



The Changing Land

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A new kind of conservation partnership in Venezuela's Llanos Grasslands protects the country's tropical plains and preserve the cultural heritage of its native peoples.

By Virginia Glass and Nature Conservancy Staff
Photographs by Antonio Briceño

A small group of battered fourwheel-drive Toyota trucks advances across the relentlessly flat prairie in the Venezuelan district of Rómulo Gallegos. Periodically, the vehicles slow to traverse deep ruts carved in the wide dirt road—the main transportation artery into this remote landscape. With the onset of the rainy season, swelling streams have begun to overtake some of the surrounding fields, and ibises wade in the flooded patches.

In a few weeks, most of this vast expanse of grasslands, known as the Llanos, will be under 4 or 5 feet of water as the tropical rains fall faster than the waters of the massive Orinoco Basin can drain. The annual transition of the Llanos from prairie to giant lagoon turns this land upside down, allowing fish, crocodiles and river dolphins to flourish where deer, jaguar and giant anteaters roamed only a few weeks earlier.

“It’s a place of extremes. It takes a special temperament to endure it,” says Nature Conservancy

anthropologist Eduardo Ariza as he wipes the sweat from his forehead. One of the few remaining intact tropical grasslands, it's also a place of rare beauty and rich biodiversity.

Ariza and fellow anthropologist Gabriela Croes are leading this delegation of Conservancy staff and local government officials to the remote outpost of Boca Tronador to meet with the Pumé indigenous group. The visit is part of an innovative effort not just to protect these lands for their ecological importance but to help preserve the cultural heritage of the Llanos as well.

Many indigenous communities in the Llanos traditionally moved in response to seasonal flooding. And this seminomadic history has complicated efforts to determine land rights in the region. "For the Pumé, the land is alive. It belongs to no one," says Croes. "They relate to it as they would with a living person."

But now a new partnership between the Conservancy, the local government and indigenous communities is helping to move things forward by giving the Pumé and other groups in Rómulo Gallegos a greater say in how these lands are managed. It will help protect more than a million acres, says Lila Gil, who directs the Conservancy's work in Venezuela. "This is unique in Venezuela," she says. "We are helping protect this territory from both a cultural and an ecological perspective."

Ariza calls for the trucks to halt where the rutted road ends, and the saddle-sore delegation boards narrow handmade canoes for the remainder of the journey. They float down a tributary of the Orinoco River, eventually arriving at the small Pumé settlement of Boca Tronador.



*Ezequiel
Mujica,
a
member
of the
Pumé*

indigenous community, shows off a small harvest of tobacco leaves. Indigenous groups here have lived seminomadic lifestyles to adapt to the extreme seasonal swings from drought to flood. © Antonio Briceño

When Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez was first elected in 1998, he instituted changes to the country's national constitution to strengthen the rights of indigenous groups. The constitution now mandates indigenous representation at all levels of government, as well as cultural protections and recognition of ancestral lands. But over the past decade, federal land-reform efforts have not gained much traction.

Starting about four years ago, Ariza, Gil and other Conservancy staff began working on an idea to jump-start some of those stalled efforts—this time by collaborating with local governments. The idea received financial support from the European Union, the oil company Total de Venezuela and the United Nations' Global Environment Facility.

Although most land in Venezuela is privately owned, large blocks of territory are publicly controlled for communal use. Elected officials in the municipalities—equivalent to counties in the United States—have broad sway over deciding how these lands can be used and developed.

“We have been working on the local level to get some of the Llanos rezoned as ‘Area de Patrimonio Natural y Cultural,’” says Gil, naming a designation for lands that are managed with natural and cultural conservation in mind.

In the municipality of Rómulo Gallegos—a 4,700-square-mile municipality nearly the size of Connecticut—the Conservancy found an unexpected ally in Leopoldo Estrada, an agricultural engineer who was elected mayor eight years ago. Estrada determined he would try to turn Rómulo Gallegos into Venezuela's first green municipality.

But transforming his vision into reality was another matter. “This municipality had the political will,” says Gil, “but at the technical, scientific and administrative level, Rómulo Gallegos was lacking the expertise the Conservancy could offer.”

Estrada asked the Conservancy to help pull together a zoning plan, required by Venezuelan law, for the entire municipality. The plan would determine which areas might be developed and which should be set aside and protected.

