. In 2006, the yearly salary for a ranger was approximately USD 8.500, including social security, health care and vacation bonuses. The guards employed with Austrian donations do their duty in the part of the forest surrounding La Gamba, the field station and Esquinas Lodge. One of them is a former hunter who now makes a living protecting the animals, which he used to kill.

In 2005, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation donated eight million dollars to the National Park Service. A large part of the money was used to pay the salaries of more than fifty park wardens for the whole Osa area until January 2008. The majority patrols the vast forests of Corcovado National Park but 14 rangers were employed specifically for Piedras Blancas and adjoining Golfito Wildlife Refuge. The amount of reports to the police and confiscations of illegally cut wood, hunting dogs, and weapons increased. Simultaneously, wildlife recovered at a rapid pace. Animals that reproduce easily, such as peccaries, have been reported in large numbers (Fig. 6).

At the time this article went to print, the future of park rangers in Piedras Blancas after 2008 was uncertain. There was hope that the Costa Rican government might take over their salaries. Plans were under way to



Fig. 4: Park ranger with illegally felled tree.



Fig. 5: Park ranger at raided poachers camp.



Fig. 6: Michael Schnitzler in discussion with hunters from La Gamba.



Fig. 7: Macaw release site supported by Rainforest of the Austrians.

construct three or four new ranger stations at strategic points in and around the park border, and there was talk about joining Golfito Refuge with Piedras Blancas National Park, adding 2.810 hectares to the park and increasing its total size to 175 km².

Research and Reintroduction of endangered species

Since these themes will be discussed at length in other parts of this book, I am limiting my comments to the role, which Rainforest of the Austrians has played. Our organisation owned the La Gamba Field Station from 1993 to 2006, after which it was donated to the “Verein Freunde der Tropenstation La Gamba”. During those 15 years, we invested approximately USD 500.000 into land purchase for the station, purchase or construction of buildings, furnishing and office equipment, laboratory and library, and scholarships for students. Due to the proximity of the station to Esquinas Rainforest Lodge, interaction between the two is obvious. Students, researchers and study groups are accommodated at the lodge when there is not enough space available at the station. Guests of the lodge visit the station for tours of the botanical garden. Rainforest of the Austrians and the “Association for the Sponsoring of the Field Station La Gamba” have become jointly involved in activities in the village of La Gamba such as the renovation of the water system or the installation of a biological wastewater treatment system.

Rainforest of the Austrians played a crucial role in the decision of the „Fundación para la Restauración de la Naturaleza“ (Zoo Ave) to reintroduce scarlet macaws into the Esquinas rainforest. We have supported the efforts of Dennis Janik and his dedicated team since the very beginning of the release project in 1998, when we purchased 13 hectares of property in San Josecito and do-

nated them to Zoo Ave. The property, in a secondary forest behind Golfo Dulce Lodge, is where the release station and the birdcages are located. Besides, Rainforest of the Austrians has donated a total of USD 32.000 to Zoo Ave towards operation costs at the release site (Fig. 7).

Ecotourism and Regional Development

Seeing their future threatened by restrictions set up by the National Park Service, a group of local farmers and former loggers in the village of La Gamba decided to turn to nature tourism as an alternative to the exploitation of the Esquinas rainforest. However, a complete lack of funds made it necessary to find a financial backer. In 1993, the Republic of Austria, recognising the importance of sustainable alternatives as opposed to the destruction of tropical forests, decided to finance the project as part of its Development Aid Program. Rainforest of the Austrians was appointed to oversee and direct the project, and the construction of Esquinas Rainforest Lodge was completed in 1994. The ultimate goal is to prove that a small, ecologically safe nature lodge, accommodating no more than 40 guests, can generate enough income to raise the living standard of a whole community of 70 families. The lodge belonged to Rainforest of the Austrians until 2005, when it was privatised but remained in Austrian hands. From the sales profit, USD 200.000 was donated to a fund for projects in La Gamba (see below). Except for management and office personnel, all employees at Esquinas Rainforest Lodge are from La Gamba, making the lodge the largest single employer in the community (Fig. 8).

