IUCN Conservation Outlook Assessment 2014 **(archived)**
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Please note: this is an archived Conservation Outlook Assessment for Los Katios National Park. To access the most up-to-date Conservation Outlook Assessment for this site, please visit https://www.worldheritageoutlook.iucn.org.

Los Katios National Park

SITE INFORMATION

Country:
Colombia
Inscribed in: 1994
Criteria:
(ix) (x)

Site description:
Extending over 72,000 ha in north-western Colombia, Los Katios National Park comprises low hills, forests and humid plains. An exceptional biological diversity is found in the park, which is home to many threatened animal species, as well as many endemic plants. © UNESCO

SUMMARY

2014 Conservation Outlook

Significant concern

Los Katios National Park continues to be an outstanding protected area in region of major importance in the biogeographic history of the Americas, jointly with the neighboring and much larger Darien National Park and World Heritage property in Panama. The many years of limited security have reduced and at times prevented governmental control of the property. The same holds true for scientific research which was mostly suspended despite the major scientific importance of the area. At the same time, it can be argued that the lack of security may have contributed to preventing large scale infrastructure projects. While the improved security situation is a blessing for local communities, including indigenous and afrodescendant communities and permits conservation actors to operate, it may well favour large-scale infrastructure projects. Building upon the promising management response and increased law enforcement over the last years, illegal resource use can be kept at acceptable levels providing sustained funding and staffing. The case of the Wounaan community is a highly important practical experience in terms of negotiating and agreeing on a balance between local resource use and conservation. It deserves to be observed and documented, as similar processes are likely to occur elsewhere in Colombia and the region. Eventually, the future of Los Katios will be strongly influenced by the development and land and resource use of the surroundings. Colombian legislation and policy provide an adequate framework for the full consideration of use and conservation at the landscape level but much remains to be done in implementation. As the pressure on the resources in the surroundings is mounting, it becomes increasingly important to coordinate and cooperate with Panama on the contiguous conservation area comprised of the two World Heritage properties, Darien National Park and Los Katios National Park.

Current state and trend of VALUES

High Concern
Trend: Stable

Following an earlier trend of well-documented concerns, the situation has been slowly but consistently improving in the years after inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger. There are consistent indications that the trend could be halted over the last years in response to the recognition of an earlier negative trend. The property benefits from being adjacent to the much larger Darien National Park in Panama.

Overall THREATS

High Threat

The most acute current threats are decreasing. Despite important progress, the overall security situation continues to be a cause of concern. Illegal and uncontrolled resource use, including fishing, from the settlements around the property is being addressed but continues to be a challenge. The return of an indigenous community is a remarkable development posing a new challenge in terms of balancing the use of natural resources and conservation. While all these threats are serious, there are encouraging signs of the government regaining control in cooperation with non-governmental organizations, academia and local and indigenous communities. Planned mega-projects do not pose an immediate threat to the property at this point in time. However, plans to construct electrical utilities corridor in the vicinity of the property appear to remain active and require detailed assessment in terms of possible direct and indirect impacts on the property. Likewise, the debate on the "missing link" of the Panamerican Highway through the Darien Gap may be re-opened in the medium or longer term. In the long term, climate change is expected to add significant threats to the property.

Overall PROTECTION and MANAGEMENT

Serious Concern

The formal protection status is fully adequate whereas enforcement and overall management have long been hampered by the security situation. Major and

encouraging efforts have been made over the last years to regain control of the management of the property and its surroundings, re-establishing an increasing governmental presence in and around the property. Despite a clear positive trend challenges remain in terms of the relationship with local communities, illegal and unsustainable use of natural resources. Additional efforts based on adequate and reliable funding and staffing are required to ensure effective management.

FULL ASSESSMENT

Description of values

Values

World Heritage values

- **Rich variety of ecosystems and habitats in an exceptional biogeographic location**
  Criterion:(ix)

  The region in which Los Katios National Park is located has been and continues to be of major importance in the biogeographical history of the Americas. Its geographical location in what is today northwestern Colombia made it a barrier to the interchange of fauna and flora between the Americas during the Tertiary and Pleistocene and subsequently an area of exchange of fauna and flora between the previously separated land masses of Mesoamerica and South America. Jointly with the contiguous Darien National Park in neighboring Panama, likewise a World Heritage property, the property displays an exceptional biodiversity with many endemic species of fauna and flora in a rich variety of ecosystems, such as alluvial plains, marshes, lowland swamp forest, and lowland and montane tropical rainforest (IUCN Evaluation, 1994; draft SoOUV, 2012).

