

# Battle for a Colombian Park

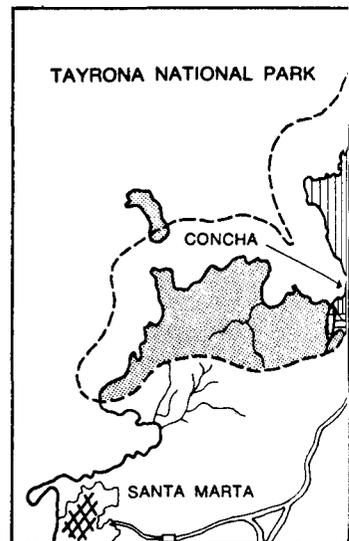
Richard A. Meganck

In 1972 the Tayrona National Park, on Colombia's Caribbean coast, was suddenly threatened with a multi-million-dollar tourist complex to be built within the park boundaries. But Colombians in thousands objected to the plan—over 50,000 signed a petition to the Government. Eventually, in 1976, a presidential decree permanently excluded the proposed tourist development from Tayrona, a victory for conservation that the author believes could have resounding effects in Latin America.

Tayrona National Park on the north coast of Colombia includes representative ecosystems from the sea coast, through tropical thorn forest, to upland humid forests. The park comprises 12,000 hectares plus some 3000 hectares of the Caribbean Sea and its bottomlands, with a coastline broken by many pristine bays and coves and white sand beaches separated by truncated headlands. Moreover, Tayrona adjoins the Sierra Nevada National Park which includes the highest peaks in Colombia, and between them the two contiguous parks protect everything from the Caribbean coast to the glaciers of Cristobal Colon Peak, 5824m (19,100 ft) high. This is one of the few places in the world where the opportunity to preserve a complete transect from the mountains to the sea exists.

The park includes a large part of shallow continental shelf and this is vital, for here are the submarine *praderas* (associations mainly of *Thalassia testudinum*, a plant of the Frogbit Family) which provide food for the five marine turtle species that nest on Tayrona's beaches: the green *Chelonia mydas*, hawksbill *Eretmochelys imbricata*, loggerhead *Caretta caretta*, olive ridley *Lepidochelys olivacea*, and leathery *Dermochelys coriacea*.<sup>16</sup> This relatively shallow continental shelf also has coral reefs, and within the park areas are found more than 50 of the estimated 72 coral species of tropical fish in the Caribbean Sea,<sup>1</sup> the majority in the Concha, Cinto, Chengue, Gairaca, Nenguange and

	Archeological Site Pueblito		Picnic Area
	Visitors Center		Camping Area
	Biological Field Station		Cultural Historic
	Park Limit		Primitive Wilderness
	Highway		General Recreation
	Administration Building		Natural Recovery
	Ranger Station		Intensive Use



