



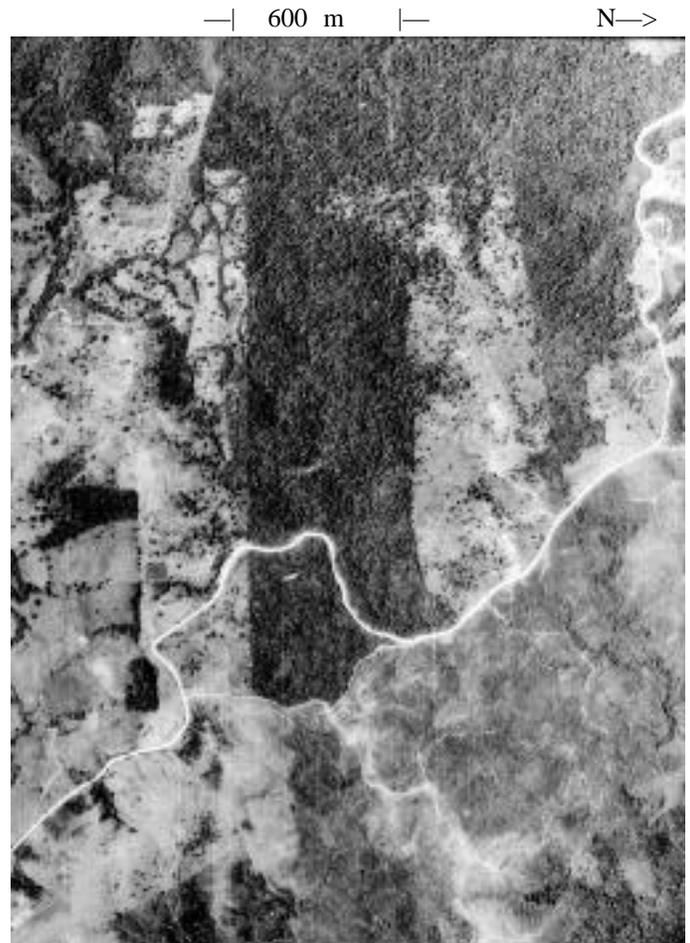
## Of Aerial Photograph and Decisions

My partners and I made up our minds by 8:30 A.M on Dec. 6, 1998. It is difficult to prove it now but I believe it was so.

Alvaro Ugalde, Arturo Jarquin and Sigi Altamirano just joined David and myself for a working session in San Jose, Costa Rica. They had been scouting for a suitable property for our Nectandra Garden Project. We were hoping to find 20-30 hectares of abandoned pasture or plantation with a few remaining trees or a residual patch of forest to develop our garden. After several disappointing prospects in the last few months, they thought “this one” may be it. Our best candidate was located in the vicinity of San Ramon, some 60 kilometers northwest of San Jose. Alvaro started off his briefing with all its “pluses”: comfortable traveling distance by car, good highway for visitors from San Jose on the way to Arenal Volcano, larger (100 hectares) than our specified size range, 85% primary forest, 15% secondary forest. It has been unoccupied for the last 30 years; its pastures and coffee fields left abandoned and grown over. With an elevation of 1100 m, it is classified as cloud forest (an even scarcer commodity than rain forest). On the legal side, the property has been properly inscribed and registered with the Registro Nacional – a very important security factor for land purchase in Costa Rica. On the negative side, Alvaro mentioned a deep ravine along the entire roadside of the property. A sturdy bridge or ramp would be required for vehicular access. The highway in the vicinity is winding, with blind curves in both direction. The property has no structures, no electricity, no municipal services. Supplies will have to be trucked from San Ramon or further. The telephone line stops 5 kilometers away with no imminent extensions. There was no reception for cellular phone that he could determine; communication with the outside world

would be a major challenge. There are several creeks, but with unknown water quality and quantity. The latter did not worry us, as our meteorologic information indicated an average annual rainfall of 5000 mm for the region. Alvaro warned that any human occupants, to withstand the mist and rain, will need to have amphibian skin. He brought an 1992 aerial photograph of the area, but the rest of us had not seen it.

In a flash, the photograph made up our minds for us all. No matter that it was not what we had expected, nor that it was larger, steeper, more rugged and costlier. Nothing dissuaded us after seeing it, not even the potential problems that might arise from the hydroelectric project slated for the region in the near future. From this significant moment on, I noticed we all referred quietly to it as “our” property.



