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Land conservation in Ecuador is stymied by an incomplete view of privately protected areas

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Relative to its size, Ecuador is the most biodiverse country on earth, but its exuberant vegetation is declining rapidly. From 1990 to 2020, the country lost 2.1 million hectares (ha) of forest, a trend driven by the spread of agriculture, mining, oil exploration, and infrastructure creep. To reverse this trend, its government is leaning into private land conservation, but information gaps make it difficult to determine which tools and policies are impacting land protection.



Ecuador coastal plains region

In Ecuador, and across several Latin American countries, National Systems of Protected Areas (SNAP) are the primary tool for biodiversity conservation. Ecuador's system was established in 1970 and is a department of the Ministry of the Environment. Today, it protects 26,187,323 ha of land across 70

areas, but most of that land is publicly owned. In 2017, privately protected areas (PPAs), were constitutionally established as a subsystem of the SNAP through the Organic Environmental Code. The goal was to create a comprehensive picture of all protected land, regardless of ownership, to enable more strategic and efficient conservation. Over half a decade later, only six areas and about 10,000 ha of land are registered in the system.

Land ownership patterns across Ecuador vary depending on land use. Ninety-four percent of agricultural land is privately owned, and about 60 percent of forest land is owned either by indigenous groups or by private individuals and organizations. If the government cannot collaborate with private landowners, it cannot protect many swaths of high-priority areas, such as riparian buffer zones and forest corridors.

“We need private/civic conservation because the government cannot reach some spots of biodiversity,” explained Hernán Mladinic, the International Land Conservation Network’s representative for Latin America. But without a comprehensive system for tracking private conservation, that process is complicated. “[You] cannot work hand-in-hand if your left hand does not know what your right hand does.”

Other Latin American countries, such as Colombia and Peru, have been more successful getting private landowners to register their property in SNAP. Mladinic said that part of this is likely due to additional benefits their programs provide. The government in these countries will intervene in the case of trespassing and illegal occupation of SNAP land, which is a concern for many landowners in the region. Government institutions in Ecuador tend to be weaker and take a hands-off approach to private land conservation. As a result, there is little incentive for landowners to make an effort to formally register their property.

There is also no outreach system to guide landowners toward government programs. The National Corporation of Private Forests and Reserves of Ecuador (CNBRPE) was created in 1996 to enable a robust national network of voluntary, private-sector conservation initiatives; but the nonprofit is barely active. “The problem is that there is no organization, either governmental or non-governmental, doing this job,” said Mladinic. “The government is not doing it, because they register only the private owners that knock at the door of the government offices. The private organizations? They only know about the members of the association that decided to subscribe as members.”

The CNBRPE has added about 60 associated reserves, covering 73,000 ha, but Mladinic estimates the total amount of privately protected land exceeds 100,000 ha.

Though participation of PPAs in SNAP is particularly low in Ecuador, inconsistent tracking of privately protected land is a concern for land practitioners across Latin America. Earlier this year, the ILCN organized a group of representatives from private conservation networks from 10 Latin American countries to discuss this topic.

The group found that various forms of private and community conservation are burgeoning across the region and often strategically complement national objectives. But it is just as common for private reserve networks to lack resources and structure. The group noted government distrust and a lack of incentives as barriers to widespread interest in achieving official recognition. That means that a significant portion of undeveloped land is protected only by the will of its owners. Reflecting on these

issues, the group of representatives proposed establishing a collaborative georeferenced database on voluntary private conservation areas in Latin America.

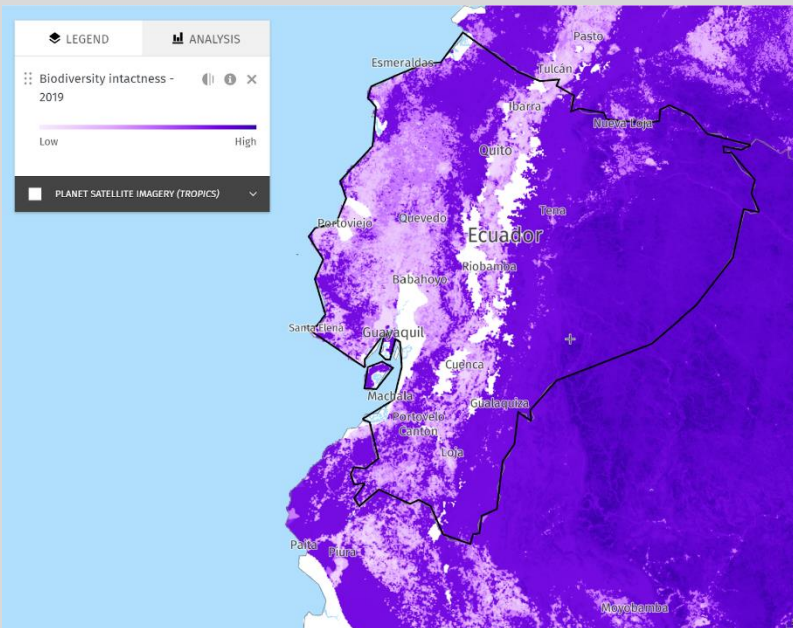
While only a small amount of private conservation land in Ecuador is registered under SNAP, there are other programs for land protection that private owners may be turning to instead.

