

- **Chapter Two: “If I see or hear another Scarlet Macaw, I’ll scream.”¹**
 - **Corcovado National Park, Costa Rica**
 - R. Michael Wright, 2013

The rationale for creating an international program at The Nature Conservancy in the mid-1970s was to apply the organization’s negotiating, legal, tax, and real estate skills elsewhere in the western hemisphere. This was a period when TNC judged its impact based on “bucks and acres”—the amount of land secured for conservation, the economic value of that land and funds raised. I pitched an international program using the unsubstantiated claim that there were significant large and valuable lands overseas owned by Americans that could be acquired by gift or bargain sale—there were bucks and acres to be had beyond our borders. Once the program was approved my initial challenge was to identify such opportunities. The search led me to John Archbold, a TNC board member with land holdings in Dominica. Despite its complexity, the Middleham Estate acquisition catalyzed the establishment Morne Trois Pitons Park and seemed to validate my assertion that TNC’s unique land conservation approach could contribute to the international conservation field then emerging in the US. Additional sleuthing unearthed the Southern Cross Club on Little Cayman Island, Hershey Chocolate owned land in Costa Rica, owners of several properties in Canada, including land owned by the Long Point Hunt Club, and to one of the world’s richest men, the co-owner of much of the Osa Peninsula on Costa Rica’s Pacific coast, Jay Pritzker.

Patrick Noonan, the President of The Nature Conservancy, and I flew to Chicago to meet with Jay Pritzker, who together with brother Robert, owned the Hyatt Hotel chain, McCall's magazine, Braniff Airlines, various casinos and a host of other businesses. Jay also happened to be the co-owner of Osa Productos Forestales (OPF), a timber company that held title to about 119,000 acres of extraordinarily diverse rain forest on the Osa Peninsula. We had thought initially of approaching his co-owner, Will Gonyea of Oregon, until we were discouraged by a confidant who described the timberman as “a very successful businessman but a very unsuccessful human being.” In any case, with the lumber business struggling in the NW it was unclear whether he needed a tax relief. Concluding that Jay might lend a more sympathetic ear to our interest in preserving the rain forest of the Osa, we decided to pitch him first.

Getting on the plane just before the doors closed, one of Pat’s nerve racking habits, we reviewed our pitch as we headed to Chicago. It was tricky as Pat and I were the bearers of the unpleasant news that he and Gonyea were on the verge of losing their land on the Osa either to squatters or to expropriation or both. Pritzker’s office was vast and to me, and I suspect even to Pat in those days, pretty intimidating. A large, imposing man, Pritzker seemed to confirm psychological studies that correlate height with professional success. Impeccably and conservatively dressed

¹ When I took my family to Corcovado in 1984 this was a comment of my daughter Melina with the melodramatic sigh of a 10 year old but to me captures the abundance and wonders of the forest that can almost be “too muc” for the mind to grasp.

he could not have been more cordial despite a constant flow of people darting in with questions and urgent matters related to a major acquisition that had been described above the fold in that day's Wall Street Journal. He would have a five minute conversation plus phone call on decisions requiring his input and he would then resume the conversation beginning mid-sentence right were it is ended before the interruption, for which he was most apologetic. We were both impressed by his intimate level of knowledge about the details of his vast holdings including the recently and incidentally acquired bottomland forests on the Mississippi flyway that Pat desperately wanted to conserve. Nevertheless, we left the meeting empty handed. Although Pritzker was widely regarded among his peers as a man of great business acumen, in the case of OPF he had employed and chose to follow the advice of some dubious, self-interested characters. As the facts would prove out they had misled him about how dire the situation was.

The meeting with Pritzker came at the end of brief, intense and increasingly acrimonious negotiations with various representatives of OPF (Walter Wood and Bob Bonday of Costa Rica Properties Inc and Charles Pflueger of Out Island Development Inc.). Efforts to exploit the timber on the Osa had been struggling for some time, management costs were escalating and company's heavy-handed local manager had created a firestorm that eventually catalyze a communist-inspired invasion of remote parts of the OPF lands. In my communications with Wood, Bonday and Pflueger (and later to Pritzker) I stressed that the best strategy was for Pritzker and Gonyea to donate the land to The Nature Conservancy and seek a tax deduction or, alternatively, we proposed that Pritzker donate \$1 million the Conservancy which we would use to acquire a significant portion of the Osa from OPF which could then declare a dividend back to the owners or use of funds to manage their remaining holdings on the peninsula. But Wood and Bonday continued to insist, against all evidence from the ground that expropriation could be staved off through their political connections. "We have powerful friends." They darkly warned.

