Los Karios National Park

2020 Conservation Outlook Assessment

SITE INFORMATION

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

Extending over 72,000 ha in north-western Colombia, Los Karios 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

Los Karios National Park continues to be an extraordinary protected area in a region globally renowned for high levels of diversity and endemism. Adding to its importance is the location within the frontlines of the “Great American Exchange”, a major and ongoing biogeographic event in the history of the Americas following the earlier geographic separation of what became North and South America. Such values are shared with the much larger and contiguous Darién National Park and World Heritage site in nearby Panama. The vast scale of Darién National Park considerably contributes to the integrity and conservation outlook of Los Karios National Park. It is therefore clear that investment in transboundary conservation is an investment in the future of both sites. Given that the establishment and configuration of the national park was not primarily based on a conservation rationale according to contemporary conservation planning, it can be argued that the property is facing some shortcomings by design. Years of limited security have reduced and at times prevented governmental control of the property. The same holds true for scientific research, which was largely 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. The Colombian Constitution and the evolving 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. 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. Further progress in the negotiations with the Wounaan community inside the property serves as an unfolding practical experience in terms of negotiating and agreeing on a balance between local resource users and rights-holders versus formal conservation efforts. Lessons learned deserve to be extracted to inform the much broader debates about rights-based conservation and sustainable use. Eventually, the future of Los Karios National Park will be strongly influenced by the development and land and resource use of the surroundings. While the improved security situation is a blessing for local communities, including indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities and finally permits governmental and non-governmental
conservation actors to operate, it may well favor longstanding ideas to invest in large-scale infrastructure projects. If such projects materialize every effort is needed to carefully assess and address the direct and indirect impacts and risks for the landscape and its inhabitants.
FULL ASSESSMENT

Description of values

Values

World Heritage values

► Rich diversity of ecosystems, habitats and species in an exceptional biogeographic location

Like the adjacent Darién National Park the property displays an extraordinary biodiversity at all levels. The region in which both Los Katios National Park and the contiguous Darién National Park and World Heritage in neighboring Panama property are located has been and continues to be exceptional in the biogeography of the Americas. Its geographical location in what is today northwestern Colombia made it a barrier to the interchange of terrestrial and freshwater 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 what are today North, Central and South America (“Great American Interchange”). The rich variety of ecosystems and habitats encompasses alluvial plains, marshes, lowland swamp forest, and lowland and montane tropical rainforest (IUCN, 1994; State Party of Colombia, 1994; World Heritage Committee, 2014).

► High diversity of endemic and threatened species of flora and fauna

Part of the “Tumbes-Chocó-Magdalena” Hotspot (formerly known as “Chocó-Darién-Western Ecuador”) suggested by Conservation International, Los Katíos National Park features exceptional species richness and provides habitat to numerous threatened and endemic animal and plant species (CEPF, 2005). 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 scientists assume the Colombian Chocó might be the most floristically diverse site in the Neotropics (CEPF, 2005). Some 430 species of birds have been recorded in the property, comprising about one quarter of the renowned avifauna of Colombia despite the relatively modest size of the national park. More than 700 vertebrate species have been recorded despite limited research efforts due to the property’s remoteness and security issues (Los Katios Management Plan 2007-2011). The most conspicuous large mammals include Giant Anteater, Giant Tapir, several felids, such as jaguar, puma and ocelot and manatees in the river lagoons in the lowlands.

Other important biodiversity values

► Freshwater biodiversity

Los Katios National Park encompasses numerous creeks and small rivers as well as a reach of the mighty Atrato River and associated wetlands. These complex freshwater systems are not only productive contributors to the overall ecosystem and local livelihood systems but home to a broad range of freshwater organisms, including an impressive diversity of freshwater fish. WWF Colombia (2014) reported 264 freshwater fish species in the Chocó-Darién Ecoregional Complex with the highest species richness (116 species) registered in the Atrato River basin to which the property belongs.

► Overlap of high biological and cultural diversity

The Darién Gap, including but not limited to Los Katios National Park and Darién National Park, is a telling example of an area with a high degree of naturalness serving as the foundation for a rich biological and cultural diversity, just like for all other forms of biodiversity the land bridge played an important role in the human migration and distribution across the Americas.
Scenic values

Beyond its extraordinary diversity of all forms of life, the national park and its surroundings are visually stunning through the combination of lush lowland swamps against the backdrop of large and uninterrupted forested mountains. Particular highlights include several large waterfalls, such as the Tilupo and the Tendal Falls, the latter exceeding 100 meters in height.

