

# Mesoamerican Biological Corridor: Mexico to Panama

**Type of TBPA:** The Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (MBC) is a concept of sustainable development for Mesoamerica that unites goals of conservation with sustainable development initiatives of local peoples throughout the region. Although the MBC has moved away from its original strong focus on a transboundary system of protected areas and connecting corridors, this remains to some degree at the heart of the MBC. It is a **cluster of protected areas and the intervening land**.



## Introduction:

The MBC is an initiative of Central America and Mexico which encompasses many projects, both nationally and internationally funded, and supported by a great variety of organizations. The World Bank supports the MBC in a variety of ways and in a great many thematic areas, with grant funds, research projects, trust funds, Global Environment Facility (GEF) projects, and national loan projects. The MBC is not a geographically delimited area but a concept in development and conservation. All the protected areas of Central America are part of the MBC a total of about 600. The numbers and percent of territory covered are as follows:

- Southern Mexico: 33 (18.8%)
- Belize: 59 (44.8%)
- Guatemala: 104 (26.3%)
- El Salvador: 3 (1.6%)
- Honduras: 106 (19.0%)
- Nicaragua: 76 (21.7%)
- Costa Rica: 151 (24.6%)
- Panama: 69 (29.5%)

Specifically in the area of **support to protected areas**, ongoing national full-sized GEF biodiversity MBC projects in Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama all have components designed to strengthen protected areas and national protected area (PA) systems. A similar project is under preparation in El Salvador. Some key examples of work include the definition of corridors between protected areas in Mexico, redesign of the protected area system in Honduras based on a study of biological priorities, protection of indigenous land rights in protected areas of Atlantic Nicaragua, innovative financing of PAs in Costa Rica, and extensive networks of community-based subprojects around protected areas in Panama. Many Bank-implemented medium-sized GEF projects throughout the region have also contributed to protection of conservation areas.

In addition to projects, particularly with Dutch funding, the Bank has supported for many years a great variety of investments intended to strengthen the MBC, including the role of protected areas and biological corridors in the region. A United Nations Development Programme

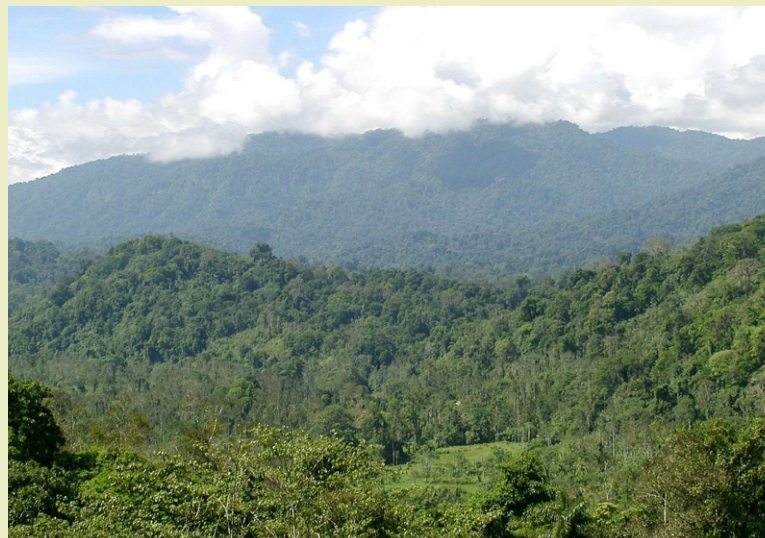


Photo: Asociación ANAI

(UNDP)-implemented regional GEF project for the MBC brings together many of the national initiatives so that they constitute true transboundary initiatives.

Finally, the World Bank is currently working with Nicaragua and Honduras in the preparation of a new GEF project called the "Corazón Transfrontier Biosphere Reserve Project" to support a proposed new United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) transboundary reserve between the two countries, constituting the "heart" of the MBC.

## Importance to biodiversity:

As noted in a recent Central American Commission on Environment and Development (CCAD) report (see web sites, next page) prepared for the MBC Paris Conference in December 2002, Mesoamerica has a very diverse geography, with its location as a terrestrial land bridge between North and South America, the presence of two oceans with the second largest coral reef in the world, extensive mountain chains with peaks that reach up to 4211 m, and areas ranging from deserts to very wet rain forests. A recent World Bank supported map of the ecosystems of Central America identifies 200 distinct ecosystem classes in the region. With less than one

half of one percent of the world's terrestrial surface area, Mesoamerica possesses between 7 and 10 % of all known life forms a megabiodiversity hot spot.

