

Colombia peace could reveal jungle species' secrets

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The promise of a peace deal in Colombia has scientists and naturalists hoping they may soon explore the rich tropical forests that they have long avoided for fear of being kidnapped or killed

Countless rare insects and flowers are said to inhabit the jungles of Colombia, but decades of war have stopped naturalists from discovering them—until now.

The promise of a peace deal has scientists hoping they may soon explore tropical forests that they have long avoided for fear of being kidnapped or killed.

"When you look at the map of Colombia in terms of biodiversity, you see incredible gaps," says the biologist Brigitte Baptiste, director of the Humboldt Institute, a Colombian research group.

"That clearly reflects the difficulties researchers have in moving around" the country, where parts of the jungle are no-go zones controlled by rebels or criminal gangs.

She recalls having to flee when she came under fire while carrying out fieldwork near the Inirida river in the Amazon.

She had unwittingly drawn near a clandestine cocaine factory in a remote area.

Other naturalists have been less lucky.

In 2011 a gang killed two students, Margarita Gomez and Mateo Matamala, who were researching in swamps in the north of the country.

"Sometimes researchers are a bit too daring," Baptiste said.

"They fail to judge the risk and don't take account of the fact that the country is in a serious armed conflict."

Bird-watching hostage

In 2004 the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) kidnapped the ornithologist Diego Alarcon in the northeastern Sierra del Perija.

The communist guerrillas marched him hundreds of miles, giving him the chance to observe unfamiliar bird species. He secretly made notes about them on cigarette papers.

"He never stopped doing his job as a biologist," said Lina Tono, author of a study on nature research in the conflict, which recounts the story of Alarcon.

Colombia's jungles are considered one of the most biologically diverse regions in the world.



A wild flower is seen in the mountains of Cali, Colombia, which has the second largest biodiversity in the world

Scientists would like to know more about the movement of fauna

between Central America and the tip of South America, says Maria Angela Echeverry, head of a conservation program at Javeriana University in Bogota.

Between those two points lies the Darien jungle spanning the border with Panama—one of the hotspots of the Colombian conflict.

"As a university, we cannot take students there or have scientists based in those areas because of the lack of security," she says.

"There are some very dangerous areas that we know too little about."

Science, business opportunities

The Colombian government and the FARC say they are close to sealing a peace agreement to end their half-century conflict.

"That offers a lot of opportunities for science," says Alejandro Olaya, vice-president of the state science institute Colciencias.

The government has already planned 22 scientific expeditions to little-explored territories due to start in June. It aims to draw up a new complete national inventory of the country's ecosystems.

It also aims to identify natural products that can be sold to cosmetics and pharmaceutical companies, "to place Colombia in the bio-economy sector," Olaya told AFP.

Once the sides agree on how to settle the conflict, questions about how to conserve the territories will emerge—as well as threats such as illegal mining.

They will also look to reintegrate former fighters into post-conflict

society.

The Humboldt Institute has suggested demobilized guerrillas could join in the scientific research, contributing their knowledge of the jungle and mountain areas.

Baptiste said former guerrillas could find work in "tourism, forest management or fishing projects."

If the peace talks prosper, scientists will then be able to get to work.

"The biggest surprise that awaits us is in plants and insects," said Echeverry.

"We are convinced that 60 percent of the species on the planet have yet to be discovered, and most of them are in the tropics."

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