- **Important habitats of endemic and threatened species**
  Criterion:(x)

  Los Katios National Park features exceptional biodiversity and provides habitat to a number of threatened and endemic animal and plant species. At the time of inscription a total of 669 plant species had been recorded in Los Katios National Park, of which 20-25% are endemic to Colombia. Some 430 species of birds have been recorded in the property, comprising some 23%

and 44% of the avifauna of Colombia and Panama respectively, and more than 700 vertebrate species, not counting the impressive diversity of freshwater fish (Los Katios Management Plan 2007-2011).

Assessment information

Threats

Current Threats

High Threat

The most acute current threats are decreasing. Despite this important progress, the overall security situation continues to be a cause of concern. Illegal and uncontrolled resource use, including fishing,from the settlements around the property is being addressed but continues to be a challenge. The return of an indigenous community is a remarkable development posing a new challenge in terms of balancing the use of natural resources and conservation. While all these threats are serious, there are encouraging signs of the government regaining control in cooperation with non-governmental organizations, academia and local and indigenous communities.

► War, Civil Unrest/ Military Exercises

High Threat
Inside site
Outside site

Despite reports suggesting the occasional presence of armed groups believed to cross the property at times, there is evidence of an improving overall security situation. The current security level allows the conservation authorities to carry out their mandate and to conduct routine management and control operations. Nevertheless, further improvements are needed to fully restore effective management (SOC Report, 2013).

► Crops

High Threat

Inside site
Outside site

Settlements along the boundaries of the property bear a risk of further encroachment and pressures, including through swidden agriculture, livestock grazing, subsistence hunting and, in the absence of alternative income, involvement in illegal logging operations (36COM.LosKatios.SPreport; 35COM.Los Katios.SOC; WDPA Sheet, 2011). An indigenous Wounaan community re-entered what is today the property, which they consider part of their ancestral land. Several meetings between the indigenous Wounaan community and conservation authorities have been held over the last years with the objective to negotiate a balance between conservation and legitimate livelihood needs. Important progress in this highly sensitive and complex process is noted (SOC report, 2013). The presence of the community within the property from now on will be an integral element of the governance and management of Los Katios National Park.

► Other Biological Resource Use

High Threat
Inside site
Outside site

The limited governmental presence in the property over an extended period of time due to security reasons, among other factors, has favoured illegal resource extraction, in particular of timber, fish and wildlife (SOC report, 2013). Illegal logging is an ongoing threat to the property. The situation has improved in that increased monitoring and patrolling is taking place, communication with the relevant regional institutions has been intensified and infrastructure is being consolidated, including through external support (Mission report, 2011). Fishing is a major activity of communities near the Park, reported to reach levels of overfishing (36COM.LosKatios.SPreport; 35COM.LosKatios.SOC; WDPA Sheet, 2011). An agreement on fisheries management in the Tumaradó Swamp was signed between the conservation authorities and the Tumaradó Community Council (SOC report, 2013). Subsistence hunting and wildlife trade are related to the combination of limited management presence and effectiveness and restricted livelihood alternatives (Mission report, 2011).

Potential Threats

High Threat

Planned mega-projects do not pose an acute threat to the property at this point in time. However, plans to construct electrical utilities corridor in the vicinity of the property are reported to remain active. A possible re-opening of the debate surrounding the completion of the Panamerican Highway through the Darien Gap would undoubtedly require a full understanding of the possible World Heritage implications. If such plans will go ahead, detailed assessment in terms of possible direct and indirect impacts on the property will be needed. In the long term, climate change is expected to add significant threats to the property.

► Commercial/ Industrial Areas

High Threat
Inside site
Outside site

For many decades there have been proposals for several large infrastructure projects (Pan-American Highway, electrical utilities corridor). If implemented, these could have major direct and/or indirect impacts on Los Katios National Park. None of these plans appear to be imminent or close to implementation stage (Mission report, 2011). In 2010, the Ministry of the Environment had denied a license for the construction of an electrical utilities corridor intended to link Colombia with Panama and planned near the property’s boundaries (SOC report, 2012). However, unconfirmed reports suggest that an agreement may have been concluded between the governments of Colombia and Panama in terms of shared financing of the project (Mission report, 2011). It appears that this project remains active. The Committee’s request to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the electrical utilities corridor planned near the property’s boundaries has not been addressed (SOC report, 2013).

