

The New York Times

Americas

October 15, 2010

Costa Rica Gets \$56 Million for Conservation

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Filed at 3:28 p.m. ET

SAN JOSE, Costa Rica (AP) — The Costa Rican government is receiving nearly \$56 million in donations and debt write-offs to expand its forest and marine conservation programs and become the first developing country to meet [U.N.](#) goals on protected areas.

Costa Rica will use the funds to increase its protected tropical forests from 25 percent of its national territory — 1.3 million hectares (3.2 million acres) — to 26 percent, said Zdenka Piskulich, the manager of the trust created with the funds.

The goal is to meet Costa Rica's commitments on environmental protection under the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity by 2015, Piskulich said Friday. If successful, Costa Rica would be the first developing country to fulfill those commitments.

The Central American country, known for its burgeoning eco-tourism industry, also hopes to triple the size of its protected territorial waters. Less than 0.1 percent of Costa Rica's waters are currently protected.

"The convention establishes that every ecosystem should be protected in good measure. Costa Rica is doing well with 25 percent of its land, but it has a great debt when it comes to marine areas," Piskulich said.

Under the plan, the U.S. agreed to buy back \$27 million of Costa Rica's foreign debt, money that will be used instead to invest conservation programs. The U.S. already trimmed \$26 million of Costa Rican debt in 2007 as part of the U.S. Tropical Forest Conservation Act. The debt now stands at \$77 million.

With the aid and write-offs, Costa Rica will work "to turn what has been promise into reality," Environment Minister Teofilo de la Torre said.

Under the act, the U.S. has provided \$135 million in aid to 11 countries since 1998, including Panama, El Salvador, the Philippines and Bangladesh.

"Costa Rica is a global leader in conservation and this agreement today is an important investment to continue the expansion and protection of the incredible biodiversity found in Costa Rican forests," U.S. Ambassador Anne Andrew said.

Costa Rica is receiving another \$19.9 million from private organizations including the Linden Trust for Conservation, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation. Another \$9 million is coming from The [Nature Conservancy](#), an international non-governmental organization.

"In our case, we identified areas in Costa Rica that are worth permanently conserving, and we saw a government and a society committed to their conservation," said Roger Ullman, executive director for the Linden Trust for Conservation.

The sites that will benefit from the initiative, called "Costa Rica Forever," include the Cocos Island National Park, Corcovado National Park and the Golfo Dulce and Pacific areas such as the Barra del Colorado and Gandoca shelter, on the Atlantic coast.

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