

# BIOGEMS FACTS



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## Protecting Nature's Treasures and Sustaining Livelihoods in Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula

The Osa Peninsula is Costa Rica's crown jewel of biodiversity, and truly one of the planet's greatest natural treasures. Home to lush rainforests, breathtaking coastal landscapes, and rich tropical waters that shelter some of the world's most spectacular biodiversity, the Osa has grown to be a model for small-scale ecotourism. Yet, the region is now at a critical juncture: increasingly, it faces threats from unsustainable land-use practices and large-scale tourism. The Osa Peninsula needs environmentally sustainable development that allows its local communities to thrive while protecting its unique natural values and sustaining biodiversity.

Costa Rica has a well-earned reputation as leader in biodiversity conservation and environmentally sustainable development. Today, slightly more than 25 percent of the country is protected, including the world-renowned Corcovado National Park in the Osa Peninsula. Costa Rica reversed deforestation and currently has twice as much forest cover as it did 20 years ago. The country has been a long-time supporter of eco-tourism, creating economic opportunities for local communities while protecting its natural resources.

### THE OSA PENINSULA IS AT A CROSSROADS

Located on the southern Pacific coast of Costa Rica, the small but mega-diverse Osa Peninsula is home to approximately half of the country's 500,000 species, including jaguars, four species of monkeys, hump-backed whales, marine turtles, and the country's largest population of scarlet macaws. Yet this incredible biodiversity is under increasing pressure from unsustainable agriculture, resource extraction, and illegal poaching. A proposed major international airport also has the potential to accelerate large-scale tourism near ecologically fragile areas, endangering habitat and bringing little lasting benefit to local communities.



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Costa Rica's strong record on conservation and its leadership on environmentally-sustainable development now hang in the balance in the Osa Peninsula. The country's government should work with local stakeholders to protect this irreplaceable region while building environmentally-sustainable economic opportunities.

### Strengthening Biological Connectivity

The Osa Peninsula's Corcovado National Park has wonders that range from cathedral-like forests to vibrant coastal wetlands; it is a key habitat for jaguars and other endangered species. Across the Osa's Golfo Dulce is the Piedras Blancas National Park, another refuge for the region's wildlife. It is critical that the lands around these parks—often in private hands—are used in an environmentally-sustainable manner.

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In particular, key watersheds must be restored and protected, preferably by establishing strong land-use and water-management policies, and incentives that ensure that private lands are managed sustainably.

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### Preventing Uncontrolled Overdevelopment

As Costa Rica's greatest wilderness frontier, the Osa's isolation has helped to keep it largely pristine. That could change, however, if plans for a new international airport move forward. As currently proposed, the project would be built less than three miles away from the fragile Térraba-Sierpe wetlands and near critical biological corridors. Costa Rica has already seen how a busy, international airport near natural attractions can spark unsustainable tourism development. In the country's northern province of Guanacaste, an international airport led to uncontrolled mega-tourism development near coastal areas, harming fragile lands, wildlife, and local communities. Such development in the Osa could wreak similar havoc on the region's fragile biodiversity and ecosystems. The Osa needs strong conservation and community-based land use planning to ensure that development projects provide long-lasting economic opportunities without harming the myriad natural values of the region.

### Protecting Wetlands

The Osa region's internationally important Térraba-Sierpe wetland is home to one of Central America's largest and most important mangrove forests. This land is important habitat for many of the region's species, including backyard birds common in the United States that spend their winters here. Local communities depend upon the wetland, and its ecosystem services are valued at nearly two billion dollars. The Térraba-Sierpe is threatened by unsustainable agriculture, tourism construction, and hydroelectric development. The area should be protected with a stronger legal and institutional framework that encourages effective planning and management of these fragile areas. Access to information about the value of the region's ecosystem services, and payments for these services, would also help prevent environmental degradation.

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### NRDC in Costa Rica

In 2001, the Costa Rican coalition ADELA contacted the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) for help in blocking an offshore oil-drilling project proposed by Harken Energy. The project would have caused irreversible damage to Costa Rica's biologically rich Talamanca region. With the international support of NRDC's BioGems Initiative, ADELA persuaded the Costa Rican government not to pursue oil exploration in the region.

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Following this victory, NRDC recognized that, despite Costa Rica's impressive conservation record, many of its natural treasures continue to face pressure from environmentally unsustainable activities.

In 2009, NRDC designated Costa Rica as a BioGem to strengthen efforts to protect its wild places and to help the country meet its goal of carbon neutrality. NRDC members are also engaged in bringing back the healthy forest habitat that the Osa's wildlife needs to flourish. With their support, we are working with our partner Osa Conservation to restore the biodiversity of a key biological corridor.