During these discussions in mid-1975 I remained in close touch with Alvaro Ugalde, the effervescent Director of the Costa Rica National Park Service and advisor to Costa Rican President Daniel Oduber and Tom Lovejoy of World Wildlife Fund, the primary funder of The Nature Conservancy's international program. Alvaro and his colleagues in Costa Rica had already been pressing OPF for a number of years. Seeking to drive a wedge between TNC, WWF and our Costa Rican allies, the OPF representatives proposed to me that TNC make common cause with OPF and that together we create our own private nature reserve (of course employing them in the process) to "keep the land out of Costa Rican hands." They suggested that TNC raise half a million dollars which, they claimed without evidence, that Pritzker would match and they would then raise additional management funds by selling to unsuspecting Americans timeshares and second homes on the Osa—a remote tropical region that received 157 inches of rain a year! After consulting with Alvaro and Tom, I rejected the idea. In my last conversation the increasingly desperate Wood said we probably had only 30-60 days to find a solution, to which I countered "you will be lucky if you have 10 days, it's time to make a 100% gift." But even that was optimistic, time had run out. The application of TNC's land acquisition skills was not going to provide the answer to the long sought goal of saving the rain forests of the Osa.

It is almost impossible to over state the extraordinary natural beauty and value of the Corcovado basin that was ultimately to become the core of the Corcovado National Park. The basin itself is about 85,000 acres with a 25,000 acre plain and caiman-filled swamp rimmed by modest hills and bordered on the west by a pristine 14 mile long beach. The only large expanse of wet tropical forest left on the dry Pacific

side of Central America, the forest contained over 500 species of trees many over 200 feet tall with 65 foot diameters. In his report to President Oduber, Joe Tosi, a highly regarded forester, wrote, “No written description... can begin to convey to the reader a true idea of the structural magnificence and incredible biological variety, or of the wealth of primal sights, smells and sounds to be experienced by the visitor to these virgin communities in the Corcovado Basin. Long experienced in regions of lesser biological complexity and perhaps hardened to the esthetic experience of nature, trained biologist return from their first visit to the Corcovado Basin with ecstatic praise, eager to find some opportunity to return again.” The Osa’s 13 distinct ecosystems contain over 1,500 species of trees and provides habitat to 124 species of mammals including for six endangered cat species including a significant population of jaguar with large populations of peccary, tapir, crocodiles, four species of monkeys, an extraordinary bird fauna-estimated at 375 species, the most prominent of which are flocks of raucous magnificent Scarlet Macaw (when I visited Corcovado with my family in 1984 my exacerbated 10 year old daughter finally sighed, “if I see or hear another Scarlet Macaw, I’ll just scream!”).

In many ways the long push to create Corcovado Park bore striking similarities to that of Trois Pitons in Dominica. As in that case, some of the earliest attention to the natural riches of these systems came from research scientists and those working with corporations that sought to exploit the forests who then raised concerns about the ecological values of what they found. The scientist, Paul Allen, published a book The Rain Forest of Gulfo Dulce in 1956 the year before Pritzker and Gonyea purchased 119,000 acres on the peninsula and in 1960 OPF hired the eminent ecologist Leslie Holdridge and Joe Tosi as consultants to survey the resources. At the time OPF’s professed goal was creation of a sustainable forestry industry but within a decade its managers were burning down houses and shooting at local *campesinos*. During the initial period of OPF management, Holdridge and Tosi founded the Tropical Science Center (OTS) in 1962 to study tropical environments and awe struck by what they had seen on the Osa OTS rented a small plot of land from OPF to create a field station. The TSC field station was to become the beachhead for a growing cadre of scientists passionately studying and advocating for the need to save the Osa forests. Over 1,000 visited the field station between 1962 and 1973 including Jack Ewel, a plant ecologist, who surveyed major parts of the basin to be followed by ornithologists and other scientists including Monty Lloyd a biology professor at University of Chicago who, I came to believe, had made it his life calling to badger Tom Lovejoy and me endlessly until we did something to help save the Osa. As scientists compared their experiences interest and concerns grew and as happened in Dominica, in 1973 an attractive publication was prepared making the wider case for conservation of these forests and to build a wider constituency among those who had not yet experienced the Osa’s ecosystems first hand.²

In 1973 the Servicio de Parques Nacionales (SPN), was formally created in large part due to the vision and persistence of Mario Boza, then the director of the Department of National Parks in the Forestry Division (a branch of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock) and his equally dedicated, colleague Alvaro Ugalde. A more contrasting team could not be imagined than the reserved and strategic Boza with his oversized glasses and shorter exuberant, tenacious and charismatic Ugalde. From different political parties (thus assuring that whichever party was in power, conservation would have a fierce

² To my surprise in the process of writing up this history 35 years after the fact I have learned that several years before I became involved TNC had participated in earlier attempts to conserve parts of the Osa including through negotiations between OPF and Huey Johnson head of TNC’s Western Regional Office (who hired me, reluctantly, in 1972) and Bob Jenkins, TNC’s chief scientist who noted at the time that it was unlikely that TNC could help as it then lacked a Latin American program.

