

## Having turned 20, CEC setting priorities for future

Albuquerque, New Mexico

**T**he trilateral environmental body created in conjunction with the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta) has turned 20 years old, an occasion its governing council marked this month by setting new priorities.

At a July meeting in Yellowknife, Canada, the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) Council, comprising the top environmental officials of Nafta signatories Canada, Mexico and the United States, spotlighted three challenges above all: climate change mitigation and adaptation; a green economy; and sustainable communities and ecosystems.

These priorities are to be cornerstones of the CEC's strategic plan for 2015-2020, which is on the agenda for next year's governing council

meeting, slated to be held in the United States.

The Yellowknife session capped a one-year public review of the CEC's work since the commission was launched in 1994 under Nafta's environmental side agreement. The review inspired spirited commentary and debate about the CEC's performance and future, prompting the agency's Joint Public Advisory Committee (JPAC), a volunteer panel of five citizens from each Nafta nation, to call last year for a "new mission" with "better public participation."

After the meeting, JPAC Chair Robert Varney, a former New England region administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said the CEC Council is listening. "We're

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## Bolivian mining law seen as environmental retreat

New York, New York

**I**n 2009, Bolivians who worried about the growing contamination of their waters from mining waste had reason for hope.

That year, a new constitution came into being that guaranteed citizens the right to water and to "a healthy, protected and balanced environment." Moreover, the government seemed serious about safeguarding that right, declaring an environmental emergency in the department of Oruro, and lining up grants worth millions of euros from the European Union to clean up toxic mining waste there.

If Bolivians expected ongoing improvement in the country's environmental controls on mining, however, their hopes were dashed on May 28 of this year, when a new Law of Mining and Metallurgy took effect. The law gives mining companies ever-greater rights in water-rich ecosystems and removes requirements that indigenous and farming communities be consulted about mining projects, analysts say.

"This law is a setback for environmental regulation of the mining sector," says Ariel Pérez, a Bolivian lawyer for the nonprofit Inter-American Association for Environmental Defense (AIDA). "It explicitly legalizes many bad practices, including the lack of consultation for exploration, amid an already grave situation in which

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Count Evo Morales among the mining law's supporters (AP photo)

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Coverage of Latin American environmental developments and trends for academic institutions, businesses, NGOs and public agencies.

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### Environmentalists win posts in Panama's new government

After years of conflict with the right-wing government of Ricardo Martinelli, green advocates celebrated the July 1 swearing-in of newly elected President Juan Carlos Varela and the appointment of prominent environmentalists to leadership positions in the National Environmental Authority (ANAM).

Varela, who won a three-way contest May 5 with 40% of the vote, has promised to elevate ANAM to the level of a ministry, push for a moratorium on new open-pit mining projects, and review existing mining projects to see if they are harming the environment.

His government also has appointed environmental activists to top spots in ANAM, including Félix Wing, an environmental lawyer and critic of mining policy, as secretary general and Zuleika Pinzón, a former director of the nongovernmental Fundación Natura, as head of protected areas and wildlife.

"This marks the first time that the environmental management of the country has been transformed into a high level political commitment," says Harley Mitchell Morán, a professor of environmental law at the Interamerican University of Panama, referring to Varela's promise as a candidate to work towards a mining moratorium and a new environment ministry. "It marks an important change."

Former President Martinelli had drawn the ire of environmentalists by slashing Anam's annual budget 37% to \$34 million, cutting its staff, and vastly reducing its ability to patrol protected areas and carry out enforcement activities at mines

and construction sites. His effort to promote open-pit mining projects, especially of copper and gold, infuriated environmentalists and indigenous communities alike, with polls showing most Panamanians oppose such projects.

Resistance to the open-pit Cerro Colorado copper mine has been especially fierce. Hundreds of people have been wounded and dozens arrested in recent years amid protests by the Ngöbe-Buglé indigenous people against the project in the western province of Chiriquí.

Mirei Endara, the new administrator and top official at ANAM, has said his agency will review existing mining projects to ensure they are mitigating environmental impacts while Panamanian society decides whether it wants to pursue mining. A bill is currently before the National Assembly to declare a moratorium on new open-pit mining.

Analysts say ANAM also will try to improve prior-consultation procedures, involve the citizenry more in environmental decision-making and improve environmental impact studies for mining and other development projects.

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### Argentina reaches nuclear accords with China, Russia

Argentina this month signed nuclear-cooperation deals with Russia and China, making it possible that the two countries will become involved in efforts here to build a fourth atomic energy plant and a uranium enrichment facility.

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Buenos Aires on July 12, and his Chinese

counterpart, Xi Jinping, followed suit a week later. Few details of the cooperation deals were disclosed.

Argentina has had two nuclear power plants—Atucha I and Embalse—functioning for decades. Together, they provide 1,000 megawatts of generating capacity. In 2006, the country resumed work on a long-delayed third plant, 745-megawatt Atucha II, which has gone online and is expected to reach full capacity later this year.

Putin's visit was preceded by signals from his government that Russia is interested in collaborating on Argentina's development not only of nuclear energy but also of its massive shale-oil and shale-gas reserves.

The agreement with China calls for the state-owned Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) and China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC), respectively, to provide financing and technical assistance for the project to build a fourth nuclear power plant, according to Argentine atomic energy officials.

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### Colombia designates Orinoco wetlands as sixth Ramsar site

After years of struggle between environmental and mining authorities, Colombia moved this month to conserve some of the biologically rich Orinoco region by earmarking 253,000 hectares (625,177 acres) for protection under the Ramsar Convention, the international wetlands-preservation treaty.

The designation of the Estrella Fluvial del Inirida, bordering Venezuela in the eastern department of Guainía, as Colombia's sixth Ramsar

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# Brazil to simplify access to genetic resources

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

**C**ompanies conducting bioprospecting and signing benefit-sharing contracts for genetic resources in Brazil will face less red tape should the country's Congress, as expected, approve legislation on the subject.

The proposed law is aimed primarily at companies developing new pharmaceuticals or cosmetics made with genetic resources, or biological material from plants, animals or microorganisms, that can be put to commercial use.

Eliana Fontes, the Environment Ministry's director of genetic resources, is calling the bill "the most important piece of environmental legislation to reach Congress this year." Says Fontes: "When approved by Congress and signed into law, it will boost company investments that result from much easier access to Brazilian biodiversity."