Aerial photograph 1992, CR Instituto Geographico Nacional

As one can see from the photo, the property is a 2 km long rectangle with a thumb-shape appendage on the northeast corner. The area corresponding to the “palm/fingers” is a separate property. The highway winds along the 800 m long eastern frontage. As we studied the photo, it became crystal clear why its outline is so perfectly delineated from the air. All of the surrounding properties on three sides are now a combination of mostly denuded pastures with residual trees and monoculture ornamental plantations. The degree of deforestation along the highway was heart-wrenching. Whereas our property was edge-to-edge blackened with trees, neighboring land varied from uniform light gray (pastures) dotted with trees to medium flat gray (plantation). Since 1992 when the photograph was taken, much more deforestation had no doubt taken place. At the scale of the photograph, each of the black dots probably represents a 30-50 m tree. Since that first view of the aerial photo, we have been able to identify specific “dots” from stereoscopic examination of the photograph and confirmed their actual sizes on the ground. Approximate counts of the number of black dots remaining in the two properties flanking ours were also possible using software from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory after scanning the photograph.

The other feature that tugged at our hearts was the western edge of the property. There was none! Our forest, on the Atlantic slope, extended beyond the edge of the photograph. We were able to quickly determine from complementary topographic map that our “backside” is contiguous with other privately owned forests, forming a biological corridor that eventually connects with the Brenes and the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserves, located on the Continental Divide. With the knowledge that our piece of forest will expand a treasured spot on Earth by another 100 hectares, the conservationists in us could do no less than try to save it – any way that we could. We did not need to take a vote.

The purchase was completed in February 1999. The Nectandra Garden Project now has a home, rich in fauna and flora far beyond our expectations. After the first flush of excitement came a sense of heavy responsibility and commitment— to conserve, to restore and to promote the importance of the cloud forest through public education.



## Our President, Alvaro Ugalde

I wanted to meet Alvaro long before he appeared as one of The Latin America Leaders for the New Millennium in the special Issue of *Time* magazine, May 24, 1999. I had confided to a friend in 1997 that I would gladly give up a finger to meet Alvaro Ugalde. Little did I know that I would get my wish within days, with my fingers still attached.

Two events triggered my interest in Alvaro. I had just finished reading an autobiography of Gifford Pinchot, the founder of the US Forest Service, and realized to what degree his dogged persistence and a strong stomach for roller-coaster politics played in creating a national agency. At the same time, our upcoming Costa Rican trip with the Nature Conservancy prompted us to do some background reading. Every travel piece written on Costa Rica proudly states that 25% of its land is protected under a national conservation system. My curiosity was piqued: could there be a single individual behind such a visionary accomplishment? Who is he? The journalist David R. Wallace’s very illuminating 1995 book, *The Quetzal and The Macaw*, on the tales behind the Costa Rican National Park system, provided me with not one but two names, Alvaro Ugalde and Mario Boza, co-founders of the CR National Park System. It told of a steadfast collaboration of the two men, both graduates of the University of Costa Rica and earliest directors of the National Park System. The personal interviews revealed how deftly and effectively they navigated for more than two decades through the political (each from opposing parties!) and conservation arenas to develop the now international famous park system. The historic and biographic information from Wallace’s book gave me much to think about during my two-week trip.

As fate would have it, Arturo Jarquin was our Costa Rican naturalist guide on the trip. It was his custom to arrange on the very last day of Nature Conservancy tours a short talk by a fellow conservationist, who turned out to be none other than Alvaro Ugalde.

My first impression of Alvaro was dominated by his commanding voice and determined outlook. His deep commitment to preservation of biodiversity pervaded every thought and sentence. That day, he talked of his hopes and efforts to mobilize the private property owners to join his country’s conservation movement.

Since his days as the first administrator for the newly created Santa Rosa National Park in 1970, Alvaro and Mario Boza shared a similar vision for Costa Rica. They wanted to link the fragmented parks, refuges and other protected areas into a comprehensive ecosystem network—a task they pursued in various governmental capacities. Now, some three decades later, their emphasis on linking conservation zones continues and has expanded across political borders, involving seven Mesoamerican countries, creating biological corridors from Columbia to Mexico.

While the tug-of-war between conservationists on one side and the logging, ranching and other competing interests on the other side have not diminished, there are undeniable signs of progress. For one, the Costa Rican national parks have come into their own in the eyes of the world. Among developing countries, the Costa Rican model is now the exemplar standard. Within the country, they are enviable magnets for ecotourism, surpassing coffee and bananas as the major source of foreign exchange.

