

# The ups and downs of Costa Rica's environment

*Costa Rica has an environmental reputation that is the envy of many world leaders. There is no doubt that in some respects – its protected areas; its development of locally-based tourism; its zero-carbon aim – it is deserving of all the plaudits it receives. But as previous ENCA Newsletters have tried to point out, there is no shortage of other respects for which the country deserves a few brickbats – its high dependence on plantation export crops; its excessive use of toxic pesticides; in some cases its surrender to corporate international tourism developments.*

*News of several developments of environmental significance since the last ENCA Newsletter typify these contradictions. ENCA member Martin Mowforth provides here a round-up of several items of Costa Rican environmental news from the last few months.*

## Global Environment Facility (GEF) supports Costa Rica's transition to an urban green economy



In March 2022 the GEF invested in the project 'Transitioning to an urban green economy and delivering global environmental benefits', led by the Costa Rican Ministry of Environment and Energy and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in partnership with the Organisation for Tropical Studies, an international organisation with a base in Costa Rica.

The project aims at decarbonising the Greater Metropolitan Area of Costa Rica's capital city, San José, by providing \$10.3 million (USD) to invest in the reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions generated by the city. The investment will go towards the improvement of public transport, the greening of approximately 2,000 hectares of land and the implementation of an integrated urban planning strategy.

Expanding the electric train network was one of former President Alvarado's stated aims and although he has now been replaced by Rodrigo Chaves (April 2022 election) it is likely that some of the GEF funds will be used to continue the work which had already been started on this programme.

Other transport improvements stemming from the initiative include the construction of 8 km of bicycle lanes, 3 km of shared paths and pedestrian walkways and 20 km of green sidewalks with improved access.

Visitors to and residents of Costa Rican cities will be aware of the urgent need to improve the transport systems in the country's cities most of which are known for their poor roads and traffic congestion.

## Cocos Island National Park designated a Natural Shark Sanctuary

In April 2022, the Environment Ministry declared the Cocos Island National Park (PNIC) to be a Natural Shark Sanctuary and connected the protected area with the Sweet Gulf (Golfo Dulce) Hammerhead Shark Sanctuary. Along with numerous marine protected areas in the eastern Pacific (including the Galapagos Islands), the PNIC forms part of the Eastern Tropical Pacific Marine Corridor.

These measures extend Costa Rica's marine protected areas from 2.7 per cent to 30 per cent of the country's seas. Much of the country's seas suffer from illegal fishing which especially affects sharks.

The Vice-Minister of Water and Seas, Cynthia Barzuna, noted the "bays and islets in the protected waters of Cocos Island National Park, serve as habitat, nursery and transit for fifteen species of sharks."

## Crocodile feeding in the Tarcoles River

The Tarcoles River is a favourite tourist location for watching crocodiles, but some tour guides have developed the habit of feeding the animals which can be a dangerous activity. Some tourists are even invited to take part in the feeding which is sometimes undertaken at close quarters.

The National System of Conservation Areas (SINAC) has received several complaints that the feeding continues even though it is known to be illegal. Rafael Gutiérrez, executive director of SINAC, said that "feeding crocodiles exposes the lives of many tourists [*to danger*], as well as the person who is feeding the animal."

Particularly where young crocodiles are concerned, the practice is likely to lead to the build-up of a dependence in the animals on food brought for this purpose. Some ecologists have also said that it is likely to lead to disruptions in the ecosystem.



Coco Island

## Attacks against the Indigenous peoples of China Kichá



In May 2022, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, José Francisco Calí expressed his concern about recent denunciations of tear gas attacks on and arbitrary detentions of Cabécar Indigenous peoples by the Public Force, essentially the police service of the country.

More than 370 people from 150 organisations signed a petition to the authorities against the violence suffered by Indigenous peoples in their territories. The attacks have included many fires started over 800 hectares of the 1,100 hectare territory. There have even been attempted assassinations as a result of the conflicts between non-indigenous people and the Indigenous who are legally recovering their land.

In March the weekly Costa Rican newspaper, *Semanario Universidad*, conducted a study which showed that almost all the recovered land had been consumed by fire whereas land belonging to non-indigenous people was almost completely free of any kind of damage.

The police have shown systematic bias against the Indigenous people trying to defend their recovered land.

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### UNDP warns Costa Rica about its excessive use of pesticides

In May 2022, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) produced a report on the diagnosis of health effects due to the use of pesticides in Costa Rica. The high use of pesticides affects the health and threatens the lives

of plantation workers who are regular victims of toxic poisonings.