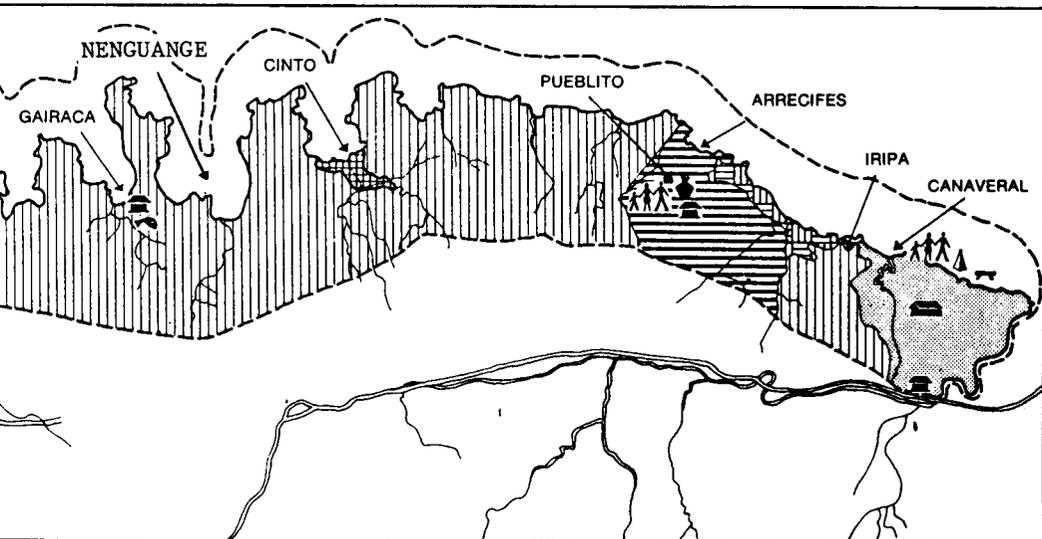


Arrecifes bays. Two Colombian scientists, Ruan and Franky,<sup>15</sup> describe these reef areas as 'a major producer of biomass in the tropical seas of the world . . . (they) constitute an important source of natural reproduction, indispensable in maintaining the fishing capacity of the southern Atlantic coast'.<sup>15</sup>

For bird life the north coast of Colombia, particularly the part in Tayrona, is one of the richest areas in the world. Over 300 species have been noted within the park boundaries,<sup>11</sup> including one of the few breeding populations of the bronze-brown cowbird *Molothrus armenti*, the endemic sapphire-bellied hummingbird *Lepidopyga lilliae*, brown pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*, magnificent frigate bird *Fregat magnificens*, savanna hawk *Heterospizias meridionalis* and yellow oriole *Icterus nigrogularis*.

Mammals include the capybara *Hydrochaeris hydrochaeris*, the world's largest rodent, which is common; white-fronted capuchins *Cebus albifrons* and howler monkeys *Alouatta seniculus* are often seen. But several species are locally in danger of extinction, including Colombian white-tailed deer *Odocoileus virginianus*, manatee *Trichechus inunguis* (reported to be one of the twenty-five most endangered animals in the world),<sup>10</sup> puma *Felis concolor* and ocelot *F. pardalis*. Some reptiles, including the spectacled caiman *Caiman crocodilus* and the common iguana *Iguana iguana* are reported by the Colombian Academy of Sciences to be common, but the American crocodile *Crocodylus acutus* is believed to be nearly extinct in the park.

The park was also the home of the Tayrona Indians and is of immense interest to archaeologists, presenting a wonderful opportunity for historic



**Table 1****Land Holdings in Tayrona National Park 1965—1972\***

<i>Year</i>	<i>Private</i>		<i>Area Claimed or Owned</i>	<i>% of Park Claimed</i>
	<i>Property Owners</i>	<i>Squatters</i>		
1965	171	40	3,800 ha	31.6%
1967	86	32	2,900 ha	24.1%
1970	45	-	1,700 ha	14.1%
1972	16	-	600 ha	5.0%
1977	15	-	595 ha	4.9%

\*Compiled from Ruan,<sup>15</sup> Franky,<sup>12</sup> and Mozo,<sup>14</sup> and from interviews with INCORA and INDERENA employees, September 1974.

+Percentages computed on the basis of 12,000 ha.

interpretation of the Tayrona civilisation.

In 1964, to preserve this unique environment, Tayrona was given 'protected park status' and has since been managed by INDERENA, the Government agency responsible for Colombia's natural resources. An inventory taken shortly afterwards indicated that 211 people owned property within the park or simply claimed squatters' rights. This meant that 3800ha (31.6 per cent) were either legally claimed or simply settled. But by early 1971, all squatters in the park, the majority of whom lived by collecting coconuts and fishing, had been removed, and 85 private holdings had been bought, giving the government control over 76 per cent of the park. By 1972, a total of 195 parcels had been acquired, leaving only 5 per cent of the park in titled properties.

But in recent years foreign tourism has become an increasingly important factor in the drive to stabilise Colombia's balance of payments. The north coast has been in a particularly difficult economic situation because of increasing numbers of rural poor crowding the coastal cities of Santa Marta, Cartagena and Barranquilla.<sup>20</sup> In 1970, the National Tourist Corporation (CORTURISMO) was specifically charged with the development of Colombia's historic, cultural and natural resources in order to stimulate the tourist industry and attract as many foreign tourists as possible. In carrying out this mandate, CORTURISMO became involved with INDERENA in what might justifiably be called the classic example of conservation versus tourism on the South American continent.