Proponents say the current regimen—based on a 2001 executive order that has the legal weight of a law and was meant to combat biopiracy—created unintended bureaucratic barriers to bioprospecting and to the development of the resulting, biodiversity-based products. The new bill, superseding the executive order, is intended to remove those barriers.

## Electronic registration

Under the bill, companies and research institutes doing bioprospecting would merely be required to register such activities electronically with the Genetic Assets Management Council (CGEN), an inter-ministerial body. Only when a company is ready to commercialize a product would it need to sign a CGEN-approved benefit-sharing contract.

By contrast, the 2001 executive order requires express CGEN approval in order for bioprospecting to proceed. It stipulates that a CGEN-approved benefit-sharing contract must be in place even before it is known whether a substance targeted for investigation as a result of the bioprospecting will be commercially viable. The contract-approval process takes an average of a year, Fontes and others say.

"The 2001 measure has discouraged research institutes and companies from doing bioprospecting," says Elíbio Rech, a member of the Brazilian Academy of Sciences and a biotechnology researcher at Embrapa, the government's agricultural research institute.

Says Luiz Gustavo Martins of Mapric Produtos Farmacoscéticos, which supplies local cosmetics companies with the extract of processed pineapple and passion fruit pulp: "... [C]urrently many [companies] waste time and money signing benefit-sharing contracts, only to find the product they have developed is not commercially viable," he says.

Under the proposed law, companies

would sign a benefit-sharing contract with the government when they are ready to commercialize a product derived from Brazilian biodiversity. Under the current system, such contracts are signed directly with genetic-resource providers, which are typically agricultural cooperatives or rainforest communities that gather fruits, nuts and tree resins in environmentally sustainable ways.

The proposed legislation would require that 1% of the annual net revenues of the commercialized product be deposited into a special government fund whose proceeds would go to the providers of the genetic resource. While benefit-sharing fees in excess of 1% of net revenues would not be permitted under the legislation, fees under 1% would be allowed in cases in which the government reaches broad agreements with business sectors such as the pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries. Under these industry-wide accords, a percentage set for a specific genetic resource would apply to any company in the sector in question.

## Setting a ceiling

"Setting this 1% [of annual net sales] figure for benefit-sharing contracts establishes a ceiling for such payments and reduces company uncertainty about the cost of using Brazilian biodiversity in commercial products," says André Guimarães, vice president of the Brazilian office of Conservation International. "And allowing government-sectoral negotiations to reduce that amount to below 1% [of annual net sales] puts some flexibility into the process."

Some provisions in the bill mirror those of the current regimen—for instance, one that permits non-cash compensation, such as the construction of a school or a clinic, for communities or collectives providing the genetic resources. The bill also maintains a provision in the current regimen that allows free negotiation of rights to traditional knowledge held by indigenous or local communities.

"Traditional knowledge, unlike genetic resources, is not a biological resource that belongs to a country," Fontes says. "Like intellectual property rights, it is the authorship of whoever discovers and holds that knowledge. And it is difficult to set a value on such a discovery since its importance and use varies, which is why the proposed law does not do so."

The government has asked lawmakers to act "with urgency," a request that gives Congress 90 days to debate and vote on the bill. Environment Minister Izabella Teixeira forecasts that the proposed legislation will take effect by the beginning of 2015.

—Michael Kepp

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# Panama Canal to set whale-protection lanes

New York, New York

**T**housands of vessels entering and leaving the Panama Canal each year will soon follow special lanes as part of a widespread effort to prevent collisions with whales.

Hundreds of whales have been killed or injured in recent decades in their breeding and feeding grounds because of collisions with high-speed freighters, ferries and tankers on their way to the world's great ports. Panama reported 13 humpback-whale deaths from 2009 to 2011, though scientists believe many more go uncounted. Collisions with ships are thought to be a leading cause.

As a result of a unanimous decision May 23 by the United Nations International Maritime Organization (IMO), which is in charge of shipping safety on the world's seas, Panama now will be permitted to create whale-protection lanes and speed limits by Dec. 1 for ships entering and leaving the canal.

"This should help bring order to vessel traffic coming in and out of the Gulf of Panama, where large numbers of humpback whales breed and give birth, and through which other species of whales, like sperm whales, blue whales and Bryde's whales travel," says Héctor Guzmán, of the Panama-based Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, who led the research on which the new measures are based. "It will reduce the chance of collisions between ships and whales by over 90%."

## Heavier traffic coming

The IMO's decision comes at a critical time for Panama, which plans by early 2016 to complete a US\$5.3 billion expansion of the 100-year-old canal. The expansion will add a third set of locks, permit passage of the world's largest cargo ships—known as Post-Panamax vessels—and double the canal's cargo capacity. The project also is expected to increase the number of vessels transiting the facility from the current 14,500 each year.

But as the risks of whale strikes grow, Panamanian authorities say they are eager to prevent accidental killings of the animals, which might harm the country's image as a burgeoning site for whale watching and marine ecotourism. Directors of international shipping agencies also have given their support, as crashes with whales can damage ships and lead to spills of precious cargo.

The Gulf of Panama hosts an estimated 300 humpback whales each year. Some travel from the northern hemisphere by way of Mexico and Central America. Hundreds more voyage more than 7,000 kilometers from the Antarctic Peninsula or Chile to spend June through December breeding and giving birth in the calm, shallow waters of Las Perlas Archi-

pelago, some 60 kilometers (40 miles) from the entrance to the Canal in the gulf.

Unfortunately, the whales, considered endangered, are unprepared for the large vessels with which they cross paths in the gulf. Experts believe the loud noises of large ships interfere with whale communication and confuse them, making it difficult for them to locate approaching vessels. The powerful drafts and suction of fast-moving freighters can pull whales in. And the high speeds of the vessels, cruising at 15-27 knots, make it difficult for humpbacks with maximum swimming speeds of 11 knots to get out of the way, causing the whales to suffer deep propeller wounds, severed tails or blunt trauma injuries.

