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Reconciling Costa Rica's Cities

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Few countries in the world have such a recognizable global environmental image as Costa Rica. By many standards, the country is well known for its historic environmental stewardship. We have decarbonized 100% of our electric generation with renewables, we not only halted deforestation but reversed it to increase forest coverage to nearly 60% of the country and have set aside 30% of the country as National Parks and Reserves.

The paradox.

Conversely, our cities - and particularly those belonging to the capital region of San José - do not stand out as speaking to those historical achievements. In fact, fossil fuels are used to power close to 100% of transportation, parks and public space barely cover 3% of the city of San José, and [the capital region has 0% forest coverage](#). In a city that is - finally - densifying, inhabitants contend with less public and natural space.

Additionally, the Grande de Tárcoles river basin is the most contaminated in all of Central America. Effluents flow from rivers in the capital region to the Tárcoles carrying solid and liquid waste to the river and then into the Pacific Ocean. A large part of this is due to how the city has been built: neglecting its urban rivers with large walls segregating the built form from natural urban ecosystems. A city that turns its back on its nature is a city that invites peril.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Government introduced regulations to set aside a 10 to 50 metre construction setbacks from urban rivers to protect and shed the waterway. However, the setbacks remained private and became a liability, not an asset. Property owners were left with a strip of land that they couldn't utilize. Their response was to protect themselves by building walls that would protect their homes and investments from this "no man's land" that could become a source of theft. The result was a series of "invisible" setbacks that have given way to illegal waste dumping, construction and defiling of the habitat.

So, in a country where the biggest sense of national pride

stems from the conservation of our tropical nature, we have historically overlooked this wonderful opportunity in our cities.

Citizens leading the way.

Three years ago, a group of citizens united to shift this reality entirely. We set out to rescue 25 kilometers (15 miles) of the two main rivers in the capital, the Torres and María Aguilar, to allow people to walk, bike and stroll along these beautiful areas that the city had long neglected. Our mission: "connect people to the city through nature." The restoration and reforestation of private riverbanks will create well over 70 new acres (nearly 30 hectares) of public space.

Interdisciplinary planning efforts among biologists, urban

planners, lawyers, engineers, architects, economists, forest engineers, and others gave birth to [Rutas Naturbanas](#) (Urban Nature Routes). The proposal shifted many paradigms. The most important among them: that nature and humans can coexist. In fact, reintroducing nature's most dangerous predator - humans - into the ecosystem might well be the only way to protect and regenerate the ecosystem within the urban realm.

Building infrastructure in these conservation areas will heal them by allowing communities access to these areas. Access to organize river clean-ups, reforestation efforts, and to both watch and report illegal activities, such as setback violations and solid waste dumping.



Grande de Tárcoles, Before Planned Rejuvenation
Photo Credit: Rutas Naturbanas

Beyond valuation.

Rutas Naturbanas will provide immense benefits to urban populations: they'll connect over 95 schools and universities; they'll allow people and visitors to bike and walk safely through the city; and they'll bring urban tourism, new retail and land value.

As we move forward in building our very first kilometer in 2019, which was donated privately with property owners ceding the right of way, the city's first urban-natural integration will emerge.

In this light, biophilic cities are less about bringing nature into the city but about saving nature that already exists, and in turn, saving ourselves.

Resources:

Róger Bonilla-Carrión and Luis Rosero-Bixby (2004). "Presión demográfica sobre los bosques y áreas protegidas al inicio del nuevo milenio [Demographic pressure on forests and protected areas, Costa Rica 2000]." Centro Centroamericano de Población de la Universidad de Costa Rica. http://www.inec.go.cr/sites/default/files/documentos/medio_ambiente/publicaciones/anambientcenso2000-17.pdf.

Rutas Naturbanas. <http://rutasnaturbanas.org>.

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Project Aerial (Cover photo)
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Bottom Images: The First Kilometer
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