Assessment information

Threats

Current Threats

It is important to understand that the most acute current threats have been decreasing over the last years due to the consolidation of both the overall security situation and management. Nevertheless, this reason for cautious optimism should not disguise the still fragile overall security situation, as evidenced by occasional incidents and illicit activities. Both illegal and excessive legal resource use, including fishing and shellfish harvesting, in communities around the property is increasingly 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. Despite very encouraging signs of the government having regained control in direct communication, coordination and cooperation with non-governmental organizations, academia and local and indigenous communities, the overall situation is still considered to be vulnerable at this stage.

War, Civil Unrest/ Military Exercises

(Volatile overall security situation following longstanding internal armed conflict)

Despite the reported occasional presence of armed groups believed to cross the property at times, there is strong evidence of a continuously 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 and insecurity may flare up again given the severity and depth of conflict and the partial overlap between the past conflict and illicit commercial activities (UNESCO, 2015 and 2017; IUCN, 2015). Despite current reason for cautious optimism (State Party of Colombia, 2018) the considerable uncertainty justifies the ranking of security concerns as a high threat. Paramilitary and guerrilla dissident groups have been reported to continue to act close to the site, and there are reports of illegal activities (Volckhausen, 2019).

Other Biological Resource Use

(Illegal and uncontrolled resource use (hunting, poaching, fishing, logging and harvesting))

The limited governmental presence in the site over an extended period of time due to security reasons, among other factors including limited management effectiveness and restricted livelihood alternatives, has favoured illegal resource extraction, in particular of timber, fish and wildlife (IUCN, 2015; IUCN, 2011; UNESCO, 2017). Illegal logging is known to occur benefiting from the remoteness and at times limited security and control. While a major concern across vast parts of the Colombian Chocó, deforestation within the site could largely be brought under control following an improved security situation and investment in governmental control and law enforcement. Nevertheless, illegal logging in remote areas accessible via rivers is an ongoing threat to the site (state Party of Colombia, 2018; UNESCO, 2019). 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 (IUCN, 2015; IUCN, 2011). Fishing and shellfish harvesting are major elements of the livelihood systems of indigenous, mestizo and afro-Colombian communities near the site, known to locally reach levels of severe over-exploitation (State Party of Colombia, 2016; UNEP-WCMC, 2011). An agreement on fisheries management in the Tumaradó Swamp
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was signed between the conservation authorities and the Tumaradó Community Council (UNESCO, 2013). Further agreements on resource use amongst indigenous and local communities, such as the Use and Management Agreements and the Special Management Regime with the Wounaan community of Juin Phubuur to promote shared management and governance with indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombian communities, have been reached in recent years which point towards tangible progress in addressing this threat, yet need to be pursued further (UNESCO, 2019; World Heritage Committee, 2019).

Crops, Livestock Farming / Grazing
(Past agriculture and ranching)

Past agriculture and ranching have affected some of the lowlands near the Atrato River. The pastures, fields and orchards were abandoned at the time of the creation of the national park and have since been overgrown by native vegetation (IUCN, 2015). Small-scale plots of illicit crops are known to occur within the property and broader region. While the management response is mostly effective, such illicit cultivation is a reminder of the volatility of the security situation. The still visible impacts of past agriculture and ranching were part of the reason of designating the national park in the first place in the early 1970s. Rather than constituting a threat, the establishment of the national park itself effectively addressed the threat. At this stage there appears to be no major threat from commercial agricultural interests or subsistence agriculture. Illicit crops are a sensitive matter requiring adequate attention. The scale of cultivation at this stage does not amount to a major threat at this stage though (State Party of Colombia, 2018).

