

July 2009



## Conservation Takes Flight on Ometepe Island; Migratory and Resident Birds Inspire Lofty Goals

By Yessenia Soto

Legend has it that there is a ghost on the island of Ometepe, in Lake Nicaragua -- the spirit of Chico Largo, who sold his soul to the devil in order to get rich. The story is that Chico Largo now roams the island in search of others who might be ambitious enough to sell their souls, but he is also considered to be a guardian of the island's indigenous heritage and of its threatened ecological treasures.

Ometepe's rich historic and archaeological heritage and exceptional biodiversity led the Nicaraguan government to declare the island a Natural Reserve in 1995. The verdant island, dominated by the twin cones of Volcán Concepción and Volcán Maderas, is one of the world's largest volcanic islands in a freshwater lake. Thanks to its diverse topography, dramatic altitudinal range, and varied climactic conditions, the island holds examples of most of the ecosystems found in Nicaragua within 107 square miles (276 square kilometers) ranging from tropical dry forest to humid forest, cloud forest, dwarf forest, wetlands, and beaches. But those natural riches are under immense pressure from agricultural and tourism development and the demands of the island's more than 35,000 inhabitants who struggle to get by.

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In response to those threats, the international conservation organization [Fauna & Flora International](#) (FFI) has launched three projects that aim to protect the island's biodiversity: [Building Protected Area Management Capacity on the Island of Ometepe, Nicaragua](#); [Integrated Management of Diverse Key Habitats for Neotropical Migratory Birds](#); and [Conserving Diverse Island Habitats and Altitudinal Refugia Significant for Neotropical Migratory Birds](#).

"This is an extremely important site for conservation in Nicaragua," explains [Salvadora Morales](#), coordinator of [FFI's Ometepe program](#). Its geographical characteristics make it especially rich in ecosystems that are either threatened or have disappeared from other parts of the country, and it is a vital spot for bird populations, both resident and migratory."

Ornithological studies have confirmed the importance of Ometepe for Pan-American bird migration. According to the United States Fish & Wildlife Service's [Birds of](#)

[Conservation Concern](#) report, at least 56 Neotropical migratory bird species and 18 species that are considered conservation priorities use the island's forests and wetlands. And whereas in the country's other protected areas, the bird population composition tends to be 20 percent migratory and 80 percent resident, nearly 50 percent of the bird species on the island are migratory, Morales notes.

FFI's work on the island began with the goal of saving bird habitat, but it didn't take long to expand its mission, since, as Morales points out, "To conserve birds, you have to conserve the forest."



One of the first steps for accomplishing this on Ometepe is establishing a land-use policy. FFI began working in the Volcán Maderas Natural Reserve, where program staff encountered a "paper park" whose boundaries appeared on maps but that had little actual protection or management. In response, they established a co-management agreement and defined environmental legislation. It also became clear that there was an urgent need to coordinate efforts with stakeholders at the Volcán Concepción Natural Reserve, located on the other side of the island. For years, the municipalities that comprised those two areas worked separately and in a legal vacuum.

Morales and her colleagues also proposed to the Nicaraguan government that Ometepe be elevated to the category of a [UNESCO Biosphere Reserve](#), which would provide the legal and institutional framework necessary to improve its management. The biosphere declaration process is still under way, but FFI has meanwhile taken important steps toward defining land use in those protected areas and organizing local players. The two municipalities are now coordinating their work, together with Nicaragua's [Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources](#), the [National Forestry Institute](#), the Environmental Commission, the Entre Volcanes Foundation, co-management committees, and various local leaders and NGOs.

The project has hired its first four rangers from Ometepe -- local people who were nominated by local communities and trained by FFI and allies such as the United States Fish & Wildlife Service's [Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act](#) and [Wildlife Without Borders](#) programs, the [United Kingdom Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#), and the [Darwin Initiative](#). They are working out of the first ranger station in the Madera Volcano area and are organizing patrols with local community members.



The new rangers and other locals have also been trained in bird identification and monitoring. Thanks to the establishment of two [Monitoring of Overwintering Survival](#) (MoSI) monitoring stations and subsequent professional assistance, they've been able to add 40 species to the Ometepe bird list.

FFI hopes to complement these efforts by promoting sustainable tourism, which could prevent deforestation in areas that serve as biological corridors and which can contribute to the project's financial sustainability. The goal is to support sustainable resource management in Ometepe within four years.

"We are preparing the community to sell a different kind of tourism," explained Morales. An example of this is the fact that six small and medium-sized hotels are working with the Rainforest Alliance's [Best Management Practices program](#) for Sustainable Tourism.

"This relationship between Fauna and Flora International and the Rainforest Alliance aims to transform the island into a sustainable tourism destination without jeopardizing its fragile ecosystems," notes [Danilo Valerio](#), sustainable tourism coordinator for the Rainforest Alliance in Nicaragua.

Two tourism businesses in Ometepe are already participating in the Rainforest Alliance's best management practices program. The first is [Hotel Villa Paraíso](#), located in playa Santo Domingo, which has received numerous recognitions for implementing best practices related to water and energy management. The second is the Puesta del Sol Association, comprised of 17 families from the La Paloma community, which offers accommodations and meals to groups of national and international tourists.



Valerio notes that two additional businesses will soon enroll in the program, stemming from their participation in a best practices workshop held in coordination with Fauna and Flora International and the Intermunicipal Tourism Commission of Ometepe (CITOMETEPE) in February of 2009.

While hotel owners learn more about sustainable tourism, 20 local people have received training in biodiversity, mammals, bird watching, geology, environmental interpretation, and other themes that enabled them to become tour guides certified by the [Nicaraguan Tourism Institute](#).

The reserve now has new signs and trails that facilitate access to its forests, as well as its development as a tourism destination. Local indigenous people are managing the island's first nature trail, and there are initiatives to charge admission fees and to design bird watching and primate research tours.

Morales acknowledges that while significant progress has been made, challenges remain. She points to the fact that Ometepe is primarily an agricultural area, mainly for plantain cultivation, and needs a plan that would promote sustainable farming and to raise awareness among farmers about the damage agrochemicals can cause. There is also an urgent need to strengthen forestry legislation, to plant trees, and to create forested corridors on local farms.



Fauna & Flora International's research has produced data that quantify the diversity of the birds that first attracted FFI biologists to Ometepe, but they've also documented other plant and wildlife species that make the island noteworthy. This information not only lets the group know where to concentrate their efforts, but will help them to attract more allies, resources, and political commitments for conservation.

An example of the last is the support they've gotten from [British American Tobacco](#) over the past two years. That relationship is the first example in Nicaragua of a private company dedicating its corporate social responsibility resources to conservation; in this case, to protected area management, sustainable tourism, and reforestation on the island.

Thanks to FFI's efforts to bring diverse groups together, there are now annual stakeholder meetings to review progress. "Our goal is that, when our work is done, the community will be ready to take over the island's management," said Morales.

In her view, local community members are on the right path to becoming the true guardians of Ometepe Island's natural treasures. And so far, not one soul has been sold to the legendary spirit of Chico Largo.

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