Currently, as full-time Director of the Environmental Program of the Costa Rica - USA Foundation for Cooperation (CRUSA), Alvaro presses on with his objectives to involve communities and private land owners to make conservation itself into a sustainable endeavor.

To my great happiness, Alvaro has consented to take time from his important duties to share his thoughts with our readers. Below is his unedited account.

## Thoughts and Tales from Our President

*Alvaro Ugalde*

The last thirty years have been the most exciting ones during my 55 year old visit to Planet Earth. For reasons only vaguely understood by my mind, in my early twenties I became an individual with a clear mission: the mission to convince the Costa Rican society, and the world at large, that conservation is a must for every society, every community, every corporation and every individual, that is, if humanity is to survive. And, that the only way to accomplish conservation, is by going through the process of actually doing something specific. In my case, I became one of the architects and builders of the Costa Rican National Park System, and today people call me the father of the

management system for this extraordinary set of natural jewels. I feel they will soon elevate my status to grandfather.

To be able to tell you the details of my personal and Costa Rica's saga in the pursuit of conservation, it will take more than a book. But, if you are interested, through the series of this newsletter, I can attempt to tell you many pieces and even anecdotes that, bit but bit, will give you most of the story. Please keep in mind that somehow or other, although individually some of the thoughts or tales may seem to you only threads of a web, I can assure you that just as it happens with species in ecosystems, each one is critical to the existence and maintenance of the web and, sometimes may even be funny.

### ONE

During my years at the University of Michigan, my friend and mentor Kenton Miller, eloquently expressed his general concept of conservation by stating that “conservation is to development, what maintenance is to a building or a construction”. Kenton was able to instill in me and many others, the sense of reverence for ecosystems, for rivers, for lakes, for forests, for oceans, and for the role, value and beauty of all creatures that inhabit them. But what Kenton conveyed most clearly to me, was the feeling of urgency, the feeling of individual responsibility and the concept of management of ecosystems. Without management, the planet will suffer and get transformed to the point of no return for most ecosystems and for species, including ours. The National Park Concept is nothing but the most successful tool so far, that has been applied to manage, in perpetuity, the best and most beautiful ecosystems of our planet.

Through the invention of complex and technologically advanced tools, humans have been busy stripping the pipes, organs and wires that maintain living conditions. Instead of maintenance, we have denuded the planet of its skin and other critical organs, we have and still are, driving innumerable species to their extinction, and in this process, we have diminished and endangered the options for humanity itself. Very clearly, we have neglected the application of conservation as described by Kenton Miller — as a tool for all generations, if we really want to construct a development model that also includes as the end result, the continuation of a livable planet for our children.

But, while immersed in this incredible saga, I have also become acutely aware of the capacity of nature to heal its wounds, just like humans do when cure is properly and timely administered. And that is basically what I believe we have to do. To make sure that we enthusiastically and timely, apply protection and rehabilitation, maintenance if you wish, as a global human effort to restore the conduits, the wires, the vital organs and the beauty of our only Planet. That is called conservation and that is what we have been trying to do in Costa Rica since 1970.

## TWO

Let me start by saying that, without a vision and a sense of mission, there can hardly be a saga to tell or follow in any human endeavor. Second, that I believe, at least in conservation efforts, that there is no such a thing as a one person show. The role of the leaders is to motivate and to enroll as many humans as possible in the pursuit of her or his vision, thus transforming it into a socially run mission. If leaders can accomplish this, then the best next step for them may even be to get ready to let go and to allow new generations to take responsibility.

As Smithsonian Magazine said in 1979 about our work in national parks-“Costa Rica is a country that really tries”. Among other things, the country has successfully provided minimum education to the majority of its citizens, it has eliminated the armed forces, it has provided an efficient health-care system, it has practiced democracy and it has build a tangible economic and ecologically valuable National Park System.

I’m sure that in the process of accomplishing these national landmarks, the country needed the same critical ingredients that were needed for conservation. But I must say that the pre-existence of the others, made it possible to focus efforts in the building of the National Park System. It sure was so much easier to gain allies for conservation in a country where peace, security, respect for human rights and the rule of law, are nothing but common, where basic needs are possible to get and where opportunities are there for most individuals to seek.

So, for those of us who played the role of leaders or agents of conservation thirty years ago, the key challenge was, and continues to be, to get everybody to adopt the vision, and

to make sure that the present and new generations, include conservation as part of their mission.