Potential Threats

Proposed large infrastructure projects, namely the possible completion of the “Panamericana” road and power transmission corridor do not pose an acute threat to the property at this point in time according to publicly disclosed documents. A direct footprint of any major infrastructure project would face serious legal and constitutional obstacles and is thus hard to imagine. However, both a possible re-opening of the debate surrounding the completion of the Panamerican Highway through the Darien Gap and the possible implementation of the power transmission project - or any other major infrastructure project near the property - would come with impacts and risks. Adequate environmental and social assessment would be required in line with national requirements and the full understanding of the possible World Heritage implications would be needed in line with the State Party commitment to the Convention. Despite the absence of concrete implementation plans, any major infrastructure in the still largely roadless area would change the overall access and land and resource use dynamics and is thus considered to be a high threat requiring careful and detailed scrutiny.

Roads/ Railroads, Utility / Service Lines
(Longstanding concerns about the impacts of major road and energy transmission infrastructure on both sides of the international border.)

One of the particularities of large tracts of the bi-national Darién Gap is the absence of any major human-made infrastructure. On both sides of the international border, there have long been concerns about the anticipated impacts of the eventual connection of the Panamerican Highway through the Darién Gap. The Darién is the only missing link on the so-called "Panamericana" between Alaska and Tierra del Fuego. The possible bridging of the gap has been controversial and sensitive at all times for a wide range of reasons, including but not limited to nature conservation. The perspectives and priorities of the two involved governments do not necessarily coincide. From a technical perspective, a route crossing both the property and its sister park Darién National Park, likewise a World Heritage property, is conceivable. Constitutionally and legally, however, the construction through the property appears unthinkable and no recent political appetite for possible alternative routes has been made public. If ever constructed, the highway would in all likelihood avoid any part of the Colombian property and the discussion would thus center around indirect impacts.

A proposed electrical utilities corridor faces similar complexity. If constructed, the corridor
“Interconexion Electrica”) would link Colombia to the Central American energy market. Bottlenecks include pending binational agreement on the implementation, indigenous opposition in Panama and environmental concerns. The project would inevitably trigger Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) and consultation requirements in both involved countries (IUCN, 2015). Comparable to the above road project, a direct footprint inside the property does not appear to be legally possible. Indirect impacts require careful assessment and consultations, including the involvement of the conservation authorities at all governmental levels. However, no active administrative processes are underway to develop the proposed electricity transmission corridor (State Party of Colombia, 2018; UNESCO, 2019), and therefore this remains a potential threat only.

Overall assessment of threats

As illustrated by the removal of the site from the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2015, the management authority has systematically and effectively been addressing complex challenges in direct cooperation with law enforcement actors, institutions at all governmental levels, NGOs, indigenous peoples and mestizo and Afro-Colombian communities. This achievement deserves major credit. At the same time, the overall situation continues to be vulnerable and continued effort will be needed to prevent the security situation from deteriorating again. Illegal and uncontrolled resource use is being addressed but the management response remains to be consolidated. The possible large infrastructure projects are not posing an acute threat and in all likelihood will not directly affect the land within the property boundaries. Nevertheless, the interest to bridge “missing link” of the Panamerican Highway through the Darien Gap is here to stay and so is the interest in the power transmission corridor. It is for these reasons that the overall future is still considered to be uncertain despite remarkable and successful conservation efforts and the absence of acutely tangible threats from infrastructure projects.

Protection and management

Assessing Protection and Management

Management system

The Colombian national protected areas agency is the land manager, represented by the local unit in charge of the property. There is coordination within the national protected area system SINAP, including the regional unit to which the property belongs. The management system encompasses elements of local participation, as well as important and increasing efforts to cooperate with institutions and sectors in charge of or otherwise shaping land and resource use in the broader landscape. A comprehensive 5-year management plan is being implemented. Inside the property, zonation is used as a major management instrument. Controlled resource use is in principle possible as long as it is compatible with conservation objectives (IUCN, 2015; State Party of Colombia, 2016). Even though the area was originally nominated as an extension to the previously inscribed Darién National Park in nearby Panama, the site is formally not inscribed as a transboundary property. There are modest recent efforts to increase the conservation dialogue between the two countries as regards the two contiguous national parks and properties, which are intricately linked ecologically, ethnically and culturally. During the last three years, there has been no direct communication between the management of both properties (IUCN Consultation, 2020).