### **Importance to regional economic growth and integration:**

The MBC began in the mid-1990s with a strong focus on protected areas but has since evolved in the direction of greater integration of conservation interests with those of economic and rural development. Mesoamerica boasts more than 600 protected areas covering about one fifth of the area but virtually all these areas have significant human populations, in many cases original indigenous inhabitants. It is widely recognized that conservation of the green areas of the MBC requires a strong focus on the needs of local peoples, of which there are millions that depend directly or indirectly on PAs of the MBC.

### **Importance in promoting a culture of peace and cooperation:**

The MBC itself is a transboundary initiative which has been important in bringing together the countries of Mesoamerica and reducing international tensions. There are transboundary PAs on every border in the region and these are each important in maintaining the relationships that underlie the international partnerships that sustain the MBC. As an example, the Corazón Biosphere Reserve between Nicaragua and Honduras has resulted from a long process of binational meetings and cooperation which have been an important counterweight to cross-border tensions in past years.

### **Main partners:**

The countries of Mesoamerica, including Mexico, are the key partners in the MBC. The GEF has been critical as a funding organization. In addition to the Bank, other major MBC partners include UNDP, USAID, the German Government, the Dutch Government and many other bilaterals, multilaterals and national and international NGOs have important projects underway.

### **Organization:**

Regional cooperation on the MBC, including for transboundary protected area issues, falls to the CCAD, the Central American Commission on Environment and Development, an inter-governmental forum of the Ministers of Environment.

### **Main challenges:**

Exactly half of the natural habitats of Central America have been converted to agriculture or urban areas and deforestation rates in the region continue to be alarmingly high. CCAD estimates that about 400,000 ha of forest are being lost on an annual basis. All of the region's protected areas are thus under intense pressure. Achieving the MBC goals of integrating the Mesoamerican protected area system into the regional economy continues to be a significant challenge requiring ongoing focus on indigenous land rights, on the financial sustainability of protected areas, and on natural resource management in buffer zones and corridor areas.

### **Lessons learned:**

In the nearly 10 years that the MBC has been in existence, the countries of Mesoamerica and their partners, including the World Bank, have been on a long road together learning what works and what does not work. The shifting priorities of the MBC and the changes in the concept itself, as it shifts increasingly toward integrated actions of rural development, are signposts of the directions taken. For further information on the initiative please consult the web sites of the MBC Regional Project (<http://www.biomeso.net/>), of CCAD (<http://ccad.sgsica.org/>) and of the World Bank (<http://www.worldbank.org/ca-env>).

This case study was written by Douglas Graham of the World Bank.

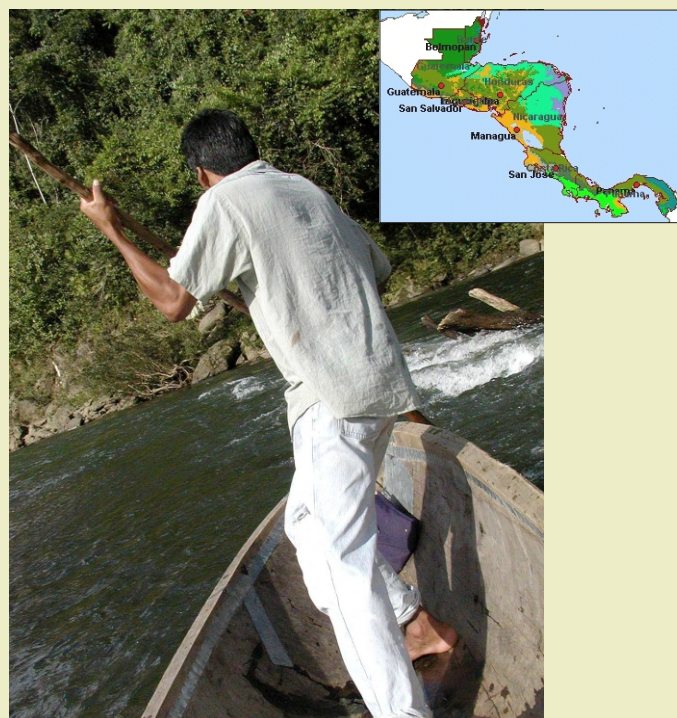


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