advocate in government) Mario pioneered the early years of SPN to be replaced in 1974 by Alvaro on his return from studies at the University of Michigan (where the tropically habituated Alvaro described to me stepping out of his apartment during Ann Arbor's winter semester as simply "Instant Death!"). Almost from the founding of SPN Mario and Alvaro, who had first seen the Osa from the air in 1965, had pushed for the creation of a national park in the Corcovado region of the Osa but the situation was not yet ripe for action and indeed prospects looked dim. Neither from the perspective of local conservationists nor to us outsiders did the newly elected President Daniel Oduber appear to be a friend of the parks. When he was a legislator he proposed that Santa Rosa, the country's first National Park, be taken from the SPN and to return its management to the more exploitative-minded tourism board. But paralleling Dominica, where Dom-Can Ltd's destructive behavior helped create an opportunity for conservation, on the Osa the violent behavior of OPF and its ugly American management approach created growing calls for a change in the ownership status and provided an opening for conservation. Pressure was building from the scientific community on one side and from political forces agitating for land rights and agrarian reform on the other. Despite the assurance the advisors had given Pritzker and Gonyea, the future of OPF was very much in doubt.

Tom Lovejoy at World Wildlife Fund was a young but already highly regarded member of the scientific community that was urging action on Corcovado. As the manager of WWF's grant to TNC and equally a comrade in arms, Tom contacted me and urged me to go to Costa Rica and meet with Alvaro and Joe Tosi to discuss the situation and see how we could help. With no Spanish and having never before set foot in Latin America, in July 1975 I flew south acting on behalf of TNC and WWF.

This was my first trip to Central America and after meetings with Alvaro, Tosi and his savvy assistant Chantal Blanton, I was anxious to actually see the forests of Corcovado that were the subject of such intense advocacy. Alvaro said that given its remoteness it was extremely difficult to gain access to the basin itself however he suggested that I might accompany Olaf Wessberg who was then planning to visit the area. A Swedish fruit farmer and a pioneer in nature restoration on his own farm, the visionary Olaf had been the driving force for creating a strict nature reserve at Cabo Blanco on the tip of Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula that was the harbinger of much of the conservation actions to follow. Alvaro called Olaf and his wife Karen Mogensen "messengers from the future." But the amount of time Olaf planned to spend on the Osa was too great and would not allow me to return to Washington on schedule. I decide to go instead to Monteverde a cloud forest reserve then owned by the Tropical Sciences Center, straddling the continental divide in the Cordillera de Tilaran then about 3 1/2 hour drive north of San Jose. Three years before the reserve was established collaboratively by George Powell and his wife and the local American Quakers dairy farmers who had moved to Costa Rica in the 1950s to escape the draft for the Korean War. I stayed in a modest pension owned by a former nurse from New York who asked if I knew her daughter who was studying elephants in Kenya. 20 years later her daughter Cynthia Moss and I would work together when I headed up African Wildlife Foundation. But now, I climbed up through a misty, magical forest and elfin woodlands to the glong of three-wattled bell birds with Roger Morales the manager the reserve. The mood abruptly changed as we came onto the ventana on the continental divide and found ourselves faced with the guns of three drunken hunters. Roger demanded that they hand over their weapons and they in turn shouted, staggered, cock their guns and pointed them at us. I thought the international program of the Conservancy was about to come to an abrupt end as I tried to assess the likelihood that I could safely dive into the dense vegetation by the side of the trail.

Despite my silent pleas that he let them go Roger persisted and they eventually handed over their weapons. I was more than a little impressed with Roger's cool and even more relieved. It was only after I returned to the states that I learned that Olaf had been murdered during his trip to Corcovado by the son of one of the squatters. I will never know how my possible presence might have changed that outcome or I would have joined in his fate. Rumor says that subsequently the convicted murderer was killed in prison while serving an eight year sentence.

Despite these incidents, at the time Costa Rica was a remarkable peaceful and certainly was a very progressive country without an army, with higher literacy rate and lower infant mortality than the US, yet ironically these were two of the three or four times where during my career where I may actually been in some physical danger (if you don't count driving on hair-raising roads and flying in planes with questionable maintenance) The third incident was also at Monteverde some years later.

I was visiting Costa Rica and Panama with several US government conservation officials when we drove to the cloud forest with its then manager Feynner Arias Godinez (see below). One of my purposes was to check on the visitor/interpretive center that had been built at Monteverde partially with funds I had raised but we arrived to discover that poor local farmers were trying to drive a bulldozer up the trail through the forest to gain access to farming in the deep Penas Blancas valley beyond the reserve. President Oduber signed an order drafted by Alvaro to stop the bulldozer but Feynner was the local face of the decision. The mood was combustible when, perhaps unwisely, we went into the adjacent campesino community to better understand the situation. It felt like a scene out of the 1950s Western--we walked the plank sidewalk to a local bar with two bedraggled horses hitched to a post outside, stepping over a comatose drunk as we pushed through the swinging half-doors. On the back wall was painted a large buxom blond cowgirl. The bar was suspiciously empty. Where was everybody? Stepping outside, we look down the rutted muddy street at a machete wielding mob determined to extract revenge on Feynner. Assisted by the bartender, we were able to escape out the back to the reserve but the villagers set up camp outside the reserve gate to keep Feynner from leaving. Early the next morning we smuggled Feynner out in the trunk of the car and return to San Jose. Once tempers cooled a solution was sorted out on the ground while Feynner was whisked safely out of the country for well-earned professional training.³

