



Conservation of Monteverde

What lessons, if any, can we learn from ecological changes that have occurred in the Monteverde since the discovery of the golden toad in 1964?



Conservation Successes in the Shadow of the Golden Toad

Given the discouraging news about conservation problems worldwide, it wouldn't be hard to become pessimistic about what has happened in Monteverde, Costa Rica. After all, in spite of the country's international reputation as a "green republic," deforestation rates are higher in Costa Rica than almost anywhere in the world, isolating Monteverde as an ecological island perched on the continental divide.

The last 15 years has also seen widespread changes within Monteverde: a proliferation of new houses, hotels, restaurants, and an explosion of ecotourism, with tens of thousands of people per year visiting what was once a rural community. Along with the Golden Toad, other amphibian and reptile species have disappeared, introduced species have invaded, and lowland species have moved upslope as Monteverde becomes warmer and drier.

Yet there have also been impressive achievements in conservation at Monteverde. In 1979, poaching of large mammals and birds was commonplace, and species such as tapirs and guans were rare. Now the very people who hunted with rifles use binoculars instead as they lead natural history tours. Tapirs and guans are more common today than they have been for more than half a century. As the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve has grown ten-fold in area, clearings on the Atlantic slope have reverted to lush forest. The Guacimal River, formerly rancid due to waste dumped by the community dairy plant, is much cleaner now.

On both global and local scales, the most enduring impact of Monteverde has been the education of the public about environmental values. I like to think that whatever negative local impact the steady onslaught of ecotourists may have on resplendent quetzals and howler monkeys, it is more than compensated by inspiring people to appreciate tropical forests and their own natural heritage. If so, the conservation gains at Monteverde may help save other tropical and temperate zone habitats worldwide.

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