

Costa Rica: How a (tropical) country can successfully restore the rainforest.

Deforestation is a widespread problem in tropical regions. Around the world, forests are cleared to make way for agriculture, livestock farming, mining, or new settlements. Tropical rainforests in particular have been heavily affected. By now, around one-fifth of the original Amazon rainforest has disappeared. Between 2001 and 2020 alone, an estimated 54 million hectares (540,000 km²) of Amazon rainforest were lost—an area roughly comparable in size to mainland France.

Deforestation has major consequences for biodiversity, the climate, and the living environment of millions of people. Once a rainforest has disappeared, it can take decades or even centuries for a comparable ecosystem to recover. In many cases, it never fully does.

Yet there is one country that demonstrates that recovery is possible. In recent decades, Costa Rica has managed to achieve a remarkable turnaround. While the country itself lost large areas of forest to agriculture and livestock farming during the twentieth century, it is now considered one of the world leaders in reforestation and nature conservation. Today, Costa Rica's forest cover is more than twice what it was at its lowest point in the 1980s.

How did Costa Rica achieve this impressive transformation? What measures did the government take to restore its forests? And how is the country trying to ensure that these environmental successes are preserved in the future?

In this article, we will take a closer look at the causes of deforestation, Costa Rica's remarkable approach, and why the country is regarded worldwide as an example of nature restoration and sustainable forest management.





Flag Costa Rica. Source: wikipedia.org

Deforestation

Costa Rica is now known for its extensive rainforests and remarkable biodiversity. The country is also one of the safest and most popular travel destinations in Central America. However, its landscape was not always as green as it is today.

Like many other countries in the New World, Costa Rica was colonized by Spain in the sixteenth century. The first settlers cleared forests to make way for farmland, growing crops such as cacao, beans, and other export products. During this period, however, deforestation remained relatively limited, partly because the population was small and agriculture developed slowly.

From the nineteenth century onward, this changed dramatically. Global demand for agricultural products such as coffee, bananas, and beef increased significantly. Large areas of rainforest were cleared to make way for plantations and pastures. As in many other Central American countries, economic growth was considered more important than environmental protection, causing a significant portion of the country's original rainforest to disappear.

This development continued into the 1970s and 1980s. Famous natural areas, such as the Monteverde rainforest, came under increasing pressure from logging and the expansion of agriculture.

It was precisely during this period that awareness grew that this development was no longer sustainable. The Costa Rican government concluded that the country's unique natural environment was not only ecologically valuable, but could also be economically important through tourism and sustainable environmental management. From that point



onward, Costa Rica began a remarkable change of course: instead of clearing forests, the country decided to actively protect and restore them.

This would eventually develop into one of the most successful reforestation programs in the world.



2 ladies who plant trees in Costa Rica. Source: adopteerregenwoud.nl

Turnaround

When Costa Rica's forest cover reached a historic low in the second half of the twentieth century, the government decided to completely change course. By the 1980s, only around a quarter of the country was still covered by forest. Costa Rica wanted to restore its unique natural environment and therefore embarked on one of the most ambitious conservation programs in the world.

To achieve this goal, a number of far-reaching measures were introduced. In the 1990s, for example, strict restrictions on deforestation were implemented. The government also introduced an innovative system in which farmers and landowners are financially rewarded for protecting forests, planting new trees, or preserving water sources and ecosystems. This program is known as Pago por Servicios Ambientales (PSA), or "Payment for Ecosystem Services." Environmental organizations and private companies also invested heavily in reforestation and the recovery of endangered species.

