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MEXICO COALITION LAUNCHES STRATEGY TO STOP DESTRUCTION OF COUNTRY'S RICHEST FOREST

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LACANDONA FOREST HOME TO 50% OF NATION'S BIRD SPECIES, 30% OF MAMMAL SPECIES

Mexico City, Mexico - Facing increased agricultural expansion, deforestation and fires that are threatening Mexico's most biodiversity-rich area, a coalition of 89 organizations, including indigenous communities, academic institutions and NGOs, launched a comprehensive plan today to protect the Lacandona Forest.

More than 300 participants spent more than two years developing "The Joint Strategy for the Conservation of Biodiversity - Lacandona Century XXI". Stretching across the southern-most state of Chiapas, the Lacandona Forest is the country's single-most biodiversity rich area. Home to 50% of all the country's bird species and 30% of all Mexico's mammal species, it is the last refuge of Mexico's scarlet macaw, which has all but disappeared from the country. Home to more than 30 endangered animal species, the area also contains dozens of Mayan archeological sites.

But despite its incredible importance, the protected areas within the Lacandona Forest, are suffering encroachment by illegal settlements. Currently there are 34 illegal villages, called "asentamientos", within the protected areas. Since 2000, 10 communities have been established and, in total, at least 2,200 hectares have been degraded by the settlements.

The Joint Strategy aims to address the poverty, social and education issues that are fueling the incursions in order to protect the region's biodiversity.

"The Lacandona Jungle is unique in Mexico for its biological richness; the United Nations recognizes the region for being indispensable for the environmental health of the planet," said Ignacio March, the director of Conservation International's Selva Maya program in Mexico, one of the organizations responsible for the strategy. "We have an international responsibility to protect the Lacandona and create alternatives that will allow the communities in the region to enjoy progress without destroying the forest."

The three protected areas that have suffered the most damage are the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve, the Lacantún Biosphere Reserve and the Nahá Protected Area. Nahá has seen damage to at least 596 hectares, or about 20% of the reserve.

The Joint Strategy presented today in Mexico City outlines dozens of economic, social and conservation objectives for the area, including:

- Rehabilitating farm land to reduce slash-and-burn agriculture by at least 30% over the course of ten years;
- Creating social programs aimed at increasing literacy and reducing the infant mortality rate by at least 30% in 10 years;
- Implementing community-participation projects to promote and regulate subsistence hunting and fishing;
- Create "poles of population attraction" in strategic locations outside of protected areas, and generate incentives (likes sustainable industries) that will encourage people to resettle outside of the protected areas.

Among the 89 participants that developed the strategy, there are 17 indigenous communities and villages, 11 academic institutions and universities, 14 state-government agencies, 13 federal government agencies and 24 civil organizations.

Created in 1978, Montes Azules (331,200 hectares) was the first biosphere reserve ever established in Mexico. Among the endemic and rare species it houses is the Central American White Turtle (*Dermatemys mawii*), which the Turtle Conservation Fund (TCF) recently declared as one of the world's top 25 most endangered turtles.

Lacandona is also home to the rare Lacandonia shismatica flower. Pale, and lacking the pigments that allow it to synthesize sugars, the tiny flower lives in symbiosis with a microscopic mushroom that grows inside it. It is also the only known plant in the world whose flower has inverted reproductive organs.

"We hope this strategy will help outline a new path for conservation in the Lacandona Forest that will protect its ecosystems and threatened species. But above all, we hope this strategy helps promote economic alternatives that will give these communities the ability to develop and progress," said March. "Promoting the reconciliation between the communities and nature of the Lacandona Forest is the right thing to do. If we allow the Lacandona Forest to be destroyed, we destroy ourselves."

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