Effectiveness of management system

Management effectiveness has been severely constrained in the past by longstanding armed conflict deeply affecting the region, but also limited resourcing. However, recent improvement of the security situation and increasing investment has produced tangible results in terms of management effectiveness. As such, the management system is transitioning from reactive emergency measures to a much more structured and systematic approach to law enforcement and community involvement. Given
that all overarching threats and challenges stem from outside the property, the coordination and cooperation with stakeholders and rights-holders at various levels outside the property is a decisive factor in the management effectiveness equation. While much remains to be done, such coordination and cooperation is steadily improving (IUCN, 2015, State Party of Colombia, 2016; 2018). Agreements with local resource users are encouraging to this end, however, issues relating to illegal activities including logging, overfishing and harvesting in rivers and wetlands remain which cannot be fully controlled by the Park’s management and negotiations with communities and stakeholders in resource use surrounding the site should be pursued further (UNESCO, 2019; World heritage Committee, 2019). Potential reducing budget may increase these threats (IUCN Consultation, 2020).

**Boundaries**

Los Katios National Park is relatively small in size, certainly when compared to the vast Darién National Park to the west. The designation of the national park was partially related to the objective to maintain a natural barrier to livestock diseases (IUCN, 2011). Therefore, the configuration of the park partially focused on areas targeted by agricultural and ranching interest in the lower elevations. Thereby the adjacent and ecologically distinct higher elevations along the international border were not included. There are credible hints at intact areas of high conservation value nearby, for example in the Serranía de Darién (IUCN, 2015). Some concern also remains regarding the identification of a formal buffer zone. Whilst existing cooperation measures with surrounding protected areas and local communities amount to a de facto functional buffer zone, a formal delineation of buffer zone boundaries remains to be completed, as requested of the State Party by the Committee (UNESCO, 2019; World Heritage Committee, 2019).

**Integration into regional and national planning systems**

Los Katios is within the Pacific Subsystem within Colombia’s National Protected Areas System (SINAP). 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 and local governments, including but not limited to environmental authorities, are required to work towards a landscape approach, which considers conservation and connectivity across sectors, land use and institutions. In terms of coordination with the adjacent land users and managers, the main entry point for the protected area authority (UAESPNN) are the so-called Regional Autonomous Corporations (CAR) and Corporations for Sustainable Development (IUCN, 2015; IUCN, 2011).

Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) have been carried out for the two planned port projects (Pisisí and Antioquia), and indicate no direct impacts of the projects to the conservation of the site’s values (State Party of Colombia, 2018). Further efforts should be pursued to ensure that any potential indirect impacts on the site are fully considered during their future planning and implementation, particularly of the Antioquia port, “including those caused by disturbance to other important ecological areas and the connectivity of the property” (World Heritage Committee, 2019).

The 2016 MoU signed between the States Parties of Colombia and Panama to strengthen cooperation and connectivity with the contiguous Darien National Park World Heritage site in Panama is undoubtedly beneficial to the regional planning with regard to the site's conservation. However, it is not currently considered a priority of the State Party to incorporate other adjacent areas within Colombia into the Los Katios National Park, such as the Serranía del Darién National Protection Forest Reserve (State Party of Colombia, 2018; UNESCO, 2019). This may be of some concern in the absence of a formal buffer zone despite laudable efforts to foster sustainable use of natural resources and improved ecological connectivity (World Heritage Committee, 2019).

**Relationships with local people**

Decades of insecurity and violence continue to taint the relationship between governmental actors and local and indigenous communities despite encouraging signs of trust-building. After extended 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. As is common in remote rural
settings where resource-dependent communities live in the vicinity of or inside of protected areas, there are conflicts regarding the use of natural resources; the well-documented over-fishing of the freshwater systems in the lowlands being one major example. The management authorities, however, have been moving from confrontational law enforcement to working with communities to jointly assess and identify solutions. The undoubtedly most remarkable improvement in relationships is the indigenous Wounaan. While the Wounaan were historically expelled from the national park, they are today cooperating with the conservation authorities to facilitate the return to their 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 so as to balance indigenous needs and conservation objectives (State Party of Colombia, 2016; UNESCO, 2011). Agreements with both Indigenous and Afrocolombian authorities have been confirmed for the implementation of the already signed Special Management Regimes (REM) with the Wounaan community of Juin Phubuur and Use and Management Agreements (AUM) (State Party of Colombia, 2018), serving as tangible examples of the progress gained in this regard. The State Party have been encouraged to build on these relationships further and to consolidate upon them, as well as document them to be shared as examples of best practice in the future (UNESCO, 2019).