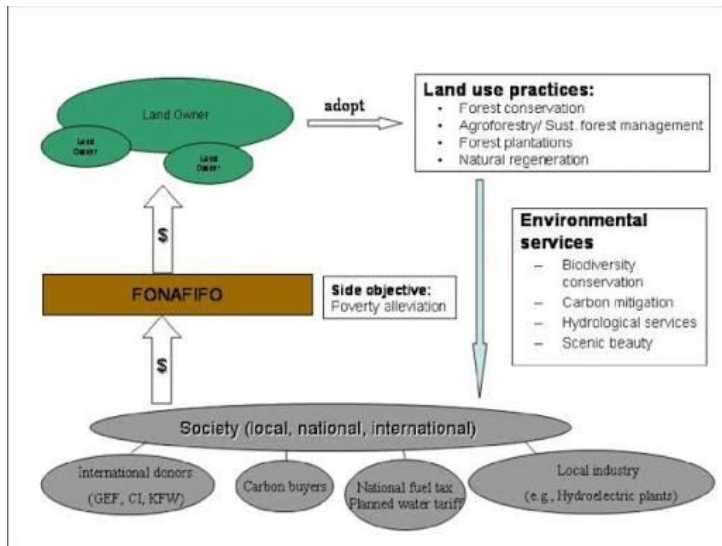
The restrictions on logging are fairly straightforward: the illegal clearing of natural forests and the conversion of forestland into agricultural land were heavily restricted. The PSA program, however, is particularly innovative because it makes conservation financially attractive. Landowners receive payments when they use their land for conservation instead of intensive agriculture or livestock farming. This means that forests can once again provide an economic benefit without having to be cleared.

The program is financed through several different sources. A significant portion comes from tax revenue, including a fixed percentage of the country's fuel tax. In addition, the program generates revenue through the sale of carbon credits to



companies that want to partially offset their CO₂ emissions. International organizations, such as the World Bank and WWF, have also contributed to financing conservation and biodiversity projects.

Thanks to these investments, not only have millions of trees been replanted, but various endangered animal and plant species have also regained habitats in Costa Rica's rainforests.



The PSA programme in operation. Source:

researchgate.net

Voluntarily work

In addition to reforestation and nature conservation, Costa Rica also invests heavily in volunteer projects. These projects range from environmental conservation and wildlife protection to teaching English or providing other forms of education to local children. In this way, not only nature but also the local population benefits from these investments.

Good education increases employment opportunities and reduces the risk of people falling into poverty. Although crime is influenced by many different factors, investing in education and economic opportunities can contribute to a more stable society. Volunteer projects therefore not only contribute to the development of local communities, but also strengthen Costa Rica's reputation as a sustainable country.

Costa Rica is therefore often referred to as the "Switzerland of Central America." The country has earned this nickname partly because of its political stability, relatively high standard of living, and the fact that it has had no army since 1948. Costa Rica is also considered one of the safest countries in Central America, making it an attractive destination for both tourists and volunteers.



This growing popularity is clearly reflected in visitor numbers. In 2025, Costa Rica welcomed approximately three million international tourists, compared with just over one million around 2005. The combination of extensive rainforests, rich biodiversity, sustainable conservation projects, and a relatively safe environment has helped the country become one of the most popular destinations in Central America in a relatively short period of time.



A group of teens voluntarily work in the Costa Rican forest. Source: studytherainforest.com

Conclusion

The future of Costa Rica looks promising, particularly when it comes to conservation and sustainability. Since the large-scale reforms introduced in the 1980s and 1990s, the country's forest cover has more than doubled. As a result, Costa Rica is considered one of the world's most successful examples of reforestation. The country also remains popular among biologists, ecologists, and students conducting research into biodiversity and environmental management.

Costa Rica is also a global leader in renewable energy. Almost all of the country's electricity is generated from renewable sources, such as hydropower, wind energy, geothermal energy, and solar power. In many years, this share reaches as much as 98 to 99 percent. The strict



restrictions on deforestation and the successful **Pago por Servicios Ambientales (PSA)** program also continue to play an important role in protecting the natural environment.

Costa Rica demonstrates that economic development and environmental protection do not necessarily have to be in conflict with each other. By giving nature an economic value through ecotourism and financial incentives for conservation, the country has developed a system that benefits both its population and the environment.

For this reason, Costa Rica is often seen as an example for other tropical countries struggling with large-scale deforestation. Although Costa Rica still faces challenges of its own, the country demonstrates that large-scale rainforest recovery is possible when governments, local communities, and international organizations work together. This makes Costa Rica not only unique, but also an inspiration for sustainable environmental management around the world.

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