Led by Ariza, the Conservancy's team worked for about 18 months conducting workshops with people across the municipality. The team met with indigenous groups, ranchers, city officials, business groups, scientists and other stakeholders to map activities and document how people were using the land.

From the outset, Estrada emphasized the importance of involving indigenous communities like the Pumé, Cuiba and Capuruchanos. “[They] are crucial actors in this process, and their vision needs to be incorporated into any plan,” he says. “Where we see merely a ‘moriche’ palm tree, they see half of what they need for sustenance.”



Conservancy researchers met with indigenous groups in Rómulo Gallegos to document their use of the land. What emerged was a more complete understanding of the residents within these oft-hidden communities, including families, workers, tradespeople and many others who are preserving traditions of the Llanos, a region known for its music and food. © Antonio Briceño

When they arrive in Boca Tronador, Ariza and his team begin meeting with the Pumé people to learn about their customs and understand how they relate to their lands in the Llanos. That night, they attend a ‘tonhé’ ceremony that is supposed to heal the sick and restore equilibrium to the land. The Pumé sing of a lonesome sand dune, or ‘medano,’ in the middle of prairies that extend endlessly into the horizon, a place where the Pumé hunt armadillos.

The day after the tonhé ceremony, Croes, Gil, Estrada and Ariza meet with village elders and several bilingual members of the village to chart the past and future use of these lands. Toyakö, a young schoolteacher and one of the few Pumé who are literate and bilingual, helps draft maps and a seasonal calendar based on the information shared by the older members of the group.

“This is the time of flooding,” says Toyakö. “The ‘cabrillas’—the small goats—go into hiding, and soon food will be scarce. This is the time we collect palm seeds and caiman for food.” Other areas hold historical and religious significance, including a sacred lagoon where their mother-like deity dwelled and where they once fished. But this area has become a cattle ranch, where the Pumé have no access.

Nothing about this gathering is quick or easy. There are local beliefs that need to be understood and respected. And concerns are raised about the need for economic opportunities in this community. Finally, after hours of careful discussion, Croes and Ariza succeed in helping to pull together maps of the territory based on the input of several Boca Tronador elders. But as willing as they might be to share parts of their culture, some indigenous knowledge is simply off-limits. “What is sacred cannot be told,” says Alicia, a

Pumé woman who has served as translator.

Still, the maps will inform efforts to protect parts of this region. And the mapping project also has helped encourage a new generation of Pumé to search for their history. “We want to move forward, but without forgetting who we are,” says Toyakö.



*Musician
Luís
Felipe
Villerma
is
pictured
on*

Venezuela's llanos grasslands--a region known for its music and its food. © Antonio Briceño

When the Conservancy team returns from Boca Tronador, the research and maps facilitated by Ariza and Croes are merged with data from the past 18 months of meetings and workshops throughout Rómulo Gallegos. Together, they identify the areas that local land users want to protect—as well as areas where ranching and other types of economic development are the priority.

With the data in hand, the team works with Mayor Estrada, land users and the municipality’s legislative chamber to facilitate a zoning plan for future use of the lands.

In December, Estrada signs an agreement to designate more than 40 percent of the municipality—an area totaling more than 1.2 million acres—as ecological and cultural conservation zones.

“This is very different from the way things are normally done in Venezuela and many other countries,

where the central government usually decides where a cattle-ranching or agribusiness project will go. It is often a top-down approach,” says Gil. “We changed that here—with cultural diversity and ecological values being integrated in a fully participatory process.” Ultimately the zoning designations were the result of community input and had to be agreed on by land users, businesses, the government and other stakeholders. And future investments in this new zone must take natural and cultural conservation into consideration.

In addition to protecting sensitive habitats, the agreement has created a new way for indigenous groups to work with the government. Even though many locals do not own the community lands they inhabit, they now have a strong voice in how that land is used.

The zoning agreement has broken new political ground in Rómulo Gallegos, and the effects may be felt elsewhere in the Llanos. The land office in the Venezuelan Ministry of Environment asked the Conservancy to help systematize the methods used in Rómulo Gallegos for possible replication elsewhere in the country. This project may set the basis for future land discussions around the country.

“Throughout this process, we established a way for all the groups involved to understand and recognize the cultural and ecological effects of land use that were invisible before,” says Gil. “For the first time, these indigenous groups’ territorial aspirations are being heard.”

Once again, seasons change in this part of the Llanos.



*Luisa in
Raicero*

wears traditional local jewelry. © Antonio Briceño

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