



# Development, Conservation and Peace in Post-Conflict Colombia

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**With the end of the country's civil conflict, Colombia now has an unprecedented opportunity to create a nation-building project based on its natural wealth and sustainability standards.**

Colombia is one of the most biodiverse countries in the world with an estimated 10% of global biodiversity within its borders. With the three Andean mountain ranges, the natural regions of the Amazon, Orinoquia, Chocó, and two oceans, the country possess unique conditions for the proliferation of diverse life forms. Within this remarkable biodiversity scenario, Colombia is emerging from one of the oldest armed conflicts in Latin America that lasted more than fifty years, and has affected its biological wealth in various ways.

On November 12 of 2016, the General Agreement for Ending Conflict and Building a Stable and Long-Lasting Peace between the National Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was signed, ending a 52 years long civil war. As a result of this agreement, programs and policies have been designed to guarantee the presence of the State in places where there is no public intervention. This step towards the end of the conflict is framed in the pursuit of social and economic development with equity and social justice, and the construction of a new paradigm of territorial development as an essential goal of a country in peace.

Peacebuilding in Colombia involves several challenges in different areas, and the environmental sector carries a unique responsibility from now onwards. A window of opportunity has been opened to create feasible sustainable models

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through the incorporation of social and environmental considerations in the planning and implementation of the main points of the peace agreement. But inadequate, untimely or poor planning could lead to irreversible impacts on the natural heritage of the country and the economic and social failure of many of the interventions that are implemented.

## Colombia's conflict and the environment

One of the most apparent [consequences of armed conflict](#) in Colombia has been the depopulation and isolation of several zones due to the risk involved for the inhabitants to remain in them during periods of intense conflict. This depopulation and isolation has had negative repercussions in social terms, undermining production systems, weakening supply chains, and increasing poverty and crime in towns and cities.

In terms of the environment, armed conflict has paradoxically [resulted](#) in the conservation and regeneration of ecosystems in certain areas. But this interaction between armed conflict and the environment hasn't been invariably positive. Illegal mining, sowing of non-licit crops, and wildlife trafficking are the leading economic activities of many of the areas controlled by armed groups, resulting in negative effects for biodiversity. Likewise, the development of scientific research has been restricted in these places, resulting in information gaps about the state of species, communities and ecosystems. The lack of detailed knowledge about nature and biodiversity can lead to a disregard of important environmental features, the generation of new impacts on strategic and/or vulnerable ecosystems, and the execution of ineffective conservation efforts.

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Today, conflict zones and their natural wealth offer an array of possibilities to boost rural economies within the framework of the Integral Rural Reform – the first point of the Peace Agreement. This reform seeks to integrate regions and to promote an equitable social and economic development across the territories. The reform takes into consideration a structural transformation of the countryside that requires adopting measures which mainstream environmental considerations and foster sustainable land uses according to soil suitability and water availability among other attributes. This reform is likely to entail rapid changes towards agricultural development and extractive activities in former areas of conflict, as seen in other countries' peace processes such as [Cambodia](#) and [Liberia](#).

There is a wide belief for Colombian Peace Process to be positive across the country and at all levels, but with no careful planning and well-informed approaches consequences for the environment could be irreversible. It is crucial to discern that rural landscapes not only hold agricultural potential, and that ecotourism, bioprospecting and payment for ecosystem services or other conservation incentives appear as alternative sustainable local development strategies that allow integrating economic activities with the valuation of cultural and environmental heritages. Biodiversity conservation through protected areas is expected to be complemented with sustainable management of biodiversity in rural productive landscapes. This means to integrate environmental values in land planning and to encourage shared responsibilities and cooperation scenarios that set the guidelines for the transformation of the Colombian countryside.

## **The future**

The end of the long and tragic armed conflict in Colombia represents a major challenge for Colombians and the international community. The imminent outbreak of land transformations and the emergence of new territorial development plans should be routed by an integrative scenario that prevents further social conflicts and environmental degradation. As mentioned above, the occasional positive link between forest cover and intensity of armed conflict is changing in Colombia. Thousands of hectares currently controlled by illegal armed groups are gradually becoming accessible to industries, economic sectors and the rule of law. The natural heritage of Colombia, remarkable even at a global level, increases the **responsibility of planning** for economic development with core environmental criteria. This means to go beyond preservation and to integrate sustainability standards and regulations within land-use and spatial planning.

Divergent government programs and policies can result in increased deforestation, inefficient or residual protected areas, and loss of highly biodiverse areas. By contrast, a rigorous land-use planning with coordination between stakeholders could assist in limiting environmental degradation and increasing the protection of the most irreplaceable natural areas. The environmental sector, together with the Colombian scientific community, must actively engage in the development of zoning plans to ensure positive and lasting results for the nation's biodiversity. Colombia faces an unprecedented opportunity to deploy a nation-building project based on its natural wealth and sustainability standards. It is vital to work together to integrate knowledge and efforts and collectively steer concrete actions to build a country in peace with the environment.

Rufous-tailed Hummingbird in Manizales, Colombia. Image

credit: [Aralcal/Wikimedia](#).

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