
Panama: Highway project threatens major biodiversity zone

By Cabinet decree 123 of 4 December 2002, the government of Panama decided to "excuse the Ministry of Public Works (MPW) from the requisite of selecting contractors and authorise it to hire CUSA (Constructora Urbana S.A) directly for the design, funding and construction of the ecological highway Boquete-Cerro Punta." This is the construction of a highway through Paso del Respingo which would cross the National Baru Volcano and La Amistad International Parks, violating the protected status of the zone. The highway is to be located along the route of the Quetzals' Trail and, according to the company, will cost 7.5 million dollars. The justification for direct hiring is the urgency of making the most of the dry season.

The project has a history already. Based on personal interests, this started in 1980-81, but did not prosper. In 1991, the then Minister of Public Works ordered a 1 km track to be opened up with a bulldozer in the National Park itself, from Respingo along the Quetzals Trail. The Governor intervened and managed to halt the measure. The executive submitted a bill to the Legislative Assembly, declaring that the construction of such a highway "was of public interest." A further attempt was made in 1992, promoted by the private interest of a series of relevant government figures, owners of properties that would see their value greatly increased by the building of the highway.

In spite of the fact that the School of Professional Geographers made a study of the proposed route, indicating that it was not advisable due to the slopes and the geology of the site, the proposal was insisted on, with no public debate, nor transparency in the handling of information, and no objective environmental impact assessment. Throughout these years, alternative routes have been submitted, recommending the construction of a highway along Cuesta de Piedras, on the southern side of the Baru Volcano, which would be of benefit to a series of isolated communities.

The damage caused by the opening up of highways in these extremely fragile sites is disastrous, due to compacting, the drop in infiltration and marked increase in surface runoff, causing changes in the water regime resulting in the danger of flooding in the low areas (such as Boquete which has a history of flooding in 1969, 1970, 1990, 1991, 1995 and 2000).

The Civil Society Initiative for the Environment (Iniciativa de la Sociedad Civil para el Ambiente - ISCA), a network gathering various environmental and human rights associations, is very interested in seeing the process clarified, determining what is behind all this and following due process in order to value the real cost-benefit of building the highway along the proposed route. They also suggest that those who know the Baru Volcano National Park can state that among the potential beneficiaries of the construction of the highway are various members of the present government who have lands there, the value of which would be greatly increased as a result of building the highway.

ISCA asks "What about the Baru Volcano National Park Management Plan, funded by the Panamanian Atlantic Central American Biological Corridor? This subject was not included in the parameters discussed in the Management Plan. Does this mean that all the investment and work put into the preparation of the Management Plan will have to be done all over again? What about the Chiriqui-Bocas del Toro Biosphere Reserve that was announced so enthusiastically last year? What

about the landslides and problems caused to the quality and flow of the waters feeding the hydroelectric plants in the region? And the disappearance of the cloud forests which are among the most threatened ecosystems in Central America? What about the value of the quetzals and other threatened species? And the endemic species of highland birds and flora?

Article based on information sent by: Felipe Carazo, TNC - La Amistad Project, e-mail: fcarazo@tnc.org