Late in 1972 CORTURISMO decided that the best use of Tayrona's Caribbean beaches would be a multi-million-dollar tourist complex (estimated at more than \$100 million in 1978 dollars) with several 20-storey hotels, accommodation for more than 11,000 visitors, an 18-hole golf course, two commercial centres—including restaurants, cafeterias, discotheques, taverns, cinemas and souvenir outlets—a visitor information centre and a marina. The theme was 'sun, sand and sea as a major attraction for foreign tourists . . . providing the highest economic return for the country'.<sup>2</sup> Most of the financing would be from private national and international sources, but it was necessary for the government to invest in the initial infrastructure, including expansion of the Santa Marta airport, and the sewer and water systems.

INDERENA wanted to restrict developments to those which would not compromise the park's natural values, quoting the 1971 Colombian National Park Statute which established the park zoning scheme. The Primitive Wilderness Zone, which was to 'be maintained in a natural state, with minimum alterations, conserving its primitiveness in perpetuity',<sup>3</sup> constituted the majority of the park, and it was within this zone that CORTURISMO planned to concentrate the hotels and services (Table 2).

**Table 2**  
**Proposed Tourist Development for Tayrona National Park.**

<i>Area</i>	<i>Development timetable</i>	<i>No. of Rooms</i>	<i>Class</i>	
			<i>4-Star</i>	<i>5-Star</i>
Bahia de Cinto	1976-1979	1250		1250
Bahia de Nenguange	1976-1984	900	500	400
Bahia de Concha	1975-1989	1900	1900	
Arrecifes-Canaveral	1985-1989	1550	450	1100

\*Compiled from information obtained from Ruan<sup>15</sup> and CORTURISMO.<sup>2</sup>

CORTURISMO immediately came under attack. Social reformers and university students argued that the level of development proposed (four- and five-star hotels) was discriminatory because the vast majority of Colombians could never afford them. Marine biologists and other scientists claimed that irreparable damage would be done to the park's fragile coral reefs, bays and wildlife. Colombians, said one editorial, did not want 'Tayrona to be turned into another Acapulco . . . where fifteen years ago its bays were submarine joys, today they are dead and populated only with beer containers, plastic bags, and other trash'.<sup>6</sup> INDERENA pointed out that developments of this type were specifically prohibited in declared national park areas and therefore illegal.

CORTURISMO asked a private firm to assess the impact of the proposed hotel construction on the Tayrona flora and fauna, and in June 1973 the general manager of the National Tourist Corporation stated in an open editorial,

'We have researched the topic and have sufficiently explained that the type of tourist development we are proposing . . . prejudices no one nor will it deteriorate in any form the ecology of the park. . . The Colombian government cannot allow itself the luxury of wasting these bays or not putting them into production. A developed country . . . can afford to not use these parks for tourist purposes. But in our case, having such limited natural reserves, we should utilise this potential that will generate foreign income and investment.'<sup>2 17</sup>

It was also recommended that CORTURISMO could legally justify this development within a national park through implementation of a 1968 law allowing the government to declare National Tourist Resources, defined as 'public or private properties which have adequate conditions for the attraction and encouragement of tourism . . . and are declared as such by the government'.<sup>2</sup> The National Tourist Corporation had already been entrusted with several national tourist resources including the municipality of Santa Marta, adjacent to Tayrona, and would be the obvious administrator of the Tayrona tourist complex. CORTURISMO therefore proposed the removal of park status from these areas.

To achieve a rational decision called for a serious evaluation of the resource, the land use alternatives and the social costs and benefits, and a study of alternative plans, including different sites for the location of the tourist complex in the Santa Marta region and various methods of managing the park's resources without destroying them. But unfortunately each side refused to consider the other's case. Disillusioned with the 'have-have not' arguments, three newly established conservation groups—the Colombian Institute for the Conservation of Nature, the National Association for the Defence of Nature, and the Colombian Association of the Friends of National Parks—joined forces and made the future of Tayrona National Park a national heritage issue. By mid-1974, more than 50,000 Colombians had signed a petition requesting the government to 'suspend the efforts to change the natural and scientific destiny' of the park. This unprecedented show of public concern caused both President