According to the report:

- Over 65 per cent of poisonings occurred in the agricultural sector, particularly in banana, coffee and pineapple plantations, these three being the country's main crops.
- Health effects can include: different types of cancer; Parkinson's disease; male infertility; damage to the cardiovascular and immune systems; damage to the blood, digestive, dermal, respiratory and ophthalmic systems.
- Most of the intoxications were related to diazinon, paraquat, and glyphosate pesticides.
- Between 2010 and 2020, 58 deaths were due to poisoning in the country and these were mainly associated with the use of agrochemicals.

Costa Rica continues to use pesticides that have been eliminated or banned by international organisations and agreements signed by the country. This includes paraquat whose high toxicity is well documented and widely acknowledged.




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### Water supply and climate adaptation project (PAACUME)

In early May 2022, the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI / BCIE) loaned \$425 million (USD) to Costa Rica to fund the Water Supply Project for the Middle Basin of the Tempisque River and Coastal Communities (PAACUME).

The project is intended to provide the Guanacaste region with water for human consumption, agriculture and tourism for the next 50 years. By providing a new source of water, it is also aimed at re-activating the economic and social

development of numerous cantons in the region.

Additionally, it will help people, especially farmers, to adapt to the difficult conditions caused by climate change by providing a permanence of water.

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### Costa Rica generates more electronic waste than any other Latin American country

According to a report by the Regional Monitor of Electronic Wastes in Latin America, Costa Rica generates the greatest quantity of waste electrical and electronic equipment (known as WEEE in the UK, but as RAEE by its Spanish initials) of the 13 Latin American countries studied. Moreover of the total generated, only 8 per cent is collected for environmental treatment.

The report was published at the end of January 2022 by the United Nations University and the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR).

Despite this poor record, Costa Rica is one of only three of the 13 countries studied which had specific legislation relating to the treatment and legal responsibility for RAEE.

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### And finally .... what the new Costa Rican President thinks of his own country

In Davos, Switzerland, in May this year, the new Costa Rican President, Rodrigo Chaves, expounded his views on what problems faced the country, and principal among his concerns were the dreadful state of the rivers and waterways, social inequality and the poor state of public services.

*More details of his speech and interviews are given in the article on page 8, following this article.*

# The new Costa Rican President's assessment of the country's environment

*Delfino.cr is a digital Costa Rican journal with a daily circulation. It is managed by the writer Diego Delfino Machín. We are grateful to Diego for permission to reproduce his article here. [diego@delfino.cr](mailto:diego@delfino.cr)*

The president of the republic, Rodrigo Chaves Robles, is in Davos, Switzerland, where for the first time he is attending the World Economic Forum in his capacity as representative of the country. The summit, which gathers delegates from all over the planet with a view to discussions on social and economic challenges facing the international community, took place from 23rd to 26th May this year.

Our leader participated in the Latin American Presidential Panel (with Iván Duque of Colombia, Luis Abinader of Dominica and Dina Boluarte, Vice-President of Perú) in which in turn they discussed the region's recovery after the pandemic.

The moderator of the forum, Marisol Argueta de Barillas, addressing Chaves, made a comment on the Costa Rican situation. She flattered us all when she said that Costa Rica is known as a stable and secure nation with social equity and added: "You freed yourself from this serious wave produced by the pandemic, but there are also some growing risks which will lead to a complex period in your presidency."

In his usual style, Chaves replied: "I haven't been freed of anything, quite the contrary. Unfortunately I'm inheriting a situation that needs to be put right, contrary to what my colleagues (alluding to the other panellists) have commented on; Costa Rica isn't doing so well, and we have even experienced a significant deterioration."

He went on to say that he (in contrast to his colleagues) could not report successes because he's only had 15 days in post, meaning that he's only able to determine "the challenges and what we are going to do about them". Among those that they have to address in Costa Rica are: the fiscal deficit, social inequality, poor quality of public services and dealing with contaminated waters.

Again he pointed out that he had received "a house in a mess" with "an inheritance of huge fiscal disorder". Explaining that he will address this scenario, he said he hopes to generate public policy which puts an end to the historical beneficiaries of private monopolies in favour of "the vast majority of Costa Rican people".

"We have to create more and better Jobs, and that might happen with a blow to the confidence of the private sector. In Costa Rica, for years we have been hearing about the false dichotomy between the private sector and the public sector. No, there hasn't been a country anywhere in the world which has achieved prosperity with only the private sector or only the state sector."

Later, Argueta tried again to flatter Costa Rica, this time referring to the country's environmental policies. Chaves again rejected the flattery and noted that the country had not invested sufficiently in its sewage system and as a result of this its rivers are contaminated. Later he stated that we had over-invested in electricity generation "above all with fossil fuels".

