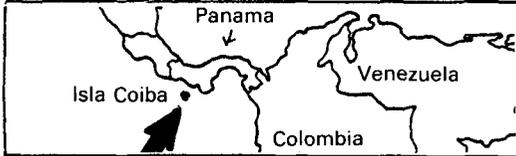


Proposal for an Island National Park in Panama

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Isla Coiba off Panama's Pacific coast still has one of the country's finest stands of tropical forest, with abundant wildlife. With the threat of logging never far away the authors suggest it should be made a national park.

Panama, with an area of 100,000 sq km and a population of some 1,900,000 people, is the geographical link between Central and South America. Being a transition zone, its flora and fauna include a mixture of North, Central and South American elements. Two national parks protect the country's interesting natural heritage—Altos de Campana and Volcán Barú—and four others are planned: Isla de las Perlas, Bocas del Toro, Portobelo and Fronterizo.⁵ Altos de Campana, 4816ha, 64km south-east of Panama City and established in 1966, consists primarily of montane tropical forest, and is especially rich in birds; it also protects the rare golden frog *Atelopus zeteki*. Volcán Barú (14,322ha), established in 1976 in the Chiriquí Province of eastern Panama, takes in Volcán Barú itself, 3474m and the highest point in Panama, and a number of forest types including the last remaining tract of virgin highland forest on the Pacific side of the Continental Divide.^{1 2 6} Another possible site for a Panamanian national park is Isla Coiba, which we were able to assess while making a primate survey in October–November, 1974.⁴



Coiba is the largest island close to Central America's Pacific coast. It lies off the Azuero Peninsula at 7°20' to 7°40'N and 81°36' to 81°54'W, is 34.6km long and 20.9km wide, and ranges in altitude from sea level to 427 m. Describing its vegetation and physical features, Wetmore writes,⁶

'The entire island is covered with heavy virgin forest, except along the lower courses of the larger streams where there are swampy woodlands, succeeded to seaward by stands of mangroves. In the San Juan area, these are of considerable extent. Rocky headlands project along the coast, with sand beaches, some of considerable extent, between them broken by mangroves at the river mouths. The land rises back of the shore rather steeply to elevations of 80–250 feet, and then slopes back to the interior ridges, which in many places are steep-sided and much broken.'

The first European known to have visited Coiba was Bartolomé Hurtado, a lieutenant of Gaspar de Espinoza, who arrived in 1516 and found the island inhabited by Indians speaking a Guaymi dialect, whom Hurtado and those who followed him quickly exterminated; the last of them were taken to the Darien as labourers around 1550. The name *Coiba*—and several variations such as Cabo, Cobaya and Quibo, which appear in the literature—apparently comes from the name of the Indian chief ruling the island at the time of Hurtado's arrival.⁶

Over the next 400 years, Coiba was visited by a number of travellers, including Captain William Dampier (1685), Captain George Shelvocke (1720, 1721) and George Anson (1741). Resettlement of the island probably began in the early 1700s with the arrival of small numbers of pearl fishermen, and coconut plantations were eventually established, but Coiba was never extensively settled.⁶ In the early 1900s, the Panamanian government bought up all private holdings and in 1919 established a penal colony on the east coast which includes a central camp and seven outlying work camps. Forest adjacent to the camps has been cleared for pasture and agriculture. But much of the forest in the interior and along the west coast has not been touched, and the forest covering the south-west part of the island is one of the finest left in Panama, with stands of huge *Prioria* trees predominating in some areas, and a mixture of species in others. Wetmore writes,⁶ 'the impressive vegetative cover of Coiba is not appreciated until it is penetrated . . . Inland from the clearings the forest is unbroken, the great trees rising to such heights that loads from my shotgun . . . failed to reach . . . the highest branches. Only on the upper Río Jacque in eastern Darien (Panama) have I seen similar stands of trees'.

Early visitors to the island noted the abundance of deer, monkeys, iguanas, snakes and sea turtles, and the fauna today is still quite impressive. Being a land-bridge island, Coiba has a fair representation of the species found on the mainland, and the larger mammals include opossum *Didelphis marsupialis*, mantled howler monkey *Alouatta palliata coibensis*, white-throated capuchin *Cebus capucinus*, agouti *Dasyprocta coibae*, and white-tailed deer *Odocoileus virginianus*,³ most of them quite abundant. Bird species number at least 133, including 20 endemic subspecies.⁶ Snakes are unusually common, many other reptiles and amphibians occur, and sea turtles abound in the surrounding waters, some of them, including the Pacific ridley *Lepidochelys olivacea*, nesting on the island, while impressive coral reefs are found close to much of the coast.

The untouched nature of much of Coiba and its isolation make it an ideal location for a park. There do not seem to be any plans to expand the penal colony, the restricted access required to maintain security prevents squatters, and the presence of the Guardia Nacional would help protect such a park against logging and poaching. But logging companies have already shown interest in the island, and trees have been or are being extracted in small numbers. The Azuero Peninsula, the closest part of the mainland, has already been devastated. If Panama is to conserve even a small part of its natural heritage, decisive action to save areas like Coiba should begin immediately.

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