Protection and management

Assessing Protection and Management

► Relationships with local people

Serious Concern

As is common in remote rural settings where resource-dependent communities live in the vicinity of protected areas, there are conflicts regarding use of natural resources. After periods of limited or even lacking governmental presence, a new chapter in the relationship between local people and protected areas management has been opened over the last years. A special case is the indigenous Phu Juin Wounaan Buur community, which is accompanied by conservation authorities in its return to ancestral lands within the property. The sensitive process in essence boils down to a negotiation of the terms of use of natural resources within the national park. (36COM.LosKatios.SPreport; 35COM.Los Katios.SOC; WDPA Sheet, 2011).

► Legal framework and enforcement

Serious Concern

The property is state-owned and has adequate legal protection. The Colombian Constitution grants a very strong level of protection to natural parks and local communities, as well as guidance for sustainable natural resource management and there is a comprehensive legal and policy framework for protected areas. The legal and policy framework is adequate but much remains to be done in terms of implementation. Enforcement is affected by armed conflicts and overall security situation in the region (36COM. Los Katios.SPreport; 35COM.Los Katios.SOC; WDPA Sheet, 2011; Mission report, 2011).

► Integration into regional and national planning systems

Some Concern

Los Katios is within the Pacific Subsystem, one of six regional subsystems within Colombia’s National Protected Areas System (SINAP). It is adjacent to the Caribbean Subsystem. All regional subsystems must develop regional action plans which are complementary to the national action plan for SINAP. There is also a strong reference to land use planning as a complementary conservation strategy to ensure connectivity of the units of SINAP. Regional environmental authorities should be provided with recommendations and be urged to establish corridors and buffer zones in the sense of a landscape

approach (Mission report, 2011).

▶ Management system

Serious Concern

An up-to-date management plan is in place but implementation has been slow due to financial and staffing constraints, as well as security situation in the region (36COM.LosKatios.SPreport).

▶ Management effectiveness

Some Concern

Management effectiveness is limited after longstanding armed conflict in the region, as well as limited funding and staffing. Coordination with other local, regional, and national authorities is improving but much remains to be done. (36COM.LosKatios.SPreport). Management is moving from emergency measures to more structured and systematic approaches. The government has re-established its presence, improved the understanding of the situation and has also been making significant efforts to engage with local communities (SOC report, 2013)

▶ Implementation of Committee decisions and recommendations

Some Concern

While there has been important progress in addressing Committee’s decisions and recommendations, additional efforts are required to fully implement the corrective measures adopted at the 36th Committee Session in 2012 following up on the earlier inscription of Los Katios on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

▶ Boundaries

Some Concern

Los Katios is relatively small in size and was not exclusively designed nature conservation grounds (Mission report, 2011). There are hints at highly valuable areas of conservation interest nearby.

▶ Sustainable finance

Some Concern

Many of the projects that contribute to the management of Los Katios have been financially supported from international sources. Additional and reliable funding is required to address the multiple challenges (36COM.LosKatios.SPreport).

▶ Staff training and development

Data Deficient

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▶ Sustainable use

Some Concern

Fisheries monitoring indicates decreased fishing pressure; there has been a reduction of illegal logging through implementation of community Forest Management Plans and a sustainable livelihoods project (36COM.LosKatios.SPreport).

▶ Education and interpretation programs

Mostly Effective

Specific environmental education program for resettlement of the Wounaan Indigenous Group and for neighboring communities. (36COM.LosKatios.SPreport)

▶ Tourism and interpretation

Mostly Effective

Given the remoteness and the security situation in the region over many years, tourism is very limited at this stage (WDPA, 2011).

▶ Monitoring

Mostly Effective

Monitoring plan for frogs, birds, hydrological resources and aquatic ecosystems are being implemented (36COM.LosKatios.SPreport).

▶ Research

Some Concern

The return of the indigenous Wounaan community is based on anthropological study of their ancestral lands. Another example of recent and ongoing scientific investigation are freshwater fisheries.

Overall assessment of protection and management

Serious Concern

The formal protection status is fully adequate whereas enforcement and overall management have long been hampered by the security situation. Major and encouraging efforts have been made over the last years to regain control of the management of the property and its surroundings, re-establishing an increasing governmental presence in and around the property. Despite a clear positive trend challenges remain in terms of the relationship with local communities, illegal and unsustainable use of natural resources. Additional efforts based on adequate and reliable funding and staffing are required to ensure effective management.

► Assessment of the effectiveness of protection and management in addressing threats outside the site

Some Concern

Most threats to the Park originate in the surroundings. Management acknowledges this by putting much and increasing effort on addressing natural resource management of communities there.

