

Case Study: Ecotourism in El Salvador

El Imposible National Park

El Imposible National Park in El Salvador is a tropical mountain forest, which is home to a spectacular array of flora and fauna. The park's unique name arose from Guatemalan traders who used to travel through the mountains to reach local markets, carefully leading their mules through the steep "Impossible Pass."

At its highest elevations El Imposible has small remnants of cloud forests — home to sloths, ocelots, orchids, and bromeliads, among others. The park stretches down into the valleys, encompassing many spectacular waterfalls and rivers, where it changes over to lush rainforests replete with toucans, macaws, anteaters, capuchin monkeys, snakes, and dozens of other bird species. The forest is a crucial habitat for millions of migratory songbirds who travel south from the U.S. and Canada each winter—over 3,000 miles each way— in search of warmer temperatures and fresh food supplies.



El Imposible is considered to be the most important natural area in El Salvador because of its size and biological diversity. It is also part of the Mesoamerican Biologic Corridor, a major conservation initiative that is creating a series of connecting protected areas between the U.S. and Colombia. However, deforestation is a serious threat. Many animals are already endangered because of forest depletion. Local residents, many of whom are living at or below the poverty level, need to hunt and gather firewood in order to support their families, yet their actions damage the delicate ecosystem.



About SalvaNATURA

SalvaNATURA, one of The Resource Foundation's affiliates in El Salvador, has managed and protected El Imposible since 1991. As part of its effort to encourage sustainable livelihoods, families living nearby help SalvaNATURA with park management by working as security guards or tourism guides.

SalvaNATURA works with local coffee farmers to develop guidelines for growing environmentally sustainable coffee and promotes wise soil management and planting of fruit trees. It also runs an environmental education program for children, oversees the protection and improvement of water resources, and organizes other community projects.

Ecotourism

SalvaNATURA has concentrated much of its efforts on promoting ecotourism. Visitors can participate in a host of natural and cultural activities, including hiking, visits to waterfalls, bird watching, and archaeological trips. Activities are organized by a group of trained guides from the community. These guides, many of whom are former hunters or loggers, are now able to make a living without destroying the forest.

To help other communities living near the park, SalvaNATURA provided small loans to help start a family owned inn, a local restaurant, a natural medicine stall, a handicraft gift shop, and three country stores. These businesses simultaneously improve the experiences of visitors to the park and provide local families with sustainable livelihoods.

Lodging

Park visitors stay at the comfortable Hostel El Imposible which is close to the park entrance. It is jointly administered by SalvaNATURA and the community. Cabins have either two twin beds or one double bed. Visitors can eat at a restaurant on the premises.