Private forests reserves account for approximately 191,000 ha of land in Ecuador and are mostly managed by a group five non-governmental organizations. To establish these areas, landowners must gain approval from the Ministry of the Environment and create a management plan. The reliability of this method is widely debated, as there have been several instances of land conversion on protected forests.

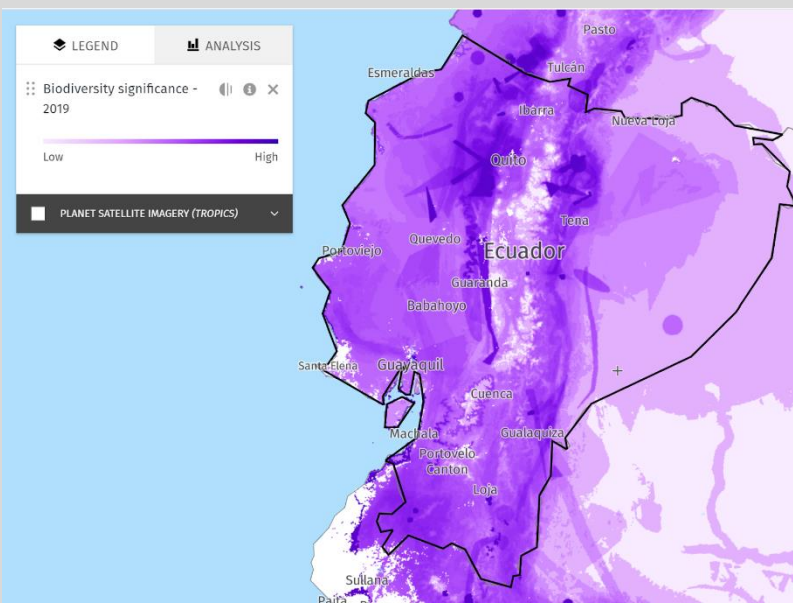
Conservation easements, known in Ecuador as ecological servitudes, have been legally recognized since 2017. This mechanism allows landowners to voluntarily commit to land-use limitations. Easements typically last for 25 to 30 years but could be in perpetuity.

Conservation trusts are an adaptation of civil and commercial trusts and transfer ownership of land to an individual or group for the purpose of land or biodiversity conservation. There are several instances of this tool being used in Ecuador and, like an easement, it has the potential to promote permanent conservation.

Biodiversity loss and significance by region



(1) The World Resources Institute's Global Forest Watch map (left) shows which regions of Ecuador have suffered the greatest biodiversity decline as of 2019. Only about 30 percent of original vegetation remains intact in Ecuador's coastal plains region. Its Andean region fares a bit better with 60 percent intact and the Amazon region remains 88 percent undisturbed.



(2) The same tool shows the significance of remaining biodiversity by region (left). The coastal plains region, which has been hardest hit by vegetation loss, is slightly more significant than much of the Amazon region, where loss is less striking.

Another tool that is commonly leveraged by NGOs is direct purchase. Organizations identify critical habitats and intact areas and purchase these parcels to ensure they are maintained. These sales sometimes include a conservation clause, binding the purchaser to its commitment to preserve the area.

Ecuador has also begun to establish a system of financial incentives for landowners who are willing to commit to sustainable land use.

Socio Bosque is an incentive-based conservation program, started in 2008. Landowners commit to a 20-year contract to conserve ecosystems on their property and receive payments based on the amount of land enrolled in the program. In July of 2018, there were 1.62 million ha enrolled in *Socio Bosque* and, by 2021, the national government had invested the equivalent of US\$ 90 million in the program.

Private and public landowners are also exempt from paying taxes on legally protected land and many landowners are able to leverage ecotourism and water funds to keep undeveloped land use sustainable.

Mladinic said that establishing clear government incentives such as these are important for improving private land conservation and tracking, but that financial mechanisms alone are not enough. He would also like to see a more robust system for informing landowners, providing technical support, connecting landowners with private protection practitioners and associations, and establishing official conservation management standards and corresponding seals that could be used as branding to promote sustainable economic activity.

“There are so many approaches that don’t require a lot of resources that could be an incentive for private owners to acknowledge the benefits of official recognition [associated with] incorporating these areas [in] national and international conservation strategies, policies, and targets,” he said.

To learn more about PPAs in Ecuador, read the full [country profile](#) prepared by the ILCN and its partners.