

A wedding and a Swedish philanthropist protect Paraguayan forest

Title

What do a wedding, a Swedish philanthropist, the conservation of the Atlantic Rainforest and a Paraguayan indigenous community have in common? The answer lies in the creation of a pioneering nature reserve in Paraguay. This land purchase and protection initiative is considered a new conservation strategy and a possible model for conservation in other Latin American countries.

Indeed, an indigenous community and an NGO have recently jointly purchased a piece of land which both parties were committed to conserving. Funds for the purchase were provided by a number of donors, including a Swedish citizen, a young traveller who cycled from Paraguay to the United States, and a couple who, as their wedding present, asked for money to go towards land purchase for conservation.

Since this land purchase, a similar innovative model has been used in Argentina. It is also being used to undertake another purchase which is currently being negotiated in Paraguay. Furthermore, the model has been presented and discussed as a showcase in various international meetings in a number of countries. Aside from the second similar land purchase recently completed in Argentina "there is currently no other case of joint social and environmental ownership of a natural area in Latin America", explained biologist Alberto Yanosky to BBC Mundo.

Alberto Yanosky is the director of Guyra Paraguay, the conservation NGO involved in the joint ownership of the purchased property. **Joint ownership** "Ownership of the land had been claimed by the Mbya Guaraní people for years. They called the land Tekohá Guasú ("Great Home Territory"), but it remained privately-owned property", explained Alberto Yanosky. The Swedish citizen Hans Swegen provided the majority of the funds used for the land purchase. "The purchase initiative stemmed from a request voiced by two Cacique brothers who wanted to work with us. They, like us, wanted to protect the forest."

One of the most moving moments for Alberto Yanosky was when Eusebio Chaparro, one of the two Caciques, signed the land title document using his fingerprint.

The purchased site is situated in Southern Paraguay in one of the few Atlantic Rainforest fragments remaining in the country, and covers 274 hectares. Two members of the Mbya

community have now become park rangers on the property. Meanwhile, Guyra Paraguay and another local NGO, Promotores Ambientales de San Rafael, continue to work permanently at the site, in collaboration with the local community led by Eusebio Chaparro.

The signed agreement states that in 10 years' time, Guyra Paraguay will donate its indivisible 50% of the property to the indigenous community, on the condition that forest conservation is ensured and that sufficient capacity has been built for this purpose amongst the local community. Guyra Paraguay also maintains the right to supervise the property to ensure that the forest is adequately conserved, and to protect it from any potential threat.

Innovative donors The Atlantic Rainforest extends over large areas of Brazil, Argentina and Southern Paraguay. Today, only 7% of the original forested area remains, and it is home to a large number of endemic species (species only found in this fragment) "BirdLife International helped us find an interested donor, Hans Swegen, a Swedish citizen who lives in England and who has even come out to visit the property ", Yanosky explained. "We then obtained the remaining necessary funds from Samuel Hagler, who cycled from Paraguay to the US, raising funds using a land purchase and protection message (*Ride for the Trees*)". The rest of the funding was donated by Peter Hansen and Diana Días de Espada, "who collected donations for Guyra Paraguay as their wedding present, in order to contribute towards land purchase for conservation. All donors are duly recognised in the land title document."

The same innovative land purchase model has since been used in nearby Misiones Province, Argentina in order to purchase a property jointly with Mbya Guarani communities (relatives of the Paraguay Mbya Guarani communities) who live there. This property is situated in the Yaboti Biosphere Reserve, near the Mocona falls and was purchased by a local Argentinian NGO, with support from international conservation NGO, World Land Trust. "We are currently in the process of acquiring a new property, based on a similar agreement, with assistance from BirdLife International and funding from the Jensen Foundation"

Guyra Paraguay has already purchased a number of properties for conservation purposes. However, Yanosky believes that this model for land purchase involving joint ownership with indigenous communities using international funding can be a very useful model for a number of other countries. "We have taken part in discussions in Canada, Cameroon, Vietnam, the Philippines and London. During these meetings, the model has been debated and discussed as an option that will ensure conservation of natural resources whilst ensuring recognition of indigenous people's rights and return of the land to these ancestral communities ". This article was original published in [Spanish on BBC Mundo](#)