Alvaro's call to Tom that prompted my trip resulted from the drum beat of advocacy on behalf of Corcovado that had gotten the attention of President Oduber in 1975. I have heard different explanations about what finally made the case with the President. One theory is that it was a letter from an Italian naturalist, Paolo Cappelli touting the attraction of scientific tourism to defray the cost of conservation. Others argue that an earlier proposal from Oduber, while he was President of the Costa Rican Congress, to downgrade Santa Rosa National Park had caused a considerable international backlash and the President was looking for a dramatic action to establish his conservation credentials. Still others give primary credit to Alvaro's considerable powers of persuasion--I have no way of knowing which prevailed but I would place my bet on Alvaro. Whatever the motivation, the President's interest provided an opportunity for Alvaro to say the time was right to establish Corcovado Park and thereafter the President's commitment never wavered (even when Alvaro's original estimate of the cost of

³ Feynner eventually and ironically became the steward of the UC Landels-Hill Big Creek Reserve (part of the UC Natural Reserve System) in Big Sur in California, a role he filled with considerable distinction for some 20 years. Over the years I passed through Big Creek several times never knowing he was there.

creating Corcovado, 1.5 million colones, turned into 12 million colones-the equivalent then of \$2 million). With a nod from the President, Alvaro sprang into action asking Tosi to finish his Corcovado report that was being prepared on behalf of WWF; he also got in touch with Tom and he launched Monty Lloyd at Tom and me to be sure that our attention did not stray (I doubt a no more passionate advocate walked the planet than Monty). This in turn prompted my initial trip and my approach to representatives of OPF (in his excellent 1978 paper on the creation of Corcovado, which I have used to jog my memory, Gary Hartshorn indicates that Monty himself was conducting these negotiations and while not strictly accurate, Monty did get us access to Pritzker and I'm sure lobbied him as well). In any event, OPF's lobbying to create its own private park and proposing a partnership with TNC was rebuffed by me and gained little traction in-country.

Effectively time had run out for the company. The president's interest, Joe Tosi's excellent report, and the deteriorating situation on the Osa with the growing number of squatters (many poor simply seeking a place to farm but also land speculators hoping for a windfall) meant action had to be taken. Like in many countries in Latin America seeking to break-up large unused landholdings, a plague throughout the hemisphere, Costa Rican law allowed people to lay claim to apparently unused landholding, make "improvements" (which usually required cutting the forest) and after three years gain legal possession.⁴ OPF had effectively lost control of the squatter situation in the early 70s and the concern was that with the fast approaching dry season and growing political turmoil, a land rush was about to take place that would irrevocably change the character of the Corcovado ecosystems. The government was in a quandary. They needed to put guards on the ground to avoid the land rush when the park was established but they couldn't appropriate funds for that purpose before it was officially declared and in any case did not want to publically signal their intentions for fear of prompting a land rush. Alvaro got in touch with Tosi, Tom, myself, and David Hill of the conservation group RARE (Rare Animal Relief Effort). Among ourselves we discussed how to come up with what, in retrospect, is a laughably small amount of money to support placement of protection forces the moment the park was decaled. In the end the three conservation organizations each committed \$10,000 (unbelievable as it may seem today to us it seemed a daunting figure) and TSC agreed to front the money for the government in the interim while we found the funds. While we searched for funds I became obsessed with weather reports from Costa Rica that would signal the start of the dry season with renewed cutting and burning. Trading increasingly anxious calls with Alvaro the question was always, "Is it still raining? Do we still have time?"

For several years there had been competing proposals within the Costa Rican government about whether to expropriate the property or engage in a swap for land elsewhere on the Osa. In 1973 a committee of the national legislature investigated OPF activities and recommended expropriation. Although President Oduber vetoed a similar bill in 1975, OPF finally saw the handwriting on the wall and accepted a land swap, the first of a complex transaction spearheaded by ITCO, the government agency which held title to otherwise unclaimed land.⁵ Through the swap, OPF acquired land 1:1 from ITCO, the government

⁴ Ironically governments in the US, in Latin America and elsewhere themselves claimed vast acreage of Indian lands claiming "nonuse" when Indian reliance on the ecosystems did not cause obvious impacts. This led to a program pioneered internationally by the NGO Native Lands to map such use and translate it onto maps that could then be legally registered.