## Comparing pathways

In 2009, Guzmán and Smithsonian colleagues used air guns to tag 15 humpbacks with satellite transmitters and then tracked the animals, finding that in a single 11-day period, whales came within 100-200 meters of large, fast-moving vessels more than 90 times. Superimposing whale routes on shipping lanes, they drew special ship routes near the Azuero Peninsula on the western edge of the Gulf of Panama and for the gulf itself to ensure greater separation. They also established lanes for the Caribbean side of the canal. And for the Gulf of Panama, they proposed a 10-knot speed limit during August through November, when most whale visits occur. The proposals were forwarded to the IMO by the Panama Maritime Authority and accepted in May.

Designated lanes and speed limits to protect whales already have been established for numerous ports, including Boston, Los Angeles and Long Beach in the United States, the Bay of Fundy in Canada and Cabo de Gata near the Strait of Gibraltar in Spain. Tragedies such as the killing in April of a 57-foot fin whale, whose carcass entered the Port of New Jersey wrapped around the bow of an immense container ship, only add urgency to calls for more such measures, experts say.

In Latin America, efforts to develop regimens such as the one in Panama have been stymied by the high costs of the necessary studies and correctives. Still, scientists say ways must be found for such work to go forward. "What Guzmán and his team along with the IMO have done in Panama is fantastic, and should be expanded elsewhere," says Greg Silber, a whale-recovery expert for the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service. "These lanes alert mariners, help protect individual whales and are good for whale populations."

—Steven Ambrus

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# Third large pulp mill seen on way in Uruguay

Montevideo, Uruguay

**P**lans for a third large pulp mill in Uruguay are said to be moving ahead with support from the country's president, José Mujica, despite concerns about the environmental impacts of such plants and their associated tree plantations. Mujica is "personally guiding" plans for the mill, says Sergio Botana, mayor of Cerro Largo, a department in northeast Uruguay that is mentioned as a likely site.

The forecast follows news on June 24 that Uruguay's second pulp mill, a joint venture of the Swedish and Finnish company Stora Enso and Chile's Arauco, has begun operating. That plant is expected to churn out 1.3 million tons of pulp annually and, according to the company, will support 5,000 jobs and add US\$844 million to Uruguay's gross domestic product.

In April, the executive president of UPM-Kymmene, the company planning to build the third plant, said "there obviously is room for an additional pulp plant ... But we are considering all types of options in the world."

Two years ago, Mujica told the media a third mill would be built in the Negro River area of northeast Uruguay by 2017 or 2018. Botana says Mujica told him the plant would be built in Cerro Largo.

## Production increase

Little more was said about the project until last month, when the government announced it would allow UPM-Kymmene to boost production at Uruguay's first major pulp mill, which the company operates in the western town of Fray Bentos, to 1.3 million tons annually from 1.1 million. The decision conflicts with the government's announcement last October that it would allow an increase of only 100,000 tons—half the amount sought by the company—out of respect for Argentina. For years, Argentina has portrayed the UPM-Kymmene mill as a water-quality threat to the nearby Uruguay River and a source of cross-border air pollution.

Following the surprise announcement of the 200,000-ton increase, Argentina has vowed to file a complaint in The Hague, where it has battled unsuccessfully in recent years for suspension of the Fray Bentos plant's operations. But the production increase follows a script Mujica disclosed in a meeting with U.S. businessmen last August. In that meeting, which was open to the press, he said UPM-Kymmene was willing to build a new pulp mill in Uruguay if the government would allow it to boost its Fray Bentos plant's production 20%.

The government's June 12 announcement of the UPM pulp-production increase has kindled speculation that construction of a third pulp mill is imminent. Details, though, remain hazy. In recent weeks the location was

said to be on the banks of the Tacuarí River, but Botana, the Cerro Largo mayor, insists the "most likely" site will be in another part of northeast Uruguay: on the Negro River, which is in a region of fast-expanding tree plantations. Botana says that he and officials in neighboring departments are leaving negotiations to Uruguay's president, adding that the lone duty of local officials will be to ensure that "environmentally it will be an adequate project."

Environmental advocates acknowledge the logic of locating a mill in the northeast. "It is reasonable for a third mill to be installed in the northeast part of the country, since plantation forests have been expanded in that area and it isn't profitable if truck transport of the wood of over 250 kilometers is required," says Lizzie Díaz, coordinator of Guayubira, a network of environmental groups here. But Díaz and others complain that in its zeal to land a new plant, the government is leaving important environmental concerns unaddressed.

## Water-quality worries

Luis Aubriot, a biological sciences faculty member at Uruguay's University of the Republic, cites the phosphorus emissions of pulp plants, pointing out that the Fray Bentos mill discharges an estimated 70 kilos of phosphorus daily into the Uruguay River. While the river has a huge flow volume and, thus, powerful dilution, he says, the Negro River has just 15% of the Uruguay's flow and two downstream reservoirs. "If a new plant is located on the Negro River, the reservoirs will receive more phosphorus, which is one of the nutrients of [toxic algae]," Aubriot says.

Díaz says the plantation-forestry model promoted by the government has contributed to the depopulation of rural areas—and dependence of those who remain on "mega-enterprises that replace all other forms of production." Mayor Botana argues that precisely because the northeast has a "population vacuum" and a lack of infrastructure, installation of a pulp mill would be beneficial. But Díaz counters tree plantations and pulp mills have become a mutually reinforcing juggernaut that destroys native forest ecosystems and bypasses higher value-added wood industry options such as furniture and construction materials production.

"We move along behind consummated deeds," says Díaz. "There were 200,000 hectares of [plantation] forests when construction of the Fray Bentos mill began, and now there are more than a million. With that same logic now another mill is opening and a third is being proposed."

—Javier Lyonnet

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## Centerpiece

# In Bonito, limits prove key to tourism growth

Bonito, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil

**A**t the heart of South America, a network of ecotourism operators has developed a unique model that combines a large but controlled volume of visits with strict conservation measures designed to preserve the region's natural attractions and, ultimately, the broader environment.

Branded as Bonito, the name of the town of 20,000 that boasts most of the region's visitor infrastructure, the network includes two smaller towns nearby, Jardim and Bodoquena. The region, located near Brazil's borders with Bolivia and Paraguay in southwest Mato Grosso do Sul state, boasts crystalline rivers, pastoral landscapes and recreational outlets for snorkelers, hikers, bikers and more. It is so well organized and popular that it might be described as an ecotourism theme park. And it is profitable, leading some to pronounce it a model in proving that conservation can pay as well as protect.

