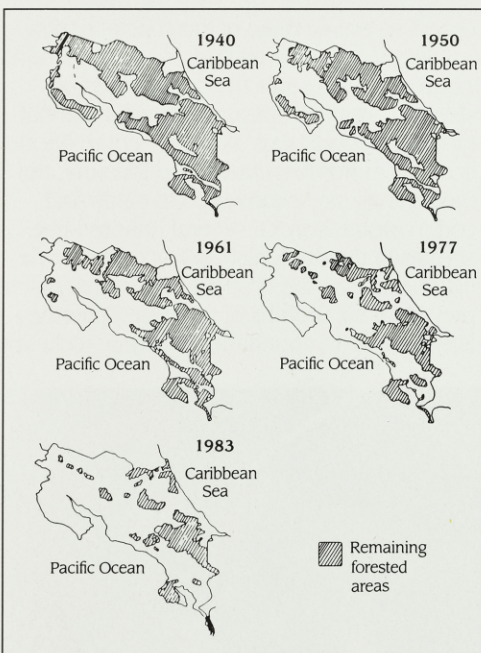


A *Passiflora vitifolia* vine flower photographed in Corcorada National Park. It is pollinated by the hummingbird. Photo: Chris Thomas

Monte Verde reserve, host to a rich assortment of wildlife, including the Quetzal. Photo: Margaret Peace



The shrinkage in distribution of closed canopy forest in Costa Rica from 1940 to the present. Only the volcano slopes within the area of Guanacaste National Park (northwestern Costa Rica) contained enough pristine forest to be recorded in this map in 1983 (Rodas 1985). Note that the relative rate and thoroughness of forest removal has been substantially greater in the dry western habitats than in the mountainous rainforest habitats.

gorgeously coloured birds and insects, monkeys, coatimundis, anteaters and deer. There is an ongoing project to reafforest areas previously burned by planting hundreds of thousands of tree seedlings every year. The adjacent beach protects the largest arribadas of Olive Ridley turtles in all of tropical America.

Manuel Antonio National Park contains virgin coastal rainforest, home to brilliant macaw parrots and several species of humming birds, two-toed sloths and the beautiful endangered squirrel monkey. The adjacent coastline and off-shore islands are also protected nesting sites for brown pelicans, frigate birds and boobies.

Monte Verde reserve, which spans the Continental Divide, has been largely funded by North American conservation organisations and is administered by the Tropical Science Centre. It contains well-maintained tracks, an information centre and accommodation facilities for large groups of students. Important among the wealth of wildlife are the amazing golden toad, which is endemic to the reserve, and the magnificent Quetzal which has been described as the most beautiful bird in the world. A sacred bird to the Aztec and Mayan Indians, its gorgeous metre-long tail feathers were carefully plucked to adorn kings and priests, and were treasured more than gold. Formerly distributed throughout Central America, the Quetzal is now very rare outside Costa Rica (though it continues to be the national symbol and coinage of Guatemala).

Probably the most developed of the national parks is Poas, centred on a huge active volcano, which can be reached by road. There is a large, well-appointed visitor centre with excellent educational displays.

Some of the less accessible reserves do not encourage visitors other than bona fide scientific researchers. It is important to note that Costa Rica claims 93 percent literacy in its population and nature conservation is a subject specifically included in the science programmes of all secondary schools (where attendance is free and compulsory). There is considerable public awareness about environmental problems and a demand for information from the National Parks Service. The National Open University is developing an extensive programme of education, research and field studies in nature conservation.

### Natural Laboratories

In the words of a past Costa Rican president: "Our National Parks are splendid natural laboratories which we offer to the scientific community – the contribution of the Costa Rican people to peace and goodwill among nations". And in this respect their sincerity has been proved by Costa Rican initiatives in establishing International Friendship Parks spanning the boundaries between their own country and Panama to the south and Nicaragua to the north.