

Conservation Coast, Guatemala



The Conservation Coast is an internationally recognised forest conservation project spanning the entire Caribbean coastline of Guatemala from Belize in the north to Honduras in the south. The project protects critically threatened cloud forest home to an abundance of unique and threatened species, including the Jaguar and West Indian Manatee, as well as over 120 species of migratory birds. Project activities support sustainable livelihoods for local and indigenous communities, such as through promoting legal land titling and diversified agroforestry. The project is perhaps best known for its wide-ranging programme to improve access to healthcare and education for local and indigenous women and girls who face systemic poverty and inequality in Guatemala.



The project is developed and implemented by the IUCN Member and leading Guatemalan NGO, FUNDAECO (Fundación para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservación) and is certified under Verra's Verified Carbon Standard and Climate, Community and Biodiversity Standard, to the gold level for biodiversity.

The project is located in the Izabal region of Guatemala, which forms part of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, a critical land bridge for biodiversity connecting North and South America. The almost 55,000 hectares of the project area cover diverse ecosystems from lowland to pre-montane tropical forest, swamp forest and aquatic habitats such as mangroves and lagoons. The Guatemalan Caribbean coast has experienced some of the highest rates of deforestation in the world. In this region, expanding industrial agriculture and mining, the migration of subsistence farmers and cattle ranchers into protected areas and rural poverty combine to drive rampant deforestation. These dynamics are exacerbated by high levels of inequality and complex cultural dynamics between indigenous and non-indigenous communities.

The legal land tenure rights of indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs) is becoming one of the key tools in the fight against deforestation in this region of Guatemala. Access to land provides livelihoods opportunities for local people, alongside important natural resources needed for survival like fuelwood and water. However, many communities in Guatemala still lack legal titles to land, a complex situation that drives communities into forested areas. FUNDAECO supports local and indigenous communities to obtain land titles, assisting with the preparation of social case studies, legal files and land use capacity briefings. These legal titles are critical as they allow local communities to access forestry incentives from the Guatemalan government and earn a livelihood from the conservation of their forests. The project works with over 700 different landowners - community, government, NGOs, private – to conserve parcels of forest, making this mosaic landscape the largest 'grouped' forest carbon project in the world.

To face complex and deep-rooted cycles of inequality and poverty in the Izabal region, FUNDAECO implements a wide-ranging programme targeting the empowerment of women and girls through improved access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. Activities include the operation of 24 community-run clinics providing family planning and reproductive health services, while mobile clinics cater to non-Spanish speaking indigenous women.

Girls are supported by FUNDAECO to finish elementary education and continue to high school, with scholarships and higher-learning opportunities provided alongside direct training support to increase employment outcomes. Of jobs created or supported by the project, 41% of roles are held by women. Business training and other assistance is also provided to women to pursue sustainable enterprises and productive initiatives.



Awards:**Natural Climate Solutions lighthouse**

The Conservation Coast was recognised by the Natural Climate Solutions Alliance as an NCS Lighthouse project due to its best practice implementation in partnership with local and indigenous communities. Lighthouse projects are carefully selected based on rigorous screening criteria that identify widespread project impact for climate, nature and people. The project was celebrated at COP27 alongside five other projects across the world who together serve as a model cohort of how high-integrity natural climate solutions projects can be implemented to deliver transformational outcomes.

Whitley Fund For Nature

The Conservation Coast won the Whitley Fund for Nature award for establishing Guatemala's first network of nature reserves for amphibian conservation. Led Carlos Vasquez Almazan, a leading Guatemalan amphibian specialist, a programme to study amphibians in the Sierra Caral led to the re-discovery of species thought to have been extinct for over 15 years. Carlos' findings were fundamental in helping to rally support for biodiversity conservation in this region and led to the creation of the first reserve for amphibian conservation, encompassing 2,300 hectares and protecting five critically endangered species.

Project impacts and Benefits:

8.0 million tonnes of CO2 avoided to date.

30 threatened species protected.

504 bird species recorded.

Habitat conserved for key plant, avian, amphibious & reptilian species.

Mobile clinics for indigenous women and scholarships and higher learning opportunities for girls

Legal land titling for local and indigenous producers.

Sustainable enterprises and commodities led by IPLCs.