The national parks of Costa Rica were created, are maintained and will be improved, only because the majority of citizens and leaders learned to consider them as part of the national soul, have learned to use them as part of the national economy, and have included them as part of their personal mission and dreams. Even though in the early days the number of individuals who worked for the Park Service and of conservation organizations were just a few, their motivation greatly multiplied their efforts and impacts. And the host of other Costa Rican persons, institutions and organizations, and of friends from abroad who applauded and supported them, ensured their success.

## THREE

It was the year 1974. I had never been so scared in my life. The crowd was composed of several hundred people, most black, some white and several representatives from indigenous territories. They had been brought in trucks specifically for the occasion, although they had little to do with issue. The provincial and local leaders and authorities were there and so was a solid representation of government officials like myself.

The gathering had been organized by local leaders, enemies of Cahuita National Park located in Costa Rica’s southern Caribbean coast. They wanted to get rid of the Park, so that private activities could be developed instead. Although the gathering they called -referendum-would have had no immediate impact, whatever the final perception of the people’s feelings was going to be, it would be the basis for the local congressman to present an abolition bill in the Legislative Assembly.

My recollection of the moment indicates that my mind was on a full state of alert, as if a premonition had told me that all the odds were against me and the Park. Even my boss, the then head of the Forest Service, was not fully behind me. I definitely could not count on him.

The leaders took the podium one by one. The list of demons and pests that would fall upon the local people if the Park survived, grew with every vociferous speech. My boss was last, and then my moment of truth finally arrived.

Up to that moment, the Park detractors were winning.

Nobody had defended it, and the crowd was thirsty for blood. It all seemed like in moments I would be in serious trouble. With a sense of resignation that must be common to those in death-row, I stared at the colorful crowd and started my speech with a somewhat elaborate line of thought.

Then, just one minute into it, like a lightning, a thought dawned on me. Wait a minute Alvaro, remember... most of these people speak English, not Spanish! You speak English too...

And boom. To the confusion of all, specially those who didn't speak English, most of the leaders, bureaucrats, and Indians, from one second to the next, there was silence. I fixed my eyes on the eyes of the descendants from Jamaican fathers and mothers and spoke only to them, in English. They were the only ones directly affected, one way or another, by the existence of Cahuita National and I needed to force them to speak. Not quite, I also needed them to speak in favor of the Park.

Whatever happened within my mind at that moment, neither was planned, nor was it something I had ever been trained for. I recall myself suddenly speaking in English, and acting as if I were some sort of a mix between a black singer and a black religious minister. I started by making a statement like: "the fact that some of us want to convince you to accept this Park is, in the first place, because your ancestors kept nature the way it is". But the extraordinary thing was that, after a short pause, my mouth uttered the following very loud question "isn't this the case? The answer came loud and clear. Speaking at one, a resounding YES came from the crowd. It sounded like coming from heaven, but it turned me into a demon ....

The series of statements, questions and answers that followed are not even clear in my mind today, except one. "your ancestors conserved this land as if it were a park, does the present generation, YOUUUU, want Cahuita National Park? The loud YES arising from the heart of all those black brothers and sisters, still resounds in my mind when I think of Cahuita. My final THANK YOU put a quick end to the referendum.

Cahuita is a National Park that still exists in Costa Rica's southern Caribbean coast. In the year 2001, it is protected by the descendants of the people who supported it in a public referendum 25 years ago.

## Future Issues

Since the last newsletter in December 2000, much has happened on the horticultural front, with the ongoing botanical survey and the continuing preparations for the visitor center construction. In upcoming issues, we will bring our readers up to date on the progress in the Garden.

Inch by inch, the trails are growing  
To the heart beat of the garden crew,  
As the garden grew  
The crew's joys and toils  
Bowed under the heavy burden  
Of soggy soil, insect bites and plant rustlers' foils  
But no matter  
The garden grew  
Plant by plant, stone by stone  
To someday feast the Garden visitors' eyes  
To strike at their hearts  
To engage their minds,  
That singular hope  
Sustains the gardeners' pride  
In the midst of their daily sighs

### *Nectandra Institute*

*Our mission is to promote, through public education, the conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of the montane cloud forests of Costa Rica*

1325 Court Street, Alameda CA 94501, USA

Telephone: (510) 521-7053

e.mail: nectandrains@mac.com

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President: Alvaro Ugalde

Naturalist: Arturo Jarquin

Vice President: David A. Lennette

Editor: Evelyne T. Lennette

Secretary/Treasurer:

Evelyne T. Lennette