

#SaveTheChocó: Alliance formed to rescue natural wonder from 'extinction cliff' as Attenborough documentary issues plea for planet

- ❖ Days after WLT patron Sir David Attenborough [showcased](#) what human activities are doing to the planet, WLT launches campaign to help save the last 2% of Ecuador's Chocó forest, home to critically endangered populations of Jaguar, Brown-headed Spider Monkey and many others.
- ❖ With support from WLT and others, Fundación Jocotoco will purchase and protect the largest tract of remaining Chocó forest from a single company, unlocking a Yosemite-sized, 740,000-acre chain of reserves from sea level to the Andes for wildlife to escape rising temperatures.
- ❖ Jocotoco's plan is critical to avert the "extinction cliff" looming over the Chocó, a world-important forest home to the same reptile and amphibian diversity as the Amazon, more bird species than in the whole of Europe and the highest plant diversity of the Americas.

MONDAY 5 OCTOBER 2020: World Land Trust (WLT) is rallying behind long-running partner Fundación Jocotoco (FJ) as they act to protect Ecuador's vanishing Chocó forests, a global alliance for a little-known biodiversity hotspot that follows [Sir David Attenborough's latest plea](#) to save the natural world.

Coinciding with the [WLT patron](#)'s warnings about natural destruction in the Netflix documentary 'A Life on Our Planet', WLT has launched a new fundraising appeal to back FJ as they purchase and protect the largest remaining tract of Chocó forest in Ecuador – a total of 57,000 acres of rainforest they will buy from a single company with support from WLT and other organisations.

Logging since the 1930s has cleared 98% of the Chocó rainforests along Ecuador's west, leaving behind fragments of an ecosystem that boasts the same reptile and amphibian diversity as the Amazon, more bird species in a 100-square-mile radius than in Europe as a whole and the highest plant diversity of all of the Americas.

Mathematical models have projected that an "extinction cliff" is not far off if protection of Chocó land does not strongly increase. According to these estimates, if another 1,000 km² of forest is logged, one-third of the area's current species would be "lost forever" – a scenario that is just a few years away, given the current deforestation rates.

The plan of FJ – an Ecuadorian conservation organisation that already manages 11 natural reserves in western Ecuador – to purchase and save 57,000 acres represents a once-in-a-lifetime chance to prevent such loss of life.

Donations to WLT's £500,000 appeal will save at least 1,668 acres of this important forest area, an expansion of [Canandé Reserve](#) that will link it to other protected areas in the region. Funded via the WLT campaign, the 1,668-acre section of protected forest will play a game-changing role in FJ's broader plans.

The 'pull' effect from securing this first WLT-backed batch of funding early on will, FJ believes, help line up support to purchase more acres, safeguarding vast swathes of forest before other potential buyers – chief among them the oil palm plantation owners who have fuelled deforestation in the Chocó – can make their move.

Clock ticking for Jaguar, Harpy Eagle as Chocó nears 'extinction cliff'

Seen from space, the devastation unsustainable logging has wreaked upon the Chocó becomes obvious. The maps put together by FJ paint a picture of a vanishing forest cover, from a colossal green wall all along Ecuador's Pacific coast in 1938 to a score of scattered islands only five decades later.

Though only small remnants of the vast forest they once were, these enclaves teem with endangered life. Alone, the Canandé Reserve that WLT's new appeal will help expand is home to around 375 bird species and 135 reptile and amphibian species; 28 of the latter group are globally threatened.

Canandé's biodiversity value is illustrated not only by species counts, but also its resident wildlife. Every week, camera traps record Jaguar roaming the tropical forests blanketing the area's lowlands and foothills. The big cat species is classified as Near-Threatened worldwide but this is the last viable population on the western slopes of the Ecuadorian Andes. Here, the Jaguar are thought to be Critically Endangered, the IUCN's last step before extinction.

Canandé's forests – the only known home of the Critically Endangered tree species of *Magnolia canandean* and *Magnolia dixonii* – also echo with the calls of the Brown-headed Spider Monkey. The area is home to 160-200 of the last 500 individuals known to be left in the wild across the whole planet, making it the only viable sanctuary for the Critically Endangered primate.