The area began morphing from a ranching community in the 1990s as growing numbers of visitors arrived to raft and snorkel in the crystal-clear, fish-rich waters. Limits eventually were placed on visitor traffic to help ensure environmental protection. (See "Bonito ranch business goes swimmingly"—EcoAméricas, Oct. '01.)

Bonito's ecotourism business has flourished ever since. From 2007 to 2013, the region's annual visitor traffic has doubled, increasing from 195,000 to 395,000. Since 1993, the three-town area's total population has risen by about 30%, while employment in the tourism industry has grown from 180 to 5,000. With just three registered ecotourism attractions two decades ago, the region now boasts 40. Hotel beds have increased from 300 to 5,400 in that period, and the number of tour agencies has grown from six to 40.

"Half of the jobs in Bonito are related to tourism," counting indirect employment, claims Rodrigo Coinete, president of the Bonito Convention and Visitor's Bureau (BCVB). "Forty percent of the municipal GDP is connected to tourism." Coinete adds that local landowners "generate more profits from ecotourism than from agriculture or cattle ranching."

Other parts of Brazil have experienced similarly strong tourism growth over the same two decades. The difference, ecotourism analysts say, is how Bonito has managed that growth. Porto de Galinhas, about 55 kilometers (34 miles) south of Recife in Brazil's northeast, offers a stark counterexample. It has been transformed from a tranquil, nearly deserted beach resort into one of Brazil's leading destinations for mass tourism. Porto de Galinhas hoteliers boast of "Chinese-style" growth. Yet this unchecked influx appears to be responsible for environmental problems including mismanagement of sewage, destruction of coral reefs, vehicle use on beaches and harm to once-pristine tide pools that had been among Galinhas's main attractions.

For 13 years straight, Bonito has been named Brazil's top ecotourism destination by the country's most respected travel guide, Quatro Rodas. Last year brought

international recognition: Bonito won a World Responsible Tourism Award as the Best Destination for Responsible Tourism. In Bonito, according to Coinete, "The number of visitors goes up, but every year water quality improves and the amount of riparian forest increases."

Most observers give Bonito's voucher scheme the lion's share of credit for helping it avoid the plight of places like Porto de Galinhas. Those who provide the region's attractions, which range from rafting and snorkeling to horseback riding and rappelling, must apply for operating licenses, each of which is assigned a "carrying capacity" that limits daily attendance. Group sizes and departure intervals are also specified. These limits are reviewed periodically by local officials and can be adjusted. Operators can be fined and temporarily shut down for failing to respect them.

"Last year we had three suspensions," says Juliane Ferreira Salvadori, Bonito's municipal secretary for Tourism, Industry and Commerce. "We work with the district attorney. We provide the data."

For visitors, the process is straightforward. They make reservations by purchasing vouchers from local travel agencies. Groups are assigned specific starting times, a procedure similar to that used at many golf courses for the same reason: to keep groups separate and allow everyone the opportunity to enjoy their own unique experience. A tour guide is assigned to each group. Prices are controlled by municipal authorities, and so remain the same no matter where you purchase them.

"You can't just get in your car and drive out to an attraction," noted Daniel De Granville, whose Bonito-based company, Photo in Natura, offers nature photography and photo expeditions. "You have to go to the agency, mark your time, and arrive with your guide." Even Brazilians have learned to adapt. "Brazilians are not known for being on time, but here people

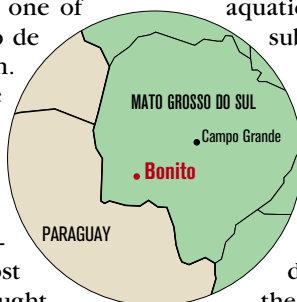
are strict. If you are a half-hour late you might not take your tour." The voucher system facilitates the collection of taxes and statistics, and ensures that travel agencies and guides receive their commissions correctly and promptly.

Before they are allowed out into the wild, tourists are coached by guides to minimize their impact. On river snorkeling runs, for example, they are admonished never to stand up in or even touch the relatively shallow riverbed, thus leaving the aquatic life undisturbed and the scenery unblemished for subsequent groups.

Policymakers, entrepreneurs and activists from around the world converged on Bonito recently for the annual Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Conference organized by the International Ecotourism Society. Many attendees seemed especially interested in learning more about the Bonito model. "We are looking to do some benchmarking," says Gustavo Henrique de Souza Campos, the new secretary of tourism and the environment for the town of Serra do Cipó in Minas



Visitors near Bonito's Buraco das Araras, a sinkhole frequented by macaws. (Photo: Bill Hinchberger)





Gerais, a state immediately to the east of Mato Grosso do Sul. “Bonito is a reference for us.”

Conference participants were led out into Brazil’s characteristic Cerrado, the savannah bioregion that surrounds Bonito. The area also boasts remnants of the coastal Atlantic Rainforest bioregion and influences from the nearby Pantanal wetlands. That encourages an abundant amount of plant and wildlife species. Representing just 0.1% of Brazil’s landmass, it is home to 27% of the country’s bird species. The region, crossed by a dozen sparkingly clear rivers, is ideal for snorkeling, with visibility sometimes extending to over 40 meters. On one river, the Rio Olha d’Água, 56 species of fish have been identified.

“One of my clients told me that she had a dream as a child that she was swimming in a fishbowl,” says De Granville. “After our snorkeling excursion, she told me that I made her dream come true.”

Geology contributes, too. The region is rich in limestone, which helps ensure the relatively sediment-free local waters have sufficient alkalinity to support a stunning array of fish and other aquatic species. The limestone features falls, caves and caverns, some of which contain sculpture-like calcium carbonate formations and subterranean pools accessible to scuba divers and snorkelers.

Like many social and cultural phenomena in Brazil, the story of Bonito’s success can be traced in part to the country’s powerful television network, Rede Globo. In 1993, the network broadcast a special report about ecotourism in Bonito—leading to a spike in visitors and a greater appreciation among locals for the region’s potential. That year marked the first training session for local nature guides. “1993 was a key year,” says De Granville.

Two years later, local entrepreneurs and politicians founded the Municipal Tourism Council (Comtur), in which the local government and private sector stakeholders are represented. The locally managed voucher system also started that year.