Legal framework

The property is state-owned and has strong and adequate legal protection. The Colombian Constitution grants an exceptionally strong level of protection to federal protected areas, which are referred to as "inalienable, imprescriptible, and unseizable goods" (República de Colombia, 1991). Fully acknowledging Colombia’s ethnic and cultural diversity of local communities, the Constitution also stipulates strong protection for communal lands, as well as guidance for sustainable natural resource management. Colombia has several layers of environmental and land use planning legislation and policies, which are highly relevant at the landscape level. More specifically, there is a comprehensive legal and policy framework for protected areas. This framework is adequate but much remains to be done in terms of implementation. Progress has also been made in recent years towards the legal recognition of agreements between rights-holders, most notably through Use and Management Agreements and the Special Management Regime with the Wounaan community of Juin Phubuur to promote shared management and governance with indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombian communities, and these should be further consolidated and documented to be shared as examples of best practice in the future (UNESCO, 2019).

Law enforcement

Law enforcement temporarily broke down due to security challenges contributing to the inscription of the property on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2009 upon request by the State Party. The situation could since be substantially improved permitting basic management operations, which in turn contributed to the removal of the property from the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2015. It is clear that the ongoing peace process is a long-term commitment and challenge and that security issues may well resurface in the future. Park management cooperates with a range of governmental law enforcement actors (IUCN, 2015).

Implementation of Committee decisions and recommendations

Overall the State Party is mostly effective in implementing and responding to World Heritage Committee decisions. In terms of the inscription on and subsequent removal from the List of World Heritage in Danger, the State Party has followed up on corresponding Committee decisions and recommendations in exemplary fashion, with encouragement for further consolidation, namely by through additional resource allocation and further investment in the promising partnership approach (World Heritage Committee, 2015; 2017; 2019).

In the most recent 2019 decision, the State Party was highly commended for "continuing to systematically respond to the Committee’s requests and recommendations, particularly with regard to enhanced resources, improved governance and effective partnerships with local communities, fostering sustainable use of natural resources and improved ecological connectivity" (World Heritage Committee, 2019). However, a number of issues remain, and the site is currently subject to a number of requests
made by the Committee. Although encouraged to assess the feasibility of extending the national park so as to include the Serranía del Darien National Protection Forest Reserve (Colombia) and potentially other areas (World heritage Committee, 2017), it was not found to be a priority by the State Party (State Party of Colombia, 2018). As such, the Committee has encouraged the State Party to “continue exploring alternative options to reflect the evolving regional protected area network in the framework of the World Heritage Convention, where appropriate, for example through defining a formal buffer zone” (World Heritage Committee, 2019). Consolidating and integrating the conservation of the site into landscape planning and participatory resource management inside the park also remains the subject of requests from the Committee. The State Party have been encouraged to address the impacts and risks posed by the artificial connection between the Leon and Atrato Rivers, while respecting the socio-economic importance of the canal (World Heritage Committee, 2017), as well as reporting on the outcomes of EIAs related to two port development projects and provide updates on a proposed electricity transmission corridor between Colombia and Panama (World Heritage Committee, 2019). The State Party has responded to all these but corresponding activities remain to be fully concluded.

At a level beyond conservation management, the Committee, on the occasion of the inscription decision in 1994, recommended that the States Parties of Colombia and Panama “consider the inscription of the transfrontier site as a single entry on the List” (Decision CONF 003 XI). The recommendation remains valid to this day. In 2016, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Panamá and Colombia, and Decision 43 COM 7B.23 repeats its encouragement towards both States Parties to continue efforts to implement actions in the management of the two contiguous properties of Los Katíos National Park (Colombia) and Darien National Park (Panama) (World Heritage Committee, 2019).