Truncated headlands near Cinto Bay

Misael Pastrana, and later his successor Alfonso Lopez Michelsen, to go on record as supporting INDERENA's efforts to preserve Tayrona.<sup>7 8</sup> Radio and television stations sponsored debates and public service announcements; newspapers took editorial stands in favour of INDERENA's plan; even poorer segments of the population responded, rallying support for the 195 small farmers who had sold their holdings within Tayrona to the federal government under the assumption that their land was to be preserved as a park and not developed as a tourist centre, whereas under the CORTURISMO plan, only the rich, who had refused to sell to INDERENA, would profit from the increased land values.

In an address after inauguration, in August 1974, President Alfonso Lopez Michelsen spoke of the need for a comprehensive environmental law for Colombia, and publicly acknowledged the grassroots efforts of conservationists, saying that the Tayrona issue had advanced from one of agency politics to one of national concern:

Tayrona National Park has become a symbol of Colombia's continuing commitment to the preservation and proper management of important resources for both present day and future citizens. We must not haphazardly plan irreplaceable resources. Colombians from every walk of life must have input into this decision.<sup>8</sup>

When, in January 1975, the Colombian Congress passed the National Environmental Code<sup>4</sup> prohibiting any change in nomenclature once a park has been established, INDERENA's position was noticeably strengthened. Tayrona could not be declared a National Tourist Resource. Support came from both Colombian and foreign scientists. The Colombian Academy of Science felt that even limited development would result in the loss of United Nations recognition of the park. It is prestigious for Colombia that six of its ten national parks have met the requirements for inclusion in the IUCN List, but to maintain this position, they must continue to be areas 'where visitors are allowed to enter under special conditions for inspirational, educational, cultural and recreational values . . . and where residential, commercial or industrial occupation is prohibited.'<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, CORTURISMO had not conducted the necessary cost-benefit studies to substantiate the claim that the investments and economic return would outweigh on a long-term basis the values which a national natural park could provide. Experience in the Caribbean tourist industry of the sort of development proposed for Tayrona shows a short life of approximately 20 years after which the capital begins to decline quickly in value. If after this period the demand from international tourism declined, Colombia could be trying to maintain tourist interest with outdated facilities that had been abandoned by foreign financiers, and most importantly, with resources that might have been



Left: Macaw parrot *Ara chloroptera*  
R.A. Meganck

Above: Egrets D.L. Golobitsh

altered ecologically beyond the point of return; the government could find itself having to pay the tremendous costs of rehabilitating the natural resources or in writing the park off as a total ecological disaster.

By mid-1975, both agencies had appealed to the President to resolve the conflict, and in March 1976 the President issued a decree 'permanently excluding tourist development plans proposed by CORTURISMO from Tayrona National Park'.<sup>9</sup> In the two years since this important day, INDERENA has completed a master plan for the park and started to put it into effect.

The President's decision was comprehensive since he also addressed the sensitive economic issues facing the region. Preservation of the park has not meant 'locking up the resources of Tayrona' and, in fact, tourist-related industries (sightseeing, fishing charters, transport services, recreation equipment) have expanded in Santa Marta. In addition, investors are currently examining the possibilities of expanding the existing hotel development on Rodadero Beach, just south of Santa Marta and about one hour by car from the park. Public acceptance for an alternative such as this would be widely based.

The Tayrona decision is one of the most vital resource-management decisions made in South America, and sets an important precedent. With proper management, Colombia will be conserving natural resources, genetic materials and representative examples of terrestrial and marine ecosystems for the whole of northern South America, while at the same time providing a national park that will continue to draw national and foreign tourists. The output of the Marine Research Centre on Gairaca Bay alone will have greater impact on the overall economy in the long run than any possible tourism alternative.

THE ENDANGERED Orinoco crocodile *Crocodylus intermedius* D.L. Golobitsh



This decision may signal a new conservation awareness in Latin America; it has already been cited by the Venezuelan Government in defence of its Morrocoy National Park, also on the Caribbean coast. Colombia still has significant national park management problems,<sup>18 19</sup> but the positive steps taken in the Tayrona case towards habitat preservation deserve wide recognition.

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