While the public sector has been supportive, most observers agree that local entrepreneurs have taken the lead. “During the first 15 years, 99% of the work came from the private sector,”



Gruta do Lago Azul is among many attractions in Bonito that only can be visited by small groups at appointed times, a regimen local stakeholders consider crucial to preservation of the environment. (Photo: City of Bonito)

says Marcos Dias Soares, a pioneer and current Comtur president.

The origin of the voucher system remains a topic of local discussion. “The mayor has ordered a study to discover the history of the idea,” says Noslin de Paula Almeida, author of a book about tourism in Bonito and editor of another, and director of the Bonito campus of the Mato Grosso do Sul Federal University.

Many old-timers point to a man known as Tó: Antonio Carlos Silveira Soares, owner of a downtown eatery. Tó also ran a tour agency and was accustomed to receiving vouchers from counterparts in places like São Paulo to cover local services. As the story goes, he outlined the concept at an early Comtur meeting. “People in the mayor’s office liked the idea,” recalls Eduardo Coelho, owner of Grupo Rio da Prata.

Vouchers initially served as logistical tools, not environmental ones. “Bonito was very small, and lacked infrastructure. There were only three hotels,” says Ferreira Salvadori, Bonito’s tourism, industry and commerce secretary. “There were very few guides. How do you deal with this in a good way? The idea was to limit the number of visitors per day. Environmental consciousness came later.”

In the 1990s the federal government wanted to encourage the “municipalization” of tourism, and officials in Brasília got behind the voucher scheme. State officials began to demand environmental licenses for ecotourism attractions, and they too found the voucher system useful for keeping tabs on visitor traffic.

Comtur has evolved, adding more stakeholders and formalizing representation. It includes delegates from business associations, travel agencies, tour businesses, nongovernmental organizations and public agencies. “You have to have the participation of the associations,” says Coelho.

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Numerous rivers crisscross the Bonito region. Their transparent waters, rich with aquatic life, have become a popular target for rafting, snorkeling and other activities. (Photo: City of Bonito)

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"When I was Comtur president, we began to make sure all representatives came from an association with a CNPJ [a Brazilian tax number for companies and organizations]. Otherwise the guy was just representing himself."

Observes Almeida: "In Bonito they created links with all of the parties. The reason it hasn't worked elsewhere is that not all of the elements are in place. In Bonito they have been weaving this since 1995." One key ingredient, in Almeida's view, is that local tour guides have been awarded a de facto monopoly in the region. This is an apparent contradiction with federal law, which ostensibly allows nationally credentialed guides to work anywhere.

In parallel, entrepreneurs have worked to improve their attractions. "With each operation, we had to undertake a study," says Coelho, whose company offers snorkeling, hiking and spelunking tours. "The tourists ended up showing us how to do it, if things were worn out or damaged, or if they said they liked the experience. We talked to them and the guides."

Often Bonito landowners transform their property into a government-recognized Private Natural Heritage Reserve (RPPN). RPPNs receive tax breaks and other benefits in return for being conserved by their private landowners. (See "Private-reserve program benefits Brazil"—EcoAméricas, Dec. '03.)

### Government conservation help

"The reason that we did it is because these are fragile places," says Coelho. "With an RPPN, I will have the support from the state against land invasions [illegal settlement], hunters, and road-building. The main idea is to get help with preservation."

For all their individual and joint efforts, Bonito's ecotourism operators are hardly immune to degradation of the larger ecosystem. Encroaching monocrop agriculture, especially soy cultivation, threatens to reduce biodiversity, for example, while deforestation can harm water quality by increasing runoff and, thus, the flow of sediment into the rivers.

In response, some Comtur members created a nongovernmental group called the Serra da Bodoquena Waters Institute (IASB) to address broader environmental concerns. "The biggest challenge to the environment here is river conservation," says Coelho, IASB's co-founder and president. "The fish need to be able to make their way upstream. All of the rivers need to be in good condition."

Together with the Bonito Convention and Visitor's Bureau, IASB and its allies were able to push through a R\$2(US\$0.75) per night hotel room tax, called a Green Tax, to fund their activities. Half of the proceeds go to the insti-

tute and half to the bureau.

The Bonito model isn't without problems. A glaring one from an environmental standpoint is reliance on the automobile. With a car, it is easy enough to travel several kilometers to an attraction. Without one you need to arrange for transportation with one of the local travel agencies. Sometimes you can share with other visitors to reduce the cost. There are no regular shuttles or other reliable public transportation. "Logistics and transportation is an element that nobody has really focused on," says Almeida. "For now, people just look at it as a cost."

Meanwhile, outdoors devotees and backpackers complain that the Bonito model is too regimented, with its required purchase of a voucher for guide-supervised access at a specific time. They also cite the relatively high cost for visitors and opening times that are too late for early-morning nature observation. "Some tourists say that it is too organized, that it is like a factory line," says De Granville.

### Nearby national park

One solution might be the long-awaited opening of Serra da Bodoquena National Park, a protected area 30 kilometers (19 miles) from Bonito that was created in 2000 but has not formally been made available for public use. The opening of the park, which would be oriented more toward rugged and independent activities, has been delayed due to lack of money in the federal budget for a series of relatively small but necessary park-infrastructure investments.

Many locals view the recent international ecotourism conference as a watershed event for Bonito. But if Bonito wants to grow beyond its domestic-tourism base, it will need more professionals, especially guides, with foreign language skills. Even at the most popular attractions, such as Abismo Anhumas, a cavern which requires a 72-meter rappel to visit, only about one-fifth of visitors come from abroad.

Staff members' lack of English skills might merely be symbolic of a wider problem in the Brazilian economy and society: a shortage of qualified labor in general. "Brazil has a serious problem in education," says Dias Soares. "Access is restricted and the quality is poor." Another problem is how to retain top employees, notably English-speaking guides, when they can make more money elsewhere.

Almeida and others have ideas, including exchange programs with ecotourism organizations in English-speaking countries. If Bonito could invent a model for ecotourism, such thinking goes, maybe it can come up with one for the job-skills training needed to expand it.

—Bill Hinchberger



CEC  
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pleased with the framework for the upcoming five-year plan they'll be coming up with," Varney told EcoAméricas, adding that his committee and the CEC staff are still accepting public input on the agency's direction.