► Best practice examples

It deserves to be highlighted that the State Party proactively requested the inscription of the property on the List of World Heritage in Danger, which was endorsed by the World Heritage Committee in 2009 and has been in effect ever since. The government thereby acknowledged major challenges and used the status as World Heritage in Danger to draw attention to the situation on the ground. The State Party has since made important progress in addressing the various governance and management challenges. Los Katios National Park is therefore a noteworthy example of the constructive use of the List of World Heritage in Danger as an instrument to acknowledge

challenges and to draw attention to them.

State and trend of values

Assessing the current state and trend of values

World Heritage values

▶ **Rich variety of ecosystems and habitats in an exceptional biogeographic location**
High Concern
Trend:Stable

The integrity and conservation values of the property have been negatively impacted on by illegal and inadequate use of natural resources in and around the property, favoured in part by the difficult security situation over many years (SOC report, 2009). After years of major concern, the situation could be stabilized over the last years.

▶ **Important habitats of endemic and threatened species**
High Concern
Trend:Stable

Los Katios National Park is relatively small, albeit connected with the much larger Darien National Park in nearby Panama. The impacts of illegal resource use have thereby impacted on the habitats and the species the support. Forest cover and fish are among the best documented indicators of the negative past trend with a more promising trend over the last years.

Summary of the Values

▶ **Assessment of the current state and trend of World Heritage values**
High Concern
Trend: Stable

Following an earlier trend of well-documented concerns, the situation has been slowly but consistently improving in the years after inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger. There are consistent indications that the

trend could be halted over the last years in response to the recognition of an earlier negative trend. The property benefits from being adjacent to the much larger Darien National Park in Panama.

Additional information

Key conservation issues

▶ **Past and partially current security concerns**
National

Past and at times current presence of armed groups in the region, including reportedly within the property contributes inevitably compromises management and law enforcement, also making it difficult to work with local communities and authorities (36COM.LosKatios.SPreport).

▶ **Large infrastructure projects**
Local

The debate is somewhat abstract, as there are no current impacts. However, major infrastructure projects, if implemented, may bring major change to the entire binational Darien Gap area, which would be very difficult to manage and control

▶ **Encroachment by settlements and illegal use of natural resources**
Local

The pressure on the property is well-documented and in line with experience elsewhere when resource-dependent communities live near protected areas (36COM.LosKatios.SPreport).

Benefits

Understanding Benefits

► Is the protected area valued for its nature conservation?

The property belongs to a large region of closed forests shared by Panama and Colombia which is highly valued as a barrier to livestock diseases and alien invasive species from South America to Central and North America and vice-versa

► Fishing areas and conservation of fish stocks

Freshwater fish is of major importance in the diet and food security of local communities and of major local socio-economic importance

► History and tradition

While it is still premature to comment on the complex process of re-settling of a community, the current legal and policy framework permits the return of indigenous communities to their ancestral lands in protected areas. Thereby, the protected area today has the potential to serve as a safe haven for previously displaced communities

Summary of benefits

Beyond the obvious conservation benefits of a protected area located in a very particular biogeographic setting which is known to harbour and exceptionally rich and rare flora and fauna, the barrier effect with respect to movement of disease and alien invasive species between the Americas is the major benefit of the property. The property also contributes to maintaining the productivity of the freshwater fisheries which is of critical importance in local food security and in the local economy. More recently, changes in the Colombian Constitution, law and policy make it possible for indigenous communities to return to ancestral lands in federal protected areas. This creates the potential of a major benefit from the perspective of indigenous peoples which remains to be explored and realized.

Projects

Compilation of active conservation projects

№	Organization/ individuals	Project duration	Brief description of Active Projects
1	USAID, WWF, Park Service		Sustainable Livelihoods project targeting vegetable production, fisheries, community capacity building in organizational matters, entrepreneurial skills, and sustainable practice management; identification of alternative livelihoods; environmental education; participatory ecological restoration; threat assessment for forests.
2	National Park Administration supported by World Heritage Fund		Small-scale project to support management infrastructure, such as control posts and for an inter-institutional meeting to review achievements of the Emergency Action Plan (Plan Choque).

Compilation of potential site needs

№	Site need title	Brief description of potential site needs	Support needed for following years
1	Embedding Los Katios National Park in the management of the broader landscape	It is widely recognized that the surroundings of the property in northwestern Colombia contain many areas of major conservation importance. The long-term integrity of the property will also depend on the conservation and management of natural resources in the entire region. There is room for further addressing these complex questions. Formally, the creation of a formal buffer zone for the World Heritage property could be a useful instrument.	
2	Consolidation of transboundary cooperation	Los Katios National Park was originally nominated as an extension to the contiguous, much larger Darien National Park. While challenging, it appears as though the improving security situation could open new windows for communication, coordination and cooperation across the international border	

REFERENCES