



forces, and strong emphasis on the housing, health and education of its people. This background has favoured the development of a conservation ethic singularly lacking in other parts of Central America.

The concept of National Parks, first considered in the 1940s, became a reality in 1974 when several parks were established. Since then a succession of presidents have favoured conservation and ensured government funding which has enabled the setting aside of 29 national parks and wildlife reserves which now comprise 525,000 ha, or 10.3 percent of the country's total area.

Because of its varied topography and geographical position, Costa Rica has a remarkably rich and diverse flora and fauna condensed in a small area. The number of species already identified (by no means exhaustive) include 208 mammals, 850 birds, 220 reptiles, 132 amphibians and over 9,000 species of vascular plants. It is claimed that the confirmed existence of most of these is assured by the protection of a wide range of habitat types including tropical rainforest, dry deciduous forest, herbaceous swamps, lagoons and coastlines, coral reefs, bird islands, and mountains up to 3,000m high.

*Iguanas spend much of their time feeding and resting in the tops of trees.* Chris Thomas

### **Dedication and Enthusiasm**

In a recent month-long visit to Costa Rica I stayed in several of the parks and was impressed by the dedication and enthusiasm of park superintendents who were eager to share their knowledge. So far, funding priority has been given to acquiring the reserves and supplying field staff to guard against poaching of wildlife, or burning and timber removal on park boundaries. Facilities for visitors are generally minimal, sometimes non-existent. Tourists are therefore conspicuously absent

except in two or three of the coastal parks.

Santa Rosa National Park in the extreme northwest represents the only remaining sizeable area of tropical dry forest, a habitat type once continuous along the entire Pacific coast from northern Mexico to Panama, but mostly long since converted to cattle and cotton production. Of several hundred tree species in the dry forest, half of them are deciduous during the drought conditions which prevail for six months of the year. Nevertheless there is an abundance of fauna, including



*A familiar toad of the Costa Rican lowlands.* Photo: Chris Thomas