▶ Sustainable use

The main examples of sustainable use are freshwater fisheries in the lowlands and the localized re-establishment of an indigenous settlement. In the case of fisheries, the management efforts are a response to unsustainable resource management and can thus be described as an attempt to move towards sustainable use. The situation in the Wounaan community differs in that the return of the indigenous peoples marks a new beginning in the history of the park. The agreements with local resource users are promising instruments to address overfishing and overharvesting of rivers and wetlands and need to be pursued further. The same holds true for the Special Management Regime with the Wounaan community of Juin Phubuur. These efforts need to continue to be consolidated and documented. Therefore, it continues to be of some concern (State Party of Colombia, 2018; UNESCO, 2019)

▶ Sustainable finance

Governmental core funding for Los Katíos National Park could be significantly increased, with external support from non-governmental, bi-lateral and multi-lateral sources historically supplementing funds to meet the capacity requirements for the management of the site (eg. WWF-Colombia/ Instituto de Investigacion de Recursos Biologicos Alexander von Humboldt, 2003; WWF Colombia, 2008; CEPF, 2005). While there is currently no drastic under-funding and the total budget for the management of the site doubled in the period between 2016 and 2018 (State Party of Colombia, 2018), it is clear that reliable funding will be required to respond to the ongoing challenges.

▶ Staff capacity, training, and development

Staff are highly dedicated and qualified (IUCN, 2015). As long as funding enables adequate staffing levels, the required management capacity can be secured. Until 2020, staff levels has remained constant, however a reported budget cut in 2019 and a likely larger budget cut in 2020 (in the context of COVID-19 pandemic) may lead to a reduction of staff capacity (IUCN Consultation, 2020).

▶ Education and interpretation programs

Both the State Party and NGOs engage in environmental education, including as regards the indigenous Wounaan and neighboring communities (State Party of Colombia, 2011; 2016). An environmental atlas of the park is a great example of effective environmental communication (WWF, 2012).
projects (funded by GEF BioCaribe, EU and KfW) provide support to conservation and community development in the area, including communication and education programs (IUCN Consultation, 2020).

**Tourism and visitation management**

The remoteness, comparatively difficult and costly access and decades of security concerns continue to impose limits to the realization of the tourism potential despite the indisputable attractiveness of the property (WDPA, 2011). While at the time of writing, Los Katios is still closed to the public (UAESPNN, 2020) according to State Party (2019), a plan is under development to restore visitor facilities and promote nature-based tourism on relatively short term (“Ecotourism Corridor of Ciénagas” sponsored by the BIOCARIBE Connection Project – GEF and implemented by FAO).

**Monitoring**

Active monitoring is planned and underway for several vertebrate species, freshwater ecosystems and fisheries (State Party of Colombia, 2016). The main challenges requiring sustained long-term effort and investment are the participatory monitoring of the freshwater fisheries in the lowlands and the resource of the Wounaan.

**Research**

The return of the indigenous Wounaan community is based on anthropological studies confirming the location of their ancestral lands, in fact an indispensable legal requirement underpinning the very option of their return. Another example of recent and ongoing scientific investigation are assessments and monitoring of freshwater fisheries in the lowland swamps linked to the Atrato River system. Other than that, the remoteness combined with decades of insecurity have limited research in the national park and its surroundings. Very little is known about the higher elevations of the Darién Range (Serrania del Darién), which undoubtedly harbors an important biological and ecological wealth. The enhanced security situation comes with an opportunity to better understand the conservation values and status of the Colombian side of the border area.

**Overall assessment of protection and management**

The formal protection status is fully adequate and the enhanced security situation permits the dedicated protected area agency to engage in overall effective and increasingly participatory management. Law enforcement could likewise be restored to acceptable levels. Despite a clear positive trend challenges remain in terms of the relationship with indigenous and local communities, whose trust is understandably limited after decades of governmental absence and hardship. Illegal and unsustainable use of natural resources is not fully under control but does currently not constitute a fundamental threat to the property. Adequate and reliable funding and staffing and a partnership approach working with the full range of stakeholders and rights-holders are permanent requirements to ensure effective management.

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

Besides localized illegal activities and excessive subsistence use most threats to the property originate in the surroundings. Management acknowledges this by putting considerable and increasing effort on addressing natural resource management of communities there. At the same time, the mandate and capacity of the protected area agency routinely reaches its limits, e.g. when it comes to upstream contamination and excessive river fisheries affecting the Atrato River or broader deforestation trends in the Colombian Chocó.