The CEC develops cross-border environmental initiatives for the three Nafta nations. It also produces reports on North American-wide green issues. And while it lacks regulatory or enforcement powers, it probes citizen complaints of member states' alleged non-compliance with environmental laws and spotlights certain of these complaints by publishing non-binding "factual records" about them.

The CEC has used these tools in hopes of nudging authorities to act on certain environmental issues. Analysts say Mexico's banning of DDT use for malaria control stemmed in part from consciousness raising done by the CEC. The trilateral agency also has launched a cross-border bird-conservation initiative; trained over 600 Canadian, Mexican and U.S. officials in spotting illegal shipments of environmentally regulated materials such as ozone-depleting substances, hazardous waste and endangered species; and provided technical support to help Mexico create a national pollutant registry.

### Boosting capacity

The registry, established in 2006, has "evolved in a very significant manner to get to the same level as the U.S. and Canada," says Arturo Rodríguez Abitia, a deputy attorney general for industrial inspection for Mexico's Federal Attorney General of Environmental Protection. Rodríguez says the CEC has helped manufacturers adopt more benign production methods, and assisted Mexico in improving its environmental law-enforcement capacity.

Environmental advocates acknowledge such contributions, but complain the CEC falls short in conducting timely investigations, interacting with citizen groups and staying on top of issues. Marisa Jacott, director of the Mexico City-based Fronteras Comunes, applauds the CEC for its report on the recycling in Mexico of lead-acid automobile batteries discarded in the United States, but faults the agency for not following up. Two Fronteras Comunes requests that the CEC fund monitoring of the blood of children living near recycling plants failed to resonate with the Commission, Jacott says.

Irasema Coronado, director of the CEC Secretariat, or staff, says her team is addressing such issues in a "modernization process" that includes investigatory deadlines and greater public transparency.

Stephen Mumme, a Colorado State University political scientist who has followed the CEC closely, says the agency has done a

"remarkable job" despite budgetary and political constraints. Mumme calculates its perennially flat US\$9 million budget should be \$15-\$16 million to account for past inflation.

For the current calendar-year budget, the three members cut their contributions to \$2,550,000 each, but were able to keep the budget at \$9 million by drawing on CEC savings, says Sylvia Correa, a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency representative to the CEC. In an e-mail, Correa wrote that efficiency measures recommended by the Council and a \$2.5 million surplus in the commission budget should tide the agency over.

Mumme argues that in part, the weak budget reflects the fact that the CEC never was granted regulatory authority. "I would characterize it as a serious lack of attention to the CEC," Mumme says. "The governments have never allowed, or been willing to allow, the CEC to function as a more robust agency."

### Report cites limitations

Watchdog groups hold a similar opinion. The CEC's "potential environmental achievements" have been hamstrung by budgetary, mission and issue-advocacy restrictions, says a new report issued by the Sierra Club, the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade and other non-governmental organizations. The report asserts that while CEC funding has stagnated, Mexico in 2010 alone suffered an estimated \$120 billion in environmental degradation and natural-resource depletion.

Mark Spalding, who advised the U.S. trade representative in the discussions that led to the environmental side accord more than 20 years ago, says Nafta negotiators were never willing to give the CEC enforcement power. "I don't think it was ever really on the table that it would have regulatory authority," recalls Spalding, now president of the Washington, D.C.-based Ocean Foundation.

For his part, Varney says the CEC Council appears willing to seek more resources if its work plan warrants it. He argues that thus far, the CEC has helped disprove warnings that trade integration would trigger a race to the bottom, with Nafta partners gutting their respective environmental regulations in order to gain economic advantage.

"I feel like it is more a race to the top," Varney says. "We have three countries working together on common problems... There is a lot to be proud of. A number of organizations and people understand that the CEC is an important institution that needs to be strongly supported in the future."

—Kent Paterson

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## Mining law continued from page 1

mining operations regularly dump toxic wastes into rivers and damage protected areas.”

Bolivia exported US\$3.08 billion of silver, lead, zinc, tin and other minerals in 2013, when mining represented the nation’s third most important export class after hydrocarbons and agriculture. But foreign investment has largely stalled. The new legislation, which reforms a 1997-era mining law, is intended to increase that investment—and generate greater revenues that can be used to fund education, health and other social priorities. It attempts to do so by making mining easier. Mining companies will not have to seek prior consultation with affected communities before engaging in exploration. They can mine in protected areas with the approval of the pro-mining Ministry of Mines and Metallurgy. And when environmental conflicts arise, the Ministry of Mines, not the Ministry of Water and the Environment, will decide whether a mining company has fulfilled its environmental obligations.

The leftist government of Bolivian President Evo Morales, confident of the law’s ability to resuscitate the mining sector, is upbeat. “We will continue expanding state mining areas, especially of rich, large-scale mining deposits,” Vice President Álvaro García Linera said May 28, during an official ceremony dedicated to the new law in the city of Oruro.

### Mixed message

However, analysts say the new law illustrates anew that the Morales administration’s progressive, pro-environmental rhetorical line is belied by the extraordinary latitude the government gives companies here to seek out and exploit natural resources—often against the wishes of local communities.

Criticism has been heated. The law fails to “avoid environmental harm, implement water treatment technologies or restrict mega-mining and mega-exploitation activities in aquifers,” says a declaration signed by dozens of farming, environmental and indigenous groups after a so-called Social Summit on the Mining Bill May 8-9 in La Paz. It will permit “the diversion of river courses, and mining in glaciers, rivers and protected areas,” the groups assert.

Mining concessions include numerous rivers and more than half the surface area of all Bolivian lakes and ponds. And mining, typically conducted with little or no government oversight, has had devastating impact, experts say. Along the 1,100-kilometer (680 mile) Pilcomayo River, mining contamination has been a problem since colonial times. But the situation has grown worse in recent decades—especially in the upper Pilcomayo watershed between the southwestern departments of Oruro and

Potosí, where mining is most intense. Despite the shuttering of 19 ore processing plants in Potosí in 2005, treatment of contaminated tailings has been inadequate, experts say.