⁵ In addition to President Oduber, Alvaro insists that the unsung heroes of Corcovado are Don Jose Manuel Salazar, the head of Instituto de Tierras y Colonizacion (ITCO) and his deputy Don Rodrigo Chavez. ITCO is the agency responsible for helping the landless obtain property. Instead of seeing Corcovado as the massive unsought new task that it was, they launched the ITCO staff at the challenge and working with Alvaro they created a brilliant marriage of conservation and agrarian reform. Without them it is doubtful Corcovado would have succeeded. Alvaro notes another even more unlikely and

agency which held title to otherwise unclaimed land. The ITCO land was adjacent to those retained by OPF. Some years later, during the administration of President Carazo, all the remaining OPF holdings were expropriated. In addition, ITCO acquired land at Canasa on the Gulf side of the Osa using funds from the National Emergency Commission, where truly needy farmers were relocated while land speculators were paid for their improvements and transported from whence they came.

With a tiny budget for immediate protection in hand, the formal establishment of Corcovado National Park took place on October 31, 1975; it was a major milestone but far from an endpoint if Corcovado was to be more than a “paper park” (parks that existed only on paper but have no reality on the ground). The situation remained precarious during 1976. The understaffed SPN struggled to prevent new squatters or speculators and to deal with the continuing conundrum of the 166 families already living in the Park and how to relocate or compensate them applying, in Alvaro’s words, “justice to the maximum.” Roger Morales’ average height and stout physic gave no hint of the quiet courage that lay within. He had introduced me to Monteverde and stood down illegal hunters there and now volunteered to go to the Osa to establish a presence in the face of frustrated, sometimes desperate and angry opposition. Indicative of the temper among the squatters, a plot was uncovered to shoot down the Park Service airplane when it was bringing Roger back from one of his frequent visits to the capital of San Jose, a plot prevented when one courageous young local, Feynner Godinez, walked through the forest out to civilization and warning Roger. Realizing that Feynner was now in danger if he stayed on the Osa, he was moved to Monteverde where it was wrongly assumed he would be safe.

In mid-1976 I was in Costa Rica seeking, unsuccessfully, to raise funds from local branches of several transnational corporations, and was finally able to go to Corcovado. The following are a few of my contemporaneous impressions as a non-scientist,

The beginning of the wet season is probably the least distressing time to fly out of Costa Rica's central plateau-- the vast formerly forested areas have turned from brown to green and the erosion which follows the rain has yet to begin in earnest. The small Cessna reaches the Pacific Coast and we turned south toward the Osa Peninsula... 45 minutes after departing the capital we reach the northern border of Corcovado and skinned treetops to observe the various natural systems visible from the air. Alvaro and I first landed on the broad beach before walking into a towering mangrove forests standing on stilted roots up to 6 feet around and wandering in an eerily abandoned thatched roof cottage with battered pots still sitting on the crude make-shift stove. As we walked back toward the plane baby turtles emerges from the sand and started their perilous scramble toward the surf, with Alvaro gently aiding a few stragglers. Taking off again Alvaro reminded me that improvement of the airstrip at Sirena was a major financial need for Park development and was convinced as we dipped immediately after the last tree landing hard in order to stop short of the wreckage of a vine encrusted plane that signaled the runway's end. Once on the ground Alvaro and I were enveloped in green and the sounds numerous birds including flocks of orange fronted parakeets and Swanson's Toucans which despite its oversized

initially reluctant ally, the representative from Communist Party which then held 6 of the 57 seats in Congress and had taken up the cause of the farmers. Captured by the grandeur of the Corcovado forest the Party position became “yes, we approve of the creation of the park, but we also demand full compensation to all affected.” Thus shifting the discussion from defiance to negotiation...hard negotiations. For weeks and weeks, ITCO teams labored from household to household, discussing relocation, debating prices, land, animals, improvements.”

bill accomplishes the apparently aerodynamically impossible feat of flying across the clearing... As we walked through the forest near the airstrip we were immediately greeted by a Coatimundi with his large eyes and long snout, fig trees perhaps 8 feet in diameter and the omnipresent leaf cutter ants... heading for Punta Salsipuedes (point of return-if-you-can) along a palm-lined beach near the Sirena River were numerous shorebirds but our initial enthusiasm for swim to escape the heat and turgid humidity was substantially diminished when the fin of a large shark, patrolling the river mouth for food, broke the surface... after lunch of what was to become familiar-rice and black beans we headed the opposite direction down the black and white sand beach, a hawksbill turtle broke the ocean surface to our right and then immediately to our left a large number of spider monkeys scramble to the treetops, a bickering flock of Scarlet Macaws launched themselves across openings in the forest...the dilemma was which way to look to avoid missing something...The second day we walked through the forest accompanied by Spider and Whiteface monkeys and serenaded by the roar of Howler monkeys...my head swiveled...parrots here; a Paca, a large rodent, there and iridescent blue butterflies flitting along the sun dappled trail... We crossed several small farms already reverting to jungle. Discussions with the former tenants revealed that only the presidential decree just prior to the dry season cut short a planned assault on the forest unprecedented in Corcovado. Without the courage of President Oduber to take on a project everyone said was too big, too costly, too complex, in a word impossible, large areas would have been cut with the newly acquired chainsaws and a delicate balance between the basin's dozen ecosystems would have been your retrievably breach....