**Best practice examples**

Los Katios National Park deserves to be noted for two best practice examples, which will hopefully inspire similar action or at least debate elsewhere. First, in an exemplary step the State Party proactively embraced and indeed requested the inscription of the property on the List of World
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Heritage in Danger, which was endorsed by the World Heritage Committee in 2009. The explicitly desired Committee decision gave rise to and provided the framework for a systematic response to the very real challenges facing the property. By doing so the State Party actively drew attention to the need to step up management. Over several years of coherent efforts, the State Party has since achieved significant progress permitting the removal from the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2015. Los Katios National Park therefore became example of the best possible use of the List of World Heritage in Danger as an instrument to acknowledge and address threats to globally important heritage. Second, Los Katios is the location of an unfolding reconciliation effort following the past eviction of indigenous inhabitants when the national park was established in the 1970s. The indigenous Wounaan, having provided evidence of their ancestral links to what is today the national park, have used their constitutional right to live in their traditional homelands (República de Colombia, 1974; 1997; 1991; 2010). The negotiation of rights and duties and is an enormously important practical example, which can inform one of the most decisive conservation debates, which is the balance between conservation and local resource use.

State and trend of values

Assessing the current state and trend of values

World Heritage values

► Rich diversity of ecosystems, habitats and species in an exceptional biogeographic location

The dense Terra Firme forest, dense flooded forests and grasslands are stated to be in a desirable state of conservation (State Party of Colombia, 2018), which is encouraging. However, given the ongoing challenges to the conservation of this value, including the need to “improve management schemes associated to prevention, surveillance and control, as well as the strategies of spatial management” (UNESCO, 2019), concern remains high.

► High diversity of endemic and threatened species of flora and fauna

Los Katios National Park is relatively small, albeit connected with the much larger Darién National Park in nearby Panama. Despite impacts of past farming and illegal logging and other inadequate resource use, the dense Terra Firme forest, dense flooded forests and grasslands which support these species are in a desirable state of conservation (State Party of Colombia, 2018; UNESCO, 2019). Nevertheless, concerns remain high due to ongoing challenges and vulnerabilities of the site, as noted in this assessment above.

Summary of the Values

► Assessment of the current state and trend of World Heritage values

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. A coherent and decisive management response enabled the removal of the site from the List of World Heritage in Danger and the ecosystems, habitats and species which constitute the Outstanding Universal Value of the site are now reported to be in a desirable state of conservation (State party of Colombia, 2018). Besides this encouraging improvement the site benefits from being contiguous with the much larger Darién National Park in Panama. Nevertheless, the relatively small World Heritage site remains vulnerable to a number of threats, and there remain management issues to
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be resolved until the values can be considered of low concern.

Assessment of the current state and trend of other important biodiversity values

For the freshwater biodiversity values, overall, there is a paucity of data as information is available for selected areas and species only according to the importance for local livelihoods. It is thus somewhat simplistic to suggest an overall "high concern" when many of the less accessible streams and wetlands are likely to be quite intact. Nevertheless the universally acknowledged and major decline of the main fish species targeted by local communities suggests major concerns and there is no indication that the trend could be reversed despite an unfolding management response. This massive decline of important freshwater fish stocks is therefore problematic from both a conservation and a livelihood perspective to the point of a food security concern. Regarding the overlap of high biological and cultural diversity, the overlap as such is widely acknowledged. In addition to the original indigenous inhabitants, the ethnic and cultural diversity today includes Afro-Colombian and Mestizo communities. Violent conflict has disrupted much of the social fabric and the current situation can be described as a fragile and sensitive recovery. This gives hope that the consolidation of both peace and nature conservation may enhance the options to maintain the exceptional cultural and biological diversity of the Chocó and neighbouring areas of Panama. The Wounaan community returning to the national park epitomizes this hope. It is also encouraging that conservation increasingly works with indigenous peoples and other local communities of the Chocó. This could result in a recovery of the remarkable coincidence of cultural and biological diversity in the Darién Gap. As for landscape beauty, at this point in time there are no indications of tangible threats resulting in a major deterioration of the scenic beauty of the World Heritage site in the foreseeable future.

