

Partnerships to Protect the Atlantic Rainforests of Brazil

In March 2008 GCBO's TFFF granted \$30,000 U.S. to the World Land Trust and REGUA for the purchase of additional land to add to the Reserva Ecológica de Guapiaçu and adjacent to the federally designated Tres Picos Park, all situated within the Atlantic Rainforest region of Brazil.



The Atlantic Rainforest is a vegetation type encountered parallel to Brazil's 4500km Atlantic seaboard in varying widths. This unique biome includes sand spit and beach vegetation/Restinga and mangroves along the coastline at sea level. It also includes wetlands and forests on the low plains next to the coastline and the forests growing on the hillsides. It includes the escarpments and granite summits, paramos/Campos de altitude with its characteristic sedge filled wetlands at 2500 meters above sea level. In 1500, when the Portuguese arrived, the Atlantic Rainforest covered an area of 1,477,500 km² (around 15% of Brazil). Since the early 1500s the forests of this region were selectively logged and the coffee plantations accounted for large areas being felled. By the early 21st century only 7% of the original extent remains, an area of 100,000 km², and only an estimated 2% still in its virgin state making it the second most threatened biome in the world after Madagascar.

The Atlantic Forest is widely recognized as one of the planet's highest priorities for conservation. It was designated a World Biosphere Reserve (1988) and indicated as one of the 8 most threatened 'biodiversity hotspots' of the world by Conservation International. With estimates of up to 8,000 endemic plant species and 600 endemic species of terrestrial vertebrates, the Atlantic Forest is considered to be one of the most biodiverse ecoregions in the world.

The "Reserva Ecológica de Guapiaçu" (REGUA) formed in 1996, is composed of members, a board of directors and a board of councilors. They are all residents of the local Guapiaçu community. REGUA currently has eight landowners that are full voting members of the board and have contributed to the size of the reserve as well as about 24 community members.

REGUA currently owns and works with a total of 16,750 acres (6700ha), or 22% of the Upper Guapiaçu basin, 8600 acres (3440ha) of which is owned by the Association. It includes the Donna Maria farm of 1500 acres purchased in 2001, the Serra do Mar farm of 4125 acres purchased in 2001, the São Jose farm of 1012 acres purchased in 2003 and the João Paulo farm of 1963 acres purchased in 2006. The remaining land lies in management agreements with the owners of the 2000 acre Lemgruber farm (2003) and the 6250 acre Schincariol farm (2005). The land runs steeply uphill from two hundred feet elevation to six thousand feet.



Photo of the REGUA region looking east, showing the mountains of the Serra do Mar with the Mt Três Picos highest point.

REGUA is working to acquire land as a means to permanently safeguard strategically important areas. Farmland is being sold to developers as Brazil's population becomes more affluent. Second homes in cool, non polluted areas such as the hillsides on the semi tropics has long held attractions. Clean water is another major benefit. Small farmers seeing recent profit reductions are all too happy to sell small plots for development. They see that this development results in an increased price of their own property. REGUA has raised funds to purchase areas considered important especially if it is located on the slope of the rocky escarpment. Much lateral animal migration occurs on the southern edge of the adjacent ridge top Três Picos Park into REGUA, important for a rich gene pool.

The Três Picos State park was created in 2002. There is no current Government policy to compensate landowners whose properties lie within this massive 115,000 acre park and all activities within are permitted. This implies a loose definition of land ownership. There are several landowners interested in selling their properties. Their properties vary in size and some are within the boundaries of the recently created Três Picos park limits and more often in the buffer zone adjacent to the park. If purchased, these properties can be placed under permanent conservation status preventing its development and habitat destruction. REGUA has found that land acquisition is the most effective form of permanent protection within the Upper Guapiaçu basin.

REGUA is increasingly seeking funding to purchase areas that lie within the broader Park confines and in the important buffer zone. In Brazil and in many other countries, the legal declaration and establishment of protected areas is a slow bureaucratic and political process and often it is difficult to achieve the protection status through government decrees. With governmental instability and policy changes, REGUA feels that direct land acquisition is the most secure method of nature conservation. A strong local social consensus is attached to private property all too different from public land, which is often invaded. In some other countries such as Guatemala, social pressure has led to the de-classification of forested land. In a biological perspective, many endangered species live or frequent areas outside of these protected reserves. Some live in small, threatened habitat and land acquisition can be the only way forward for conservation. REGUA feels that the protection through habitat acquisition for endangered and endemic birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians with restricted ranges of distribution is of vital importance. Land acquisition is also an effective tool for the establishment of biological corridors ensuring connectivity of larger ecological

networks. REGUA currently owns and works with a total of 16,750 acres or 22% of the first basin we hope to protect in its entirety.

In addition to land protection REGUA has an active wildlife research program done in conjunction with Brazilian universities and with the national government. More than four hundred bird species have been verified for the reserve including most Atlantic Forest endemics. The endangered Woolly Monkey, the hemisphere's largest primate has a resident population on the reserve. As a result of the research program REGUA was selected as the site for the first reintroduction in 2005 of the endangered Red-billed Curassow extirpated a hundred years ago and in 2007 for the reintroduction of the threatened Black-fronted Piping Guan. Curassows are now established and breeding on the property and the guans are expected to do so this year. The next challenge is the reintroduction of extirpated large mammals such as tapir.