

# Costa Rica

## Wildlife Sanctuary of the Americas

By Margaret Peace

**D**EVELOPED NATIONS frequently quote the "Southern" countries of Latin America as extreme examples of environmental abuse, especially through deforestation. But a closer look at Costa Rica reveals a country making valiant conservation efforts which deserve international recognition.

When the Spanish arrived in Costa Rica in the 16th century they found the country almost entirely forest covered. Indian methods of agriculture, with no livestock, had made minimal destructive impact on the landscape for centuries. Spanish settlers, with far less respect for nature than the indigenous people, soon began large scale land clearance for cropping but the population remained fewer than 50,000 until the 19th century when coffee was established as an export crop. Since then the population has expanded to two and a half million with consequent increased demand for cropping and grazing land, as well as sacrifice of forests for timber exports. A figure quoted in 1981 was 60,000 ha being cleared per annum in a country with a total area of only 5.2 million ha (a third the size of our South Island).

### Costa Rica Different

However, Costa Rica is different from all other Latin American countries in several respects. It has never been plagued by extremes of wealth and poverty and is immensely proud of its 40-year record of stable democratic government with no expenditure on any military