Additional information

Benefits

Understanding Benefits

Legal subsistence hunting of wild game,
Collection of wild plants and mushrooms,
Fishing areas and conservation of fish stocks

Freshwater fish is of major importance in the diet and food security of local communities and thus of major local socio-economic importance. The harvesting of wild biodiversity is an integral part of local and indigenous livelihoods as it is in all resource-dependent communities in rural areas. The indigenous Wounaan in the World Heritage site deserve to be mentioned as rights-holders in this regard.

Factors negatively affecting provision of this benefit:
- Pollution: Impact level - Moderate, Trend - Continuing
- Overexploitation: Impact level - High, Trend - Increasing

Water pollution is a concern on the Atrato River, while over-exploitation of fish and shellfish is well documented in the freshwater systems of the lowlands.

History and tradition,
Sacred natural sites or landscapes,
Sacred or symbolic plants or animals,
Cultural identity and sense of belonging

While it is still premature to comment on the complex process of re-settling of the indigenous Wounaan community in the Cacarica River areas, it cannot be overemphasized that the legal and policy framework in place explicitly 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. This is arguably the most striking example of the World Heritage site...
directly serving as an instrument to recover cultural and spiritual attachment to the land.

▶ Outdoor recreation and tourism

Los Katíos National Park may well develop into an attractive future destination for tourism and recreation. At this stage, access and security impede the realization of the potential which understandably is not a management priority at this stage.

▶ Importance for research

The entire Darién Gap is of major biological, ecological, biogeographic and anthropological research interest. Both Los Katíos National Park and Darién National Park are among the most intact areas and thus particularly suitable research areas. As the security improves, it will become easier to realize this potential.

▶ Carbon sequestration,
Soil stabilisation,
Coastal protection,
Flood prevention

As any montane forest, the forested parts of the site contribute to all of the above environmental services.

▶ Collection of timber, e.g. fuelwood,
Sustainable extraction of materials (e.g. coral, shells,
resin, rubber, grass, rattan, etc)

The small number of indigenous inhabitants uses a range of timber and non-timber forest products.

Summary of benefits

Beyond the obvious conservation benefits of a protected area located in a very particular biogeographic setting which is known to harbour an exceptionally rich and rare flora and fauna, the barrier effect with respect to movement of disease and alien invasive species between the Americas is a major benefit of the World Heritage site and its sister site across the border, Darién National Park. As most protected areas in rural settings with resource-dependent communities, the site also contributes to local livelihoods, economies, health, energy and food security. While such use tended to be a grey area at best or was explicitly illegal in the past, changes in the Colombian Constitution and the legal and policy framework have resulted in the re-thinking of local rights and resource use. The most dramatic example being the return of the indigenous Wounaan to their ancestral lands in a national park from which they were evicted in the 1970s. It can be argued that this creates an unprecedented opportunity to link social reconciliation with conservation in Los Katíos.

Projects

Compilation of active conservation projects

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<th>Organization</th>
<th>Brief description of Active Projects</th>
<th>Website</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>National Parks Colombia (UAESPNN), supported by WWF and USAID</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>National Parks Colombia (Unidad Administrativa Especial del Sistema de Parques Nacionales Naturales - UAESPNN), see <a href="http://www.parquesnacionales.gov.co/">www.parquesnacionales.gov.co/</a> and <a href="http://www.parquesnacionales.gov.co/portal/es/pa">www.parquesnacionales.gov.co/portal/es/pa</a> rques-nacionales/parque-nacional-natural-los-katios/.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>National Parks Colombia (UAESPNN) supported by World Heritage Fund</td>
<td>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).</td>
<td>National Parks Colombia (UAESPNN)</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>National Parks Colombia (UAESPNN) in cooperation with Tumarado Community Council, WWF Colombia and various research institutions</td>
<td>Assessment, monitoring and management of freshwater fisheries - including shellfish - as a basis for participatory management.</td>
<td>National Parks Colombia (UAESPNN)</td>
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### REFERENCES

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<td>8</td>
<td>República de Colombia (2010). Decreto 2372. Por el cual se reglamenta el Decreto Ley 2811 de 1974, la Ley 99 de 1993, la Ley 165 de 1994 y el Decreto Ley 216 de 2003, en relación con el Sistema Nacional de Áreas Protegidas, las categorías de manejo que lo conforman y se dictan otras disposiciones. Ministerio de Ambiente, Vivienda y Desarrollo Territorial.</td>
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