It is difficult to describe the bottom land forest without resorting to superlatives which may engender skepticism. Yet outside the majestic redwoods and sequoias, I've never experienced a forest as structurally magnificent and impressive in terms of sheer size.... Some have huge trunks rising like pillars directly from the soil but more have buttresses of an ingenuity and variety that is astonishing -- some have many slim props, others are an integral part of the trunk, either in straight rays like a child's drawing of the sun or in sensuous curves right winding back upon themselves. Most impressive are the columns from which the buttresses appear artificially attached like fins on a rocket. One of the latter, by my estimate, had buttresses well over 12 feet tall and the trunk over 15 feet across, disappeared in the lower canopy 150 feet above without yet having branched. One way to estimate the age and the undisturbed nature of these forests is by the size of the tangled vines the coil and twist everywhere. We saw many as large as a man's leg and some at least 3 to 5 feet in diameter... There were tracks of innumerable Tapirs, ungainly mammals with their prehensile noses, and tracks of two of the park's cat species, mountain lion and jaguar...Those who have lived for years in the basin have commented on the amount and closeness of wildlife encounters only two months after the relocation of most of the squatters. The response to the decreased human pressure has been almost instantaneous and provides reason to believe that by next year the Park will be better prepared to handle positive public visitation.... Yet based on my own trip, I feel the Corcovado already has the potential to be one of the major scientific and wildlife attractions of the hemisphere...

Future potential is not present reality and the government struggled to find the funds to compensate the squatters for their improvements as was required by law. The situation was increasingly fraught and fears of re-invasion were real.⁶ The scientists who had so long urged the Park be created could not help

⁶ Recently Alvaro wrote up his memories of this time and the cast of characters, some of whom lived in extreme poverty and squatter while others had claim to thousands of acres. If those living in the now declared park cease hunting and farming

as Tom, David and I struggled to find the modest amount of additional funds we were committing to add to the major support from the government to make the park a reality on the ground. At the time WWF-US had only a dozen or so staff, TNC's international program was a solo operation and RARE had no paid staff at all but with the park declared we had each committed to come up with an additional \$150,000. How TNC's share was obtained is the story itself.

In April 1976 I drafted my resignation letter from TNC. The draft said if the Conservancy would meet TNC's obligation to support Corcovado, a commitment I had made on behalf of the organization, I would resign and we could acknowledge that creating an international program in the first place was not a good idea. The reason for my frustration was my inability, in the fiercely competitive internal fundraising competition at TNC, to get access to potential major donors to support the needs in Costa Rica. Other programs were seen as higher priorities but in good faith a commitment to the government had been made and if the organization could not back me then the program had a bleak future. It was a career low point rescued by the most unlikely of events. Many years previously the Conservancy and World Wildlife Fund-US had undertaken several joint land conservation efforts in the US one of which involved buying habitat for the Attwater Prairie Chicken in Eagle Lake, Texas, 70 miles west of Houston. The Conservancy at the time was not able to raise sufficient funds so WWF completed the purchase but with the agreement that should WWF ever consider selling the land the Conservancy had a right of first purchase. The State now wanted to buy the property to create a reserve and WWF was asking TNC to relinquish its rights. Pat Noonan called me into his office and said, "You know these folks over at WWF. Do you think we should do this?" I thought, maybe this was an opportunity and I said "let me see what I can negotiate." I went to the President of WWF at the time, Godfrey Rockefeller, a kind and courtly man, and said that we would be prepared to release the right of first purchase in exchange for funds to meet our commitment which we would then send to Costa Rica in support of Corcovado Park. If, on the other hand, they didn't grant a release then WWF would not get any money from the State. The first reaction from the incredulous Chris Dann, formerly a TNC colleague and now on the WWF staff, was "Wait a minute, we're funding your program and now you're blackmailing us?" I said, "Well not really, this is just a way to use funds from the state of Texas to help support conservation in Costa Rica. Everybody wins." Eyebrows were raised but to WWF's great credit they said okay, TNC released its rights, funds went to Costa Rica and my resignation letter stayed in the drawer.

The Corcovado experience made it clear to me that TNC's program had to move beyond simply applying legal, tax and land acquisition skills which could not alone conserve the Osa. Spencer Beebe who moved to Washington in 1980 to direct the program after I left for WWF (not to start it as some believe) wisely switched the focus toward building financial resources which was an area where I struggled. Spencer was masterful at raising funds and, to his credit, did not just transfer funds but helped Alvaro and his colleagues raise the funds themselves and gave them access to the donors so the Costa Ricans would be less dependent on and beholden to external organizations. A skill that Alvaro

until they could be relocated, how were they to live? Initially SPN decided to feed them directly before having second thoughts about the logistics of buying eggs and rice and beans and distributing it to almost 200 families scattered in the forest over thousands on acres. The alternative was marginally more practical but hugely risky—give them cash (monthly checks would hardly be accepted in this Bank-less area). As Alvaro recounted, at times he would have 1-2 million colones (\$125,000-\$250,000) piled on his desk, which he would stuff in envelopes and give it to his most trusted staff to deliver in these remote areas. Years later at AWF I found myself heading an organization whose staff was also carrying cash in the lawless Congo because the government won't pay the park guards protected the Mountain Gorillas in rebel controlled areas.

