

Protecting the 'Heart of the World'

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To the Kogi Indians of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, in Colombia, the Sierra is 'the heart of the world'. One man is at the centre of effort to restore that heart to good health.

The Kogi Indians believe the Sierra moves between good and evil, between day and night, between south and north, searching for equilibrium, says Juan Mayr, founder and director of the Fundación Pro Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Since he first went to the Sierra as a photographer 20 years ago, Mayr himself has been a key figure in this search. Most recently he started the process of bringing together conflicting interest groups in order to forge a long term conservation strategy for the region.

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is an isolated mountain range, rising abruptly from the Caribbean coast of Colombia to snow covered peaks over 5,500 metres high. The Kogi Indians, who have retreated further and further up the mountains as new settlers take over the fertile lower slopes, say the Sierra is the heart of the world. Kogi 'mamas' or priests must look after its physical and spiritual health to guarantee the harmony of the universe. Streams, rocks and mountains, as well as burial grounds, are holy places that should be respected but only too often have been desecrated by peasant farmers and grave diggers.

The Sierra is a Biosphere Reserve with an extraordinary variety of climates and ecosystems, ranging from the wet northern facing slopes where ferns, lianas and epiphytes drape the trees to the semi arid cactus covered eastern foothills. Numerous reptile, plant and bird species are endemic to the Sierra and, despite the fact that only 15 per cent of the original forests remain, tapirs, pumas, spectacle bears and otters are still to be found.

In Pre Colombian times the Sierra supported a large indigenous population which practised vertical ecology, growing different crops at different altitudes and taking salt and fish from the sea. The ruins of dozens of settlements with well built stone terraces and paths that also served as drainage channels dot the steep ridges. By the early seventeenth century the Spaniards had won control of the lower Sierra and ransacked graves to steal goldwork and pottery. Later, the exploitation of valuable woods began and peasants using ill adapted farming systems invaded Indian lands. The population has now grown to about 220,000, of which some 20,000 are Indians.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s Juan Mayr lived in the Sierra, exploring pro Colombian sites and "trying to understand the Indian communities and their relationship to the land." He published a book of photographs and articles which was launched by the then President of Colombia, Belisario Betancur, and soon after the Foundation was born.

"The Sierra is a microcosm of Colombia, with all the country's problems represented. At the top are the Kogis, an exceptional pre hispanic state, one of the great legacies of South America. Then further down are the peasant migrant families, many of whom fled from Andean areas to escape the Violencia of the 1950's. The bottom of the Sierra is run by Costeños (coastal people) who own big haciendas."

In addition to these main groupings, says Mayr, there are guerrillas they control over two thirds of Sierra territory paramilitary, coca, marijuana and poppy growers, Arsario Indians with only remnants of their own culture and 1.5 million lowland dwellers who depend on the Sierra for their water supply. First of all the Foundation made a detailed diagnosis of the physical, historical, cultural and social situation, published in atlas form.

"With so many conflicts it's difficult to find any basis for joint action. We decided to focus on water as the main axis everyone is interested in water, even though they have differing points of view."

The glaciers retreat a little further every year and the Kogi mamas worry about the deterioration of the high paramo, which acts as a giant water-holding sponge. More than 30 rivers and countless streams plunge down the Sierra valleys but, whereas the water flow was once regulated by forest cover and Indian technology, now the bare, eroded slopes result in alternate flooding and drought.

"The 1991 Constitution talks about participation but the concept isn't easy for traditional groups to understand. We spent a long time wondering how to get the conservation strategy going and when we started the process we invited absolutely everyone to join in. We used the water problem to create an opening for discussion."

However, says Mayr, there was little point encouraging participation unless people understood the issues and options being decided on by local government bureaucrats in distant offices. In co ordination with other entities, the Foundation began to organize work shops and meetings with all the different interest groups, using theatre and other methods to explain land and water conflicts. "The concepts of sustainable development and conservation imply a vision of the future. But in the Sierra there were people who said, how can we think about the future if we're being killed today? This led us into human rights and we incorporated training on basic rights.

"The Indians have always seen the White as a threat and the peasants look on the Indian as some sort of wild animal. Then, at one meeting, there was a change. Peasant leaders recognized that they had invaded land and violated Indian graves they admitted it was their fault, that they didn't realize how important the graves were for the Indians."

The conservation strategy has to be adapted constantly to changes at the local and national levels: it is a flexible process rather than a rigid plan. One of the aims is to ensure that all the institutions covering the Sierra there are two national parks, two Indian reserves, three departments and eleven municipalities ordinate activities and include environmental variables in the development plans. The fact that the municipalities have formed an association and the creation of the Regional Corporation for the sustainable development of the Sierra Nevada by the Ministry of the Environment should help this.

Although the Foundation backed primarily by the German aid agency (GTZ) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) has been concentrating principally on the conservation strategy, other complementary projects continue. "We seem to be involved in everything from research on biodiversity to Indian culture to economic analysis," says Mayr. The Foundation has its own field stations and works with other organizations on health, environmental education, farming systems and conservation actions.

Not everyone is sympathetic to Mayr's energetic leadership or the Foundation's work one field base was taken over by guerrillas while some of the most acculturated Indians have refused to participate in the strategy. Mayr says the structure of the Foundation is changing and internal decisions are more democratic now. He also believes that the role of NGOs as intermediaries between local communities and government institutions needs examining.

In 1993 Juan Mayr was awarded the Goldman Conservation prize for his work in the Sierra and he is currently vice president of the IUCN. Although this takes up a lot of precious time, travelling to and from meetings, he thinks it is important for the South to be represented in the environmental debate. "The discussion is still centered in the northern countries, with documents and more documents. But we are facing environmental problems and community conflicts that need concrete action."

Like most NGOs, the Foundation fights a constant battle for funding and foreign donors often have fixed ideas about what constitutes progress. "With something like the conservation strategy, few results are immediately measurable the effects of what we're doing will be seen in 10 or 20 years. We want people in the Sierra to be able to define their own needs and priorities and often these things don't figure in the donors' schemes. I think we've been successful precisely because we've focused on one specific region, we understand its dynamics and know the people."

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Notes to readers

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