

Danger in the Amazon Rainforest: Indigenous NGO Cofan Survival Fund Works to Protect over One Million Acres of Forest

The Cofán, a small indigenous tribe in Northern Ecuador, control vast ancestral territories containing some of the most biodiverse rainforests on the planet. Constant incursions into Cofán territory by illegal settlers, miners, oil companies and others have increased the danger of losing 1 million acres of biodiverse forest protected by the Cofán. Deforestation in this and other regions of the Ecuadorian Amazon will likely escalate in the face of 13 new oil blocks that have recently opened for lease in November.

Quito, Ecuador ([PRWEB](#)) December 18, 2012 -- With the Ecuadorian government opening up bidding for oil blocks in the Ecuadorian Amazon on November 28, 2012, pressures are mounting for conservationists in the country.

According to a study from the Universidad Andina, deforestation will likely escalate in other regions of the Ecuadorian Amazon as a result of 13 new oil blocks that were opened for lease in November (Reuters, Nov 28, 2012). Another recently released study by the Amazon Network of Socio-Environmental Geo-Referenced Information, or RAISG, shows that during 2000-2010, 92,000 square miles of Amazon forest were destroyed (<http://www.albanytribune.com/17122012-amazon-rainforest-under-pressure/>).

The Cofán Ranger Program (<http://cofan.org/en/programs/cofan-ranger-program.html>), innovated and managed by the Cofán-run Fundacion para la Sobrevivencia del Pueblo Cofán (Cofan Survival Fund), was developed as a response to these kinds of threats, and this ranger force protects over 1 million acres of some of the most biodiverse forests in the world. The determination and success of the Cofán Nation in protecting the vastly biodiverse lands under their control is of ever-increasing significance for rainforest conservation in Ecuador, and the Cofán have had many challenges to face this year.

One challenge occurred during a confrontation earlier this year at the Ecuador-Colombia border between a community of aggressive illegal settlers (legal refugees from Colombia illegally living and hunting in a protected national reserve) and the Cofán rangers and their allies (ECTV, March 26, 2012).

In late March 2012, Cofán rangers mounted an operation to deal with intensifying issues surrounding an illegal settlement in the Cofán Bermejo Ecological Reserve which lies at the Ecuador-Colombian border along the San Miguel River. The problem of this land invasion was made worse heightened by the aggressive and threatening behaviors the illegal colonists displayed towards the Cofán rangers during their patrols. The colonists had even threatened to kill rangers who informed them they cannot hunt or use resources within the reserve (ECTV, March 26, 2012).

Accompanying 30 Cofán to this distant location, accessible only by boat, were 20 Cofán allies, including both the provincial governor and the director of the Ministry of Environment, as well as a handful of military personnel, special ops police and representatives of Ecuadorian media. The colonists were clearly not expecting a visit from such a varied and determined group who traveled to their remote settlement by Cofán canoes and military boats, called “piranhas.”

Despite high tensions, treacherous hikes and a harrowing nighttime journey back downriver, the intervention

proved a success and demonstrated to the colonists and all the farmers living along the peripheries of Cofán lands that the Cofán have a strong presence in the area, that they are determined to maintain that presence, and will not allow illegal activities under their watch. Moreover, through such coordinated operations, the Cofán Nation demonstrated their capacity for organizing a large intervention and for garnering the support of proper government authorities like the Ministry of the Environment and the governor. The Cofán carried out this successful operation with virtually no money, as the Cofán Ranger Program has been suffering from lack of funding for the past year.

The Cofán Ranger Program, an indigenous-run conservation strategy, was created in 2003 through the Fundación para la Sobrevivencia del Pueblo Cofán (Cofan Survival Fund) and consists of Cofán men and women who patrol and maintain hundreds of miles of trails and monitor wildlife within their ancestral territories. Without the active presence of the Cofán rangers, the impressively diverse Cofán Ancestral Territories, ranging in altitude from 300 to over 14,000 feet above sea level, fast become the targets of poaching, illegal logging, mining, and large-scale oil extraction. Invading colonists who clear expanses of forests and hunt illegally pose another pervasive threat, not only to the integrity of these globally-important ecosystems but to the Cofán culture as well. Despite their small numbers, they are a major force for protecting the Amazon rainforest and are backed by the Ecuadorian government.

The creation of the Cofan Ranger Program marks the first time that indigenous people have been made official custodians of federally-protected land and were professionally trained to guard their territory in Ecuador. It also marks the first time the Ecuadorian government has recognized indigenous park rangers as equals to government park rangers with the same legal powers and jurisdiction.

To learn more about Cofán culture, the Cofán Ranger Program, and ways to support the Cofán, please visit: www.cofan.org.

About Cofan Survival Fund (Fundacion para la Sobrevivencia del Pueblo Cofán)

Founded in 1999, the Fundación para la Sobrevivencia del Pueblo Cofán (Cofan Survival Fund) is a non-profit organization with Cofán leadership dedicated to the survival of the Cofán indigenous culture and its Amazonian rainforest environment (www.cofan.org).

The Fundación para la Sobrevivencia del Pueblo Cofán (FSC) is committed to biodiversity conservation and research, protecting Cofán ancestral territory and its natural resources, developing environmentally sound income alternatives, and educating the youngest Cofán generation.

Cofan Survival Fund (CSF) is the US branch of the FSC, an incorporated 501(c)(3) non-profit organization set up to receive and administrate all donations made from abroad. The administrative costs for the both the FSC and the CSF are extremely low, and every effort is made to channel all funding received directly into our projects, whether that be tuition fees for a young Cofán studying in Quito or the buying food for our Cofán Ranger program.

The Founder and Executive Director of the FSC is Randy Borman. Randy was born in the Cofán village of Dureno and grew up living as any young Cofán does, while simultaneously learning “western” values from his American missionary parents. His education has been a mix of ancient Cofán knowledge of the forest and jungle life with a western academic education. Randy is considered one of the Cofán Nation’s most important and respected leaders by the Cofán themselves. He is also a recognized leader of Ecuadorian environmental and



conservation related issues, and continues to work closely with various national and international non-governmental organizations.



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