Little has been done to improve mining infrastructure. This month, a large tailing dam belonging to a private company ruptured, sending toxic waste down the river as far as Argentina and Paraguay. The Huanuni River, which traverses important mining lands in the southwest, possesses little or no aquatic life. Recent studies show that local crops irrigated with water from that river are severely affected, with potatoes containing 8 times the levels of arsenic and twice the concentrations of lead permitted by the World Health Organization.

Water scarcity, partly due to the intensive use of water for mineral processing and transport, is legion. The rate of access to potable water in rural areas of Bolivia is among the lowest in Latin America, at around 70%. Mines have lowered the water table and dried up rivers, springs and wells used by local populations in large areas of the country, experts say. Sumitomo Corporation’s San Cristóbal mine, one of the world’s largest producers of tin, uses 43 million liters of water per day—about 1.5 times the consumption of Oruro, a city of 235,000.

### Guarantees cited

Government officials cite language in the law guaranteeing water for human consumption, irrigation and environmental protection. “The rights to water for human populations are being respected,” Mining Minister Mario Virreira said before passage of the law. “There is absolutely no violation of that.”

But critics say such confidence is unwarranted given the primacy that the new law confers on mining rights. Marco Gandarillas, executive director of the nonprofit Bolivian Documentation and Information Center, a think tank, points out that the law calls for incarceration of those interfering with mining activities. “This legislation ignores the constitution, which says water and all natural resources belong to the Bolivian people,” Gandarillas says. “It grants preferential water access to miners and impedes and affects its use by others.”

Indigenous, environmental and other groups say they might ask the Constitutional Tribunal, Bolivia’s highest court, to suspend implementation of the law. Among the grounds for such a request, they claim, is that the government failed to undertake proper public consultation in drafting the law and has not ensured the measure provides for such consultation in connection with mining projects.

—Steven Ambrus

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Around the Region  
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site, is intended to shield the area from large-scale mining and agriculture as well as oil and gas drilling.

Creation of the Ramsar site came after two years of tussling between authorities with distinct views on how the area should be managed. Colombia's Ministry of Mines and Energy looked eagerly on the reported reserves of coltan, gold, copper and other minerals. The Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development urged protection of the area's 470 species of birds, 470 species of fish and 200 mammal species.

It also viewed the region—which spans ecosystems of the Orinoco, Amazon and Guiana Shield, and includes the Inírida, Atabapo and Guaviare rivers, tributaries of the Orinoco—as an irreplaceable resource and a water factory for the country's future.

In the end, the two ministries agreed that the area should be conserved.

"It's not worth it to put a mine here," President Juan Manuel Santos said at a ceremony held in the town of Inírida to inaugurate the Ramsar Site. "This is truly one of the richest areas in our country, in the world... this wetland is really very, very important due to the quantity of water it has."

Stretching from the foothills of the Colombian Andes across the Llanos plains of Colombia and Venezuela to the delta of the 2,100-kilometer (1,300-mile) Orinoco River, the 880,000 square-kilometer (340,000-sq-mile) Orinoco basin is among the world's most water-rich environments.

It features some 200 major tributaries and a network of grasslands, flooded savannahs and swamp forests. But debate has raged for years in Colombia about how to preserve its immense water resources and biodiversity and where to allow hydrocarbon and mining exploitation, as well as rice, African

palm and forestry plantations.

Though the Estrella Fluvial del Inírida is only a small fraction of the Colombian Orinoco, environmentalists say that an important precedent has been set with the declaration of the new Ramsar site and the government's stated commitment to promote ecotourism, sustainable fishing, and agroforestry there as alternatives to traditional development.

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**New Costa Rican president to decide purse-seine ban**

The fate of a set of new tuna fishing regulations hangs in the balance as the Costa Rican government analyzes the viability of an executive decree carried over from the previous presidential administration.

If made into law, the decree would ban fishing with purse seine nets—the preferred fishing method of industrial tuna fleets—within 60 nautical miles of the country's Pacific coastline as well as in a deep-ocean polygon of more than 48,000 square miles.

With the ability to scoop up an entire school of tuna in one stroke, purse seine fishing is a major contributor to overfishing in the eastern tropical Pacific. High bycatch rates are also a problem, with scientists estimating that the fishing practice has killed between 5 and 7 million dolphins, which regularly swim with tuna, since the mid-1950s.

Beyond the environmental concerns over purse-seine fishing, artisanal longline and rod fishermen claim they cannot compete with the international tuna fleets operating in Costa Rican waters. They say they now have to travel so far offshore to fish that they are often unable to recoup their investment in time and gas.

It took the regulations' supporters more than two years of negotiations with former President Laura Chinchilla to get the decree finalized and signed. But according to Costa Rican law, an executive decree cannot take effect until it is published in the official government newspaper, La Gaceta. Usually presidents include a publishing order in the decree, but for unknown reasons Chinchilla did not, effectively passing on the final decision on the decree to new President Luis Guillermo Solís, who took office on May 8.

The decree's only serious opposition comes from executives at the local tuna cannery Sardimar, who are concerned that the restrictions would limit their supply of Costa Rican tuna, which they can buy at a reduced price. The cannery says that if the decree is passed, it may leave Costa Rica, taking some 1,500 jobs with it.

The Solís administration says it will have a decision on the matter by early August.

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**Argentina's Supreme Court creates environmental office**

Argentina's Supreme Court has created its first-ever Environmental Office to ensure that green issues addressed by the court are better understood and handled.

The office will bring environmental expertise to bear in the training of judges, research of court cases, engagement with international bodies and development of sustainable practices for the judicial system. It was created by a resolution signed by all six

Supreme Court justices, but was championed by the court's president, Ricardo Lorenzetti.

In a ceremony inaugurating the new office, Lorenzetti said politicians would do well to learn more about environmental issues, too.

"For those who govern, the environment is an alien question," he said. "They are wrong, however. The environmental question affects all of us in a concrete way—for example, in health, because new diseases are appearing that are the product of contamination of food, water and air."

He added: "Civilization that is based on unlimited development, instead of sustainable development, is on a suicidal path. Politicians think about the next elections, but not about the next generations."

Attending the ceremony were 30 elementary-school students who are members of Guardians of the Riachuelo, a group that has advocated cleanup of the Matanza-Riachuelo River. The river, which flows through greater Buenos Aires, was the subject of what many view as Argentina's most important court ruling on an environmental issue. In 2006, the Supreme Court ordered the national, provincial and municipal authorities to clean up the intensely polluted river.