I don't know where this observation came from, considering that 99 per cent of the electricity that is consumed in the country comes from renewable sources<sup>1</sup>; but I'm going to leave it at that; I'm not going to lay myself open to government accusations of being a member of the gutter press tied to political and economic interests.

Anyway, yes, it is certain that our rivers are suffering and our sewage system is even worse. In fact, our list of environmental grievances is not modest. Perhaps it isn't fashionable for a president to air the dirty clothes for all the neighbours to see and it parades for all to see the environmental discourse of Alvarado<sup>2</sup>, receiving praise from the future king of England less than a

year ago. But at least Chaves, on assuming the presidency, has not modified his campaign tone.

Indeed so, and he made it clear that he does not want to go back on what has been put forward on this theme. He said, "Costa Rica is a country that is not going to take one step backwards in its commitments and its wishes to reach carbon neutrality."

As a part of his intervention, Chaves also said that he has been talking with investors and that he told them that 'Costa Rica is open for business' and that he intends to break all the bottlenecks to investment in the country and create a better environment *[for business]*. Effectively, Chaves himself had stated that the principal aim of his trip to the World Economic Forum is to seek jobs and investments for Costa Rica.

Let's hope, then, that on his return to Costa Rica he comes back with a little list of useful telephone numbers; that good foreign investment may arrive; that it will offer good jobs; that regulation will be attractive for investors and respectful of the rights of the labour force; and that will genuinely begin to give form to a more equitable Costa Rica that we miss so much.

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1. Editor's note: over 70 per cent of Costa Rica's electricity is generated as hydroelectricity, and as ENCA newsletters have made clear in the past, the environmental credentials of damming rivers are open to public debate.
  2. Carlos Alvarado was the outgoing President of Costa Rica who handed over to Rodrigo Chaves in April this year, 2022.

# Central America moves forward in the fight against plastic but more legislation is needed

*In February 2022, El Economista published an article on plastics in Central America. ENCA member Pamela Machado translated it for the ENCA Newsletter. New material from the United Nations Environment Assembly held in February has been added.*

Central American countries have been among "the first ones" to make decisions to fight plastic pollution, said an environmentalist from MarViva, an organisation created in 2022 operating in Panama, Costa Rica and Colombia.

Central America has been among the first regions to adopt measures to combat plastic contamination but, much like the rest of the world, more legislation and coordination is needed to face this global problem, a coordinator from Fundación MarViva told EFE, the Spanish international news agency.

MarViva's regional coordinator for sea pollution, Alberto Quesada, said Central America has the "particularity" of being one of the few regions in the world where most countries have two coasts (Atlantic and Pacific), which means that the impact of plastic pollution "hits both sides".

"Our plastic footprint, even though it is considerable, does not compare" to the one from the developed world, "but the

contamination impact on our coasts is tremendous. In any current study about Central American coasts, about waste on the beach, about fisheries, we will find plastic pollution," he said.

A recent report from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) warned that plastic pollution has reached "all corners of the oceans", and that 88 per cent of marine species have been affected by it, including those consumed by humans.

## The actions

Quesada gives the example of Panama, which has "a couple of very modern laws, especially the most recently approved which mandates the gradual replacement of single-use plastic for more sustainable alternatives".

In the case of Costa Rica, Quesada said, some laws have also been approved, while other Central American countries have fewer policies and municipal ordinances that allow the problem to be addressed.

"We have been doing well, but in general, we need more regulation and more coordination. I can attest that there have been advances in both ways in the region", said Quesada.

Thus, Central America is in line with the action plan on sea waste for the Northeast Pacific, which also includes Mexico and Colombia.

"This is a 5-year plan that counts with actions to combat sea waste, and where the theme of plastic waste is one of the priorities", said the MarViva representative. MarViva contributed to the coordination of the initiative.

In terms of laws, Central America needs "better quality regulation" and "an integral, life-cycle approach", because the "problem of plastic pollution does not start when we have the residues in our hands but instead it is embedded within what we produce, distribute, and consume".

"This brings us to a much larger discussion, and one that is much more current: that is the urgency for a new international treaty on plastic pollution," he said.

In February this year (2022), the fifth session of the UN Environmental Assembly (UNEA 5) endorsed a resolution to end plastic pollution. The resolution paves the way for the establishment of a legally binding global treaty by 2024 to end plastic pollution.

Statistics from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) indicate that plastic production soared from 2 million tons in 1950 to 348 million tons in 2017. An estimated 11 million tons of plastic waste flow into global oceans annually, threatening the survival of marine species, food security and livelihoods of coastal communities, according to UNEP.



Delegates to the UN Environment Assembly in Nairobi admire an art installation made of plastic bottles