Corcovado National Park – almost a banana plantation
El Parque Nacional Corcovado – casi una plantación bananera

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Abstract: The Corcovado National Park was established in 1975 but it nearly became a banana plantation. During World War II, the United Fruit Company sent Costa Rican engineers to make soil surveys and design plantations for 6,000 hectares of bananas. Over 300 men were employed in several camps from the Golfo Dulce to the roaring Pacific Ocean. Maps with section numbers, farm names, roads, port and wharf plans were submitted in 1944. Fortunately, the project was never initiated and the unique area became a national park three decades later.

Key words: Corcovado National Park, United Fruit Company, banana plantations.

Resumen: El Parque Nacional Corcovado fue establecido en 1975, sin embargo estuvo próximo a convertirse en una plantación bananera. Durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial, la United Fruit Company envió a ingenieros costarricenses a realizar levantamientos topográficos y un diseño de plantación para 6,000 hectáreas de banano. Más de 300 hombres fueron empleados en varios campamentos desde el Golfo Dulce hasta el rugiente Océano Pacífico. Mapas con números de sección, nombres de fincas, carreteras, puerto y planes de muelle fueron enviados en 1944. Afortunadamente, el proyecto nunca fue iniciado y ésta área única se convirtió en parque nacional tres décadas después.

Palabras clave: Parque Nacional Corcovado, United Fruit Company, plantaciones bananeras.

World War II and was completed by 1944. Soil surveys were supervised by Agronomist George Bowman. The project called for a total of 6,000 hectares on the Peninsula de Osa and would be comprised of Corcovado, Playa Blanca and Rincón. One base camp was set up at Playa Blanca where engineers designed a long banana ship dock into the Golfo Dulce. A large, nice house was built for the engineers; the labour force lived in comfortable thatched “ranchos”. There was a community kitchen with good food for all employees.

Corcovado is a vast swampy plain on the wild Pacific side of the peninsula and is separated from the calmer Golfo Dulce shore by rugged, forested mountains. Mule trails from Playa Blanca were developed across these mountains to supply another base camp closer to the Corcovado area to be surveyed. This base camp was near the headwaters of Río Sirena between the hills and the wet plain where nearly 5,000 mm of rain fell each year.

The real challenge was building the third base camp on the wild Pacific Ocean. Mules with basic supplies and men came over the mountain from Playa Blanca, but bulk and heavy materials had to be brought from the new port of Golfito and then landed on the treacherous

1 Division is defined as an autonomous and separate operation under the United Fruit Company. The Golfito Division extended from the port of Golfito to Coto, the Panama border and northwest to the Río Térraba at Palmar. “Compañía Bananera de Costa Rica” was the subsidiary name.
beach at Salsipuedes – which means “get out if you can.” Giant waves, rocks and currents were terrifying and sometimes cargo and men were lost in the surf. The big launch anchored off shore and materials were paddled through the breakers in dugouts. After the landing, mules took the cargo for four or five hours up the beach to the remote base camp at Playa Llorona.

At low tide, there were several kilometres of broad, firm beach where Captain Sam Penry could fly in personnel and supplies. The “Compañía Bananaera de Costa Rica” replaced his famous old German-built Boesch, a twin-engine, canvas-covered crop duster, with a new twin-engine Cessna. These flights were vital lifelines that kept the kitchen supplied with fresh fruit and vegetables from San José. Other food, supplies and clothing for the workers were bought by Ricardo Gomez in Golfito at Luis Romero’s store and flown to the Corcovado beach camp.

At one time, there were 300 men on the job during this exploration. Many of the workers were from Nicaragua and Honduras because it was hard to get Costa Ricans to leave their cool, healthy highlands. Some of the Costa Ricans who were there, were released prisoners who were told by the wardens to never come back. A few “peones” came from Panama and several of them specialised in making high-spirited “guaro” – contraband liquor.

To make soil surveys and prepare topographical contour maps for future banana farms, numerous machete men and linesmen were required to cut lines through the virgin forest and swamps, as directed by engineers like Ricardo Gomez and Ramon Cabezas. When they were far from the base camp, engineers and the work gang slept in hammocks hung under provisional thatched huts. They always had staple foods and a cook at the bush camps. Meat was never a problem because the banana company hired hunters just to bring in wild hogs, bush hens, pavoines, tepescuintle, deer and other wild game. For food and pastime, fishing was always a favourite way to forget the rugged day’s work. At the Corcovado beach camp, the lagoons and streams near the ocean were teeming with snapper and snook and everyone ate well.

There were many hazards associated with this monumental project. Deadly bushmasters and fer-de-lances were killed daily, but there was only one death from a snake bite. Another menace was wild hogs that roved the forest in bands of 50 or more. Men never knew when they would suddenly encounter these dangerous animals, and workers learned to keep an eye on a nearby tree that they could climb quickly in case of an attack. Don Ricardo remembers when one of his men, “Cuchupeta,” failed to climb a tree fast enough and was knocked to the ground by a giant boar with gnashing tusks. The clack-
The project plan called for Playa Blanca and Rincón to be explored first, then Corcovado. Maps showing 10-hectare sections, 200 meters by 500 meters, included contours, proposed drainage canals and roads for hauling Gros Michel banana bunches by truck to the Playa Blanca wharf. Even the names of each 200-hectare farm were included. The final proposal was presented in 1944, and the engineers and labourers left the peninsula.

Because of the war, logistics, doubts about irrigation, and a lack of ideal soils, the development of Corcovado was postponed. This was a blessing for the world because the area today is one of the crown jewels of the tropical parks in Central America (STEPHENS 2002).

Reference


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