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 planos 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.

El Parque Nacional Corcovado was established in 1975 and is one of Costa Rica's most important natural treasures, thanks to a number of dedicated individuals who barely saved the wilderness from mass destruction. In the 1930s, this area of the wild Southwest Pacific coast had only a handful of settlers, some of whom came from nearby Panama because no one knew where the international border was. It was during this time that banana people from the United Fruit Company explored for new lands to replace diseased and devastated plantations on the Caribbean side. The Golfito Division[1] was already underway by 1937 but another project on the adjacent Osa Peninsula was on the drawing board. This was to be the Corcovado banana plantation – where the park is today.

I learned of this giant undertaking from banana engineers like Ramon Cabezas, Ricardo Gomez and Juan Macaya, all young Costa Rican engineers when the project started. Exploration of Corcovado began during 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.

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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 "Compañia Bananera 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, pavones, 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 teaming 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 clacking sounds attracted more excited hogs running in erratic patterns and attacking anything in their path. As the poor worker lay on the ground in terror, Ramon Cabezas took careful aim from his tree and shot the boar with a 30-30 rifle. The noise confused the pigs and the beasts ran off after more shots were fired. This fast action saved "Cuchupeta's" life.

On another occasion, dozens of marauding wild hogs suddenly invaded the camp in a frenzy. It was too late to climb a tree so the men jumped on top of the dining tables. Someone fired several shots with a shotgun and scared the herd away.

Crossing lagoons and tidal basins was dangerous because of enormous crocodiles and caimans; these brackish waters were also full of sharks. When men made a crossing in deep water, others with rifles kept guard and watched for sharks.

Every day, men were constantly getting cuts and scratches from working in the jungle. A first aid kit was in every camp and the main medicine was mercurochrome. After smearing so much of this bright orange disinfectant all over their bodies, some men looked like painted clowns and were called "payasos".

Because World War II was on everyone's mind, all employees were told to keep an eye open for Japanese submarines along the Pacific shore. If an enemy vessel was reported, there was a trained operator in the area who could send a message by Morse code over a radio powered by a hand-crank generator.

On occasions, some of the men would take a break from the bush and go across the range of mountains by mule to the Playa Blanca base camp. From there, a trip was made by the Company launch along the shore of the Golfo Dulce to Puerto Jimenez where good times were waiting. Cantinas were notorious and boisterous. There was plenty of drinking, dancing, singing, guitar playing, and fighting. And, of course, women entertainers were there to please bushwhacking clients.

Another way men invested their money was to buy gold for one U.S. dollar per gram ($32 per ounce). There were dozens of "peones" scattered about the peninsula panning for gold, and it was easy to buy this feverish metal that drives people crazy.

During the Christmas holidays, Manager Norman Sanderson showed his gratitude to his men in the bush by flying to the Corcovado beach camp and distributing enormous amounts of favours and gifts. These included cases of Dewars White Label Scotch, packs of playing cards, and plenty of special food for a festive party at the camp for everyone, including the workers.

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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