Esquinas Rainforest Lodge has seven cabins with fourteen rooms. Each room has a private bathroom with hot water shower, a ceiling fan, and a private veranda. The main building houses the office, kitchen, restaurant, lobby and bar. The pool is fed by a naturally filtered jungle stream and needs no pumps or filters. The 15-hectare property is at the end of a valley and surrounded on three sides by Piedras Blancas National Park. The isolated location attracts monkeys, racoons, coatis, caimans and more than 220 species of birds. Activities include hiking, riding, biking and adventure tours. Boat and kayak excursions in Golfo Dulce are offered (Fig. 9).

From the very beginning, Esquinas Lodge has actively participated in community activities. Guests are given free tours of the village, where they visit the school and a breeding project for agouti-pacas and have the opportunity to buy jewellery and shampoos produced by the women of La Gamba. Once a year, all school children are invited to the lodge. Soccer games between lodge guests and children from La Gamba have taken place, and the La Gamba Fund purchased a large-screen TV set for the town hall shortly before the soccer World Championship.



Fig. 8: Esquinas Rainforest Lodge.



Fig. 9: Esquinas Lodge at night.



Fig. 10: Schoolchildren from La Gamba visit Esquinas Lodge.

Within a short time, the “sala comunal” became an important social centre and meeting place (Fig. 10).

The Austrian Development Aid Co-operation, with the help of the Fundación Neotrópica, financed and monitored several projects in La Gamba from 1995 to 2005. One of them was the founding of a democratical-



Fig. 11: Founding meeting of the La Gamba fund, 2005.



Fig. 12: Inauguration of the new water system in La Gamba.

ly elected town committee named “Asociación pro bienestar La Gamba” (ASOPROBI), with sub-committees including health, education, sports, security, water, women, agriculture, roads and others. When the ten-year plan ended and support from the government of Austria stopped, Esquinas Rainforest Lodge stepped in and founded the „La Gamba Fund“ with an initial capital of USD 200.000, which stemmed from the sale of the lodge. From 2005 to 2007, Rainforest of the Austrians donated a further USD 22.000 to the fund. Proposals are submitted by ASOPROBI and must be for the benefit of the whole town. Proposals submitted by families or single persons are not accepted (Fig. 11).

During the first two years, the La Gamba Fund implemented several projects totalling approximately USD 90.000. The largest and most costly endeavour was the complete renovation of the potable water system for 70 houses in the town centre and in Valle Bonito, including capturing new springs, rebuilding water tanks, and replacing and/or repairing water pipes. The result was a 30% increase in water pressure. Other projects included

the renovation of the school, the town hall and the health station. The most important project in the planning stage is the eradication of the wastewater problem. Wherever necessary, new septic tanks will be installed.

Central pipelines for grey water will lead to a natural biological wastewater treatment pond, where the water will be naturally filtered and re-routed to the Quebrada Gamba (Fig. 12).

Summary

Fifteen years ago, the imminent danger to the Esquinas Rainforest made a strong impression on me and an idea began to grow in my head. I had no previous experience in fundraising. What prompted me to found „Rainforest of the Austrians“ nevertheless was my love of Costa Rica and my deep concern for the future of its beautiful jungle. I didn’t know how far I would get, but I thought it would be better to do something rather than to do nothing. My initial plan was to raise money to buy property for the national park, but one after another, new projects took shape: the field station, the lodge, the release projects, the campaign against hunting and finally, involvement in the community. What had begun as a hobby turned into a second profession. In recent years, I have spent much more time working on our projects in Costa Rica than teaching the violin or playing concerts.

I have often been invited to round-table discussions about the future of the worlds rainforests, where well-known scholars fervently denounced lumber companies and mourned the rapid loss of jungles in Africa, Asia and America. They presented hair-raising statistics and scenarios about how the world will look in 2050. However, none of them had a concrete suggestion about what the world could do to prevent the destruction from happening. I am convinced that grass-roots campaigns like „Rainforest of the Austrians“ are more important than critical, theoretical speeches by economists and scholars. We have proven that even the smallest initiative, started by a single person with no previous experience in conservation or development aid, can make a long-lasting positive impact on the environment and the social well-being of a community. Many obstacles had to be overcome and there were often disappointing setbacks, but I am proud of what we have accomplished. I hope that our activities in and around the Esquinas rainforest will serve as a model for other, similar projects and encourage others to actively participate in conservation.

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