Harpy Eagle are another presence of the Canandé Reserve. This species, the largest and most powerful raptor of the rainforest, is classified as Near Threatened and decreasing worldwide. The apex predator shares the area with endangered birds including the Great Green Macaw, the Baudó Guan, the Banded Ground-Cuckoo and the Purple Quail-Dove.

"When it comes to the Chocó, nowhere else on Earth has more to lose and is in more danger of losing it all. It really is the most important rainforest most people have never heard of," says Martin Schaefer, CEO of Fundación Jocotoco. "This ecosystem is as biodiverse as the Amazon but far more threatened and by acting, we now have the unique chance of saving its last remaining pristine tract."

A Yosemite-sized climate corridor as Attenborough calls for action on global heating

With Sir David Attenborough as the narrator, Netflix's ['A Life on Our Planet'](#) makes a compelling, dramatic case for action against global heating. Our planet, the WLT patron warns, is "headed for disaster" unless the pressure of human activities decreases quick and decisively.

A key strength of FJ's plan to save the Chocó is that it has enough scale to make a difference against climate change for the resident endangered wildlife. If the WLT partner succeeds in acquiring the 57,000 acres of Chocó forest, the new reserves will join up with existing sanctuaries to form a 740,000-plus-acre stretch of fully contiguous protected Chocó forests – a natural haven the rough size of North America's Yosemite National Park, and twice as big as the UK's Peak District.

"By protecting such a large tract of forest from sea level to nearly 5,000 metres of altitude, our partner FJ will deliver a climate reprieve for Canandé endangered wildlife," says Charlotte Beckham, Conservation Programmes Manager at WLT. "As climate change raises global temperatures, these species will have a protected altitudinal corridor – they will be able to move upland as their local conditions change, whilst remaining in the safety of protected areas."

The Chocó's significance for global conservationists is also illustrated by its ability to gift undiscovered life to the world. A group of visiting scientists recently took only 45 minutes to identify a new species, while a different expedition rediscovered in late 2018 an endangered species – the diminutive yet charismatic Horned Marsupial Frog – not seen in Ecuador for a decade before that point. If the current plans for a major expansion of protected land succeed, further discoveries are highly likely, FJ believes.

The value of preserving Ecuador's Chocó forests will extend beyond the wildlife itself, however. As FJ notes, the safeguarding of land will also help protect the culture of one of the few indigenous people – the Chachi – left in Ecuador's coast. The move from industrialised timber will pave the way for a more sustainable economy among local communities, some of Ecuador's poorest.

NOTES TO EDITORS

World Land Trust (WLT) protects the world's most biologically significant and threatened habitats acre by acre. Through a network of partner organisations around the world, WLT funds the creation of reserves and provides permanent protection for habitats and wildlife. Partnerships are developed with established and highly respected local organisations who engage support and commitment among the local community. It also works to raise awareness, in the UK and elsewhere, of the need for conservation, to improve understanding and generate support through information and fundraising. <https://www.worldlandtrust.org/who-we-are-2/>

Fundación Jocotoco was established in 1998 to protect globally threatened bird species of the Ecuadorian Andes. Since then they have grown to establish a 23,000-hectare network of 16 reserves, home to Spectacled Bear, Mountain Tapir, Chocó Tapir, Puma, Jaguar, more than 900 bird species – 50 of them threatened – and at least 200 amphibian and reptile species. The Foundation is also active in organising community programmes such as school conservation trips, running tree nurseries for reforestation projects and carrying out research in conservation and reforestation. <https://www.jocotoco.org/wb#/EN/TheFoundation>

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Pictures of the Chocó in Ecuador, the Canandé Reserve and its iconic wildlife can be found in this [media gallery](#) and used in coverage, provided that they are appropriately credited.

To find out more about the **endangered species** the 'Saving Ecuador's Chocó Forests' appeal will help preserve, follow the links to WLT's dedicated pages for [Harpy Eagle](#), [Jaguar](#), [Brown-headed Spider Monkey](#), [Horned Marsupial Frog](#), [Great Green Macaw](#), [Scarlet-thighed Dacnis](#) and [others](#).