mastered, somewhat reluctantly.⁷ While the funds from WWF and TNC were certainly an beneficial international endorsement of the importance of Corcovado, the external amounts contributed were laughingly small compared to the financial commitment made by the government of Costa Rica itself (a common reality that is often overlooked as international organizations claim disproportionate credit for conservation actions taken by governments around the world). With no funds provided in the legislation that created Corcovado, in a brilliantly creative legislative move, at Alvaro's suggestion the President declared the squatter situation at Corcovado Park a national emergency which triggered legal mechanisms which allowed the government to access \$1.7 million to compensate families that had been in possession for 10 years and them out of the Park.⁸ While the squatters were physically gone by mid-1976, it took another year and a half to get to get rid of their cattle and consolidated the Park while the complexity of tenure issues left deep lingering resentments and the seeds of future conflict.

Postscript:

Among the many challenges of running a one-person program as I did with TNC's international program is how to deal with multiple projects that require attention simultaneously. To run such a program you need to be exploring many potential projects at the same time because you can never be sure when the time is right for one to ignite—you need lots of pots simmering on the stove, but if several come to a boil at the same time you have to choose which one to focus on. With the Corcovado situation appearing to be less volatile and in Alvaro's excellent hands, I needed to look for the next opportunity.⁹ In the late 1970s and early 80s, while Alvaro and his colleagues in the Costa Rican Park Service continued to face the huge challenges of an ever-growing park system my own attention was diverted by distance opportunities north and south. For two years beginning in mid-1976 I was heavily focused on Long Point in Canada (see next chapter) and then with the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic (chapter 5).

In 1979 I left the Conservancy to join World Wildlife Fund-US as its 26th employee and it was there that I received a call from an increasingly alarmed Alvaro Ugalde in 1985. When the squatters have been removed from Corcovado perhaps romantically and naively, 6 old-fashion gold-panners, *coligalleros*, have been allowed to stay. In early 1980s several events conspired to turn this precedent into a crisis. First the park boundaries were adjusted to follow natural features and to include some key additional ecological areas but inadvertently incorporated lands where extensive mining was already underway. Then gold prices began to rise just as economic hard times brought on in part by the 1985 closing of the

⁷ During one of the recurring crisis that seemed to plague Corcovado, in the early 2000s protection had deteriorate and Alvaro headed up the Osa Campaign that raised \$30 million and brought Alvaro back as regional director of Environment, this time in the Osa, from 2003 to 2006.

⁸ The declaration of the state of emergency was the trigger to allow the direct cash payments to families in the park and to finally buy the land rights. Alvaro described the trip to the airport, a small suitcase sitting on his lap, and what followed. "I remember we almost crashed while driving to the airport, and I said, 'Oh God, we have 30 million colones (\$3,750,000).' We didn't even think of ourselves." These payments were by check and upon arriving at Sirena Alvaro placed them on a table and then sat under a tree. Some were screaming "Nobody take a check. Nobody take a check. We don't accept checks." Others disagreed. Back and forth it went until someone finally said, "Oh, the hell with it. Give me my check." And then reluctantly a line formed...

⁹ I did wonder whether I was doing exactly what I had criticized others for doing based on my Dominica experience which is not sticking with a project but flitting from one to another, sometimes leaving the locals holding the bag. The role of outsiders should be finite but the question in each instance is when it is time to leave?

nearby United Brands (formerly United Fruit) plantations throwing people out of work, causing an explosion of new miners. As they moved en masse into the park, the miners began to live off the wildlife and use technologies that moved from artisanal to quasi-industrial. Since the park had been created only a modest number of foreign scientists and adventure tourists had used the park, it was not the tourist bonanza envisioned by Cappelli. Politically these scientific interests seemed small when pitted against over a thousand poor Costa Rican miners. How could we make a case for action? After talking with Alvaro, he and I got in touch with Dan Janzen, a world renowned entomologist working in the dry forests of Santa Rosa; we ask him to investigate the situation. At first he demurred arguing that he was a scientist not trained for such a political exercise but in the end he agreed. Many years later Janzen told me that this was a turning point in his career when he was transformed from a world renowned research scientist to one of the most effective and original conservation actor in the hemisphere. He accomplished this feat without sacrificing one for the other (I stress that the descriptors of his remarkable stature are mine, not his).