Lorenzetti's efforts to bring environmental expertise to bear in the judiciary come against a backdrop of engagement on his part with green issues. At the 2012 Rio+20 summit, he was named co-president of the International Advisory Council for the Advancement of Justice, Governance and Law for Environmental Sustainability, a body of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), along with Arifin Zakaria, president of Malaysia's supreme court.

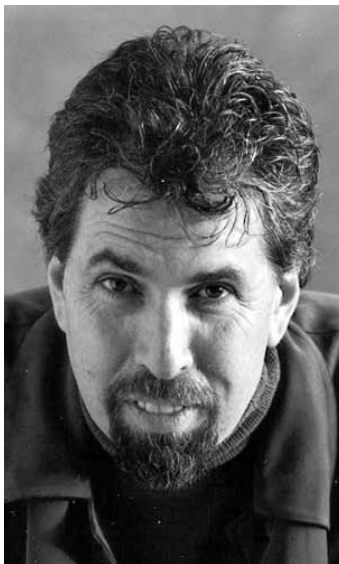
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## Q&amp;A:

# Ecotourism pioneer relates his experience in Costa Rica

Glenn Jampol began work as an artist, based mostly in San Francisco and New York. He didn't realize that he was breaking new ground when he moved to Costa Rica to open an eco-lodge in the 1980s. Since then the Los Angeles native seems to have had a hand in almost every step of the evolution of Costa Rica's now lucrative and growing ecotourism industry, and has become a presence in international ecotourism circles as well. In addition to running his Finca Rosa Blanca Coffee Plantation Resort, Jampol served until recently as president of the Costa Rican National Association of Ecotourism (Canaeco) and travels around the world as an ecotourism development consultant. EcoAméricas contributor Bill Hinchberger interviewed Jampol in Bonito, Brazil, at the recent Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Conference organized by the International Ecotourism Society. Jampol was one of the event's featured speakers.



Glenn Jampol

## How did you get started in ecotourism?

My wife and I went to Costa Rica in 1985 on vacation and fell in love with the biodiversity, progressive politics and wonderful people. We decided to start with a little inn. I'm a painter, and my mother always loved art, so we had a huge eclectic collection. We wanted a showplace for that. We also decided it should offer a minimal-impact experience. I went to Berkeley in the sixties, so that should tell you where my head was environmentally. But I had no real experience as a practitioner. In 1989 we opened the first boutique hotel in Costa Rica. There were many hotels that were owner-operated getaways, but none had the luxurious, detailed and artistic feel one finds in boutique hotels now. We were not an ecotourism hotel in the sense most perceive that, as we were in an agricultural area. We were, however, committed to stewardship and responsibility, which became Costa Rica's niche and legacy—sustainable tourism.

## Before the ecotourism boom, did you see yourselves as pioneers?

Most people told us we were crazy. How can you have a little hotel charging that much, off the main drag, without TVs in the rooms? But that's not the people we were going for. We had a pretty good idea that it would be bird-watching, NPR-listening, college-educated world travelers with a certain sensibility about their impact on the world. We were one of the first to think about what is now called sustainable tourism. When we submitted our plans to the Costa Rican Tourism Board [ICT], the name was Proyecto Ecoturístico Finca Rosa Blanca. The guy asked me, "What is a proyecto ecoturístico?" We had an idea that it would be kind of ecological, but we didn't really know how to apply it to a business. It was more an academic concept.

## How did things progress?

We had very tight margins and were trying to invest in our community. We started a program with the local school and a soup kitchen. We got guests involved as well—what they now call traveler philanthropy. When José María Figueres took over as Costa Rica's president in 1994, his minister of tourism hired consultants to figure out what was fuelling the country's incredible growth. The answer: the popularity of the medium-sized, accessible, interpretive tourism [of the kind] that we had been

offering. The consultants said: "You should offer sustainable tourism as a product." [Authorities] decided to adopt [voluntary] certification. They invited people from all walks, including hotels, the first sector that would be certified, to contribute. I ended up working very closely with the man who wrote most of the program, Rodolfo Lizano, who is still at the ICT. We started writing the Certification for Sustainable Tourism [CST], launched in 1997. The original draft had been done by people from NGOs and academics that didn't understand the problems, choices and sacrifices that business people have to make. Our hotel was the first to be certified.

## What are the pros and cons of certification?

Eighty percent of hotels in Costa Rica have fewer than 80 rooms. We are talking about people who are really living on the edge of the margin. Most invest in their communities and in their own companies, trying to create new

models and interpretative activities. When we started we wanted everybody to do this because it was good for the planet and the country. It was great branding, as a nature-loving eco-country. It was recognized around the world as the best certification program because it included not only environmental aspects, recycling and native species, but also social responsibility and the impact on your community. In 2002, our hotel Rosa Blanca received five [out of five possible] levels—the first ever. We were extremely excited. We still believed awards and certifications would help build occupancy and business, which isn't necessarily so—at least not directly, though there are some great positive influences in terms of marketing. Smaller hotels have felt the financial impact because they need to have somebody working on the CST requirements and must submit thousands of pages of documentary evidence. It takes a tremendous amount of money. Theoretically, the benefit would be differentiation. But as the rest of the world started to participate to some degree, as greenwashing became more evident, and as so many hotels and tourism entities in Costa Rica got certified, the differentiation factor diminished tremendously. In the private sector there has been a lot of discussion about the benefits. We've pretty much determined that certification at five levels does not have a huge positive impact on occupancy. We created a committee of well-versed people, about 10 of us, to take a new look at the CST. The idea is to simplify, make it less cumbersome and less expensive, while still fulfilling everything we think is important.

## What's next?

I'm working on a plan called "INCENSO: Incentives for Sustainability." One of the biggest impediments for new business developers is bureaucracy: the time it takes to get permits. For a hotel developer to build a treatment plant in Costa Rica, which is highly sustainable, versus a septic system, the process takes about 3-4 months longer. So the tendency is to go septic. My idea is based on the California freeway express lanes for carpoolers. If you agree to be a sustainable developer, we will give you a fast-track key. When you submit your application for a treatment plant, it will take six weeks instead of six months. No one, no matter how cynical, will ever say no to that.