With a sense of urgency Janzen and his small team disappeared into the jungles of the Osa. Three weeks later, as I was told, he walked out wet, bedraggled, scratched and bitten from his time in the field to make a dramatic public presentation in Costa Rica's capital of San Jose about the massive damage being done to Corcovado by an estimated 1,4000 miners. Critically and brilliantly, Janzen didn't confine himself to ecological destruction but discussed the social conditions of the mining families, how they saw the situation and their limited options and the need for active engagement with the communities once the illegal miners had been removed. The government struggled to find funds for a growing number of those claiming to be miners. Political pressure built as a result of a march of miners from the Osa to the capital where they set up camp in downtown San Jose. The resulting call to arms along with a strategy for implementation came to me at World Wildlife Fund as Alvaro sought about \$80,000 to match funds that he had raised for the Costa Rica Parks Foundation. As we too often forget, while the WWF funds helped, the final outcome depended more on political savvy, persistence and courage of leaders on the ground and a compensation bill approved by the Congress in one day.¹⁰ All through 1985 and into 1986 Alvaro fought valiantly to protect the Park and the integrity of the whole system which was now at risk. The struggle for the soul of the conservation model for the hemisphere was as explosive and politically charged as I have ever witnessed but after a sweep by Rural and Civil Guards, in March 1986 Corcovado was free of miners, nine years after it had been made free of farmers.

The battle was to simmer on for years but I won't detail this continued struggle for Corcovado and the park system which is well described in the history of Costa Rica parks by David Rains Wallace. Just as it changed Dan Janzen's professional perspective, the Corcovado experience had a significant impact on my own thinking about how I should direct my future energies as a conservationist. It was clear that setting up a park, even when you get the legal niceties sorted out, was not enough if you do not also deal with the political and social context within which any protected area exists. It was with this change of perspective that I began the conversion that resulted in the Wildlands and Human Needs Program. (see chapter X).

Battered and exhausted from his fights to save the parks, Alvaro resigned in 1986 as the Corcovado evictions were completed. Mario and Alvaro were the visionary and charismatic founders of the Park

¹⁰ A history of the Corcovado estimated that compensation costs associated with Corcovado were close to \$3 million, triple SPN's annual budget.

system but that process inevitably requires making enemies and burning bridges and it was time for the system to transition to managers who could consolidate the gains. While the founders each moved on to new challenges,¹¹ the Costa Rica park system carried forward under the watchful eye of Minister Alvaro Umana. The fact that Alvaro and Mario were willing to let go of an institution they had virtually built and to know, in each case, when it was time to leave is further proof of their remarkable vision and leadership. Lesser men would have clung to the power and visibility of being at the top (as many in the conservation field have done and continue to do) but they are models for me about knowing when you have made your maximum contribution and when your skills are better applied elsewhere for the greater good. Both have continued to make huge contributions and been periodically called back in moments of crisis. But if conservation is to be sustained we have to build institutions and not solely rely on individuals, even such dedicated and remarkable ones.

Among the many lessons of Corcovado is that in conservation every victory may be transitory and every defeat risks becoming permanent (although steps backwards are inevitable and despair must be resisted). In retrospect, establishment of the park had all the drama and celebration of a child's birth but then comes the challenge of raising and nurturing the person through the travails of a lifetime. In the late 1990s and again in the early 2000s Alvaro had to write President Jose Maria Figueres warning that once again Corcovado, and other parks in the system, were in danger of becoming at best paper parks through a combination of lack of funds and human capacity as a result of waning political commitment to protection. When I talked with Alvaro while writing up these memoirs he said that Corcovado had taught him that you have to live through periodic human tsunamis. Corcovado has, so far, produced five tsunamis. The first was he flew over the Osa before the park was declared saw the forest burning; the second tsunami was the invasion of the gold miners; third, the deforestation that came during a period when protection is lacking; the fourth occurred 10 years ago when hunting began to deplete the park of its large mammals and finally the tsunami of today the weak leadership and the gradual deterioration of the parks resources that is resulting.¹²

Additional Reading:

G. Hartshorn, Report on Corcovado Park to the Institute of Current World Affairs, September 4, 1978

D. R. Wallace, The Quetzals and the Macaw: The Story of Costa Rica's National Parks, Sierra Club Books, SF 1992, Chapter 6: The Osa Peninsula; Chapter 7; Corcovado National Parks and Chapter 14: The Desecration of Corcovado

¹¹ Add summary of what Alvaro and Mario have done since leaving SPN.

¹² This is a pattern I have seen during my career in many settings. We are initially called to act by some tangible dramatic and tangible threat, such as a burning forest or poached rhinos, and it is easier to rally support. But if successful, over time the threats become more indirect, loss of habitat rather than poaching, hunting which leaves the forest intact but empty of wildlife, and finally the threats are very indirect and harder to see such as weak management or changing climate.

C. Cuello, K. Brandon and R. Margolis, "Costa Rica: Corcovado National Park" in Parks in Peril: People, Politics and Protected Areas, K. Brandon et.al. ed. Island Press 1998, pg 142-191

A. Ugalde, transcript of Alvaro Ugalde Oral History, Nectandra Institute, San Ramon, Costa Rica 2007