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IN COLOMBIA'S AMAZON, A RESTORATIVE VISION TAKES ROOT AMID A LEGACY OF CONFLICT

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With the care of a mother attending her child, Felipe Garcia gently places a baby tamarind into a small clump of soil, where the sapling will be nurtured and slowly take root before being returned to the forest. At the edge of the Amazon, this one life-giving act stands out amid the backdrop of a nation wracked by decades of war and violence.

If the rivers and waterways of Colombia are its arteries, the forest is its beating heart, its fate intertwined with the future of a country grappling with the legacy of its tormented past.

"This is a form of resistance," says Garcia, 30, gently patting down the soil as he reaches for another sapling, part of a small but growing nursery intended to help restore the surrounding forest.

Image available online: view image

Felipe Garica, 30, gently adds a sapling to a small but growing nursery of native Amazon trees at Escuela Bosque in Caquetá, Colombia. (Photo by author)

Colombia's forests are among the world's most biodiverse, home to more bird, amphibian, and plant species than almost anywhere else on the planet. The Amazon, which blankets much of the country's southern region, plays a key role in regulating global weather patterns. Its survival — uncertain amid ongoing threats caused by deforestation and a warming planet — is key to avoiding the worst outcomes of climate change.

Rising rates of poverty and social inequality, which triggered nationwide protests in April, complicate efforts to protect these vital resources. But here, under the canopy of the world's largest rainforest, where the shadows of Colombia's half-century long armed conflict continue to loom, Garcia is part of a small team helping to sow the seeds of a more prosperous and equitable future, one tree at a time.

Escuela Bosque, or Forest School, is a modest 40-hectare plot situated in the hills above Florencia, the capital of Caquetá, a largely agricultural region at the juncture of the massive Cordillera Mountains and the Amazon rainforest. It is the vision of Bogotá native and conservation crusader Julio Andrés Rozo.

In 2019, Rozo, who is 40, embarked on a 400 km trek across Caquetá, earning him the moniker "Forest Gump of the Amazon." The journey was an opportunity to immerse himself in a region known today more for its sprawling cattle ranches, a backbone of the local economy and also a key driver of forest loss. But it was also a publicity stunt of sorts, an effort to draw attention to the plight of Colombia's Amazon and to the opportunity it presents for Caquetá and the country.

Image available online: view image

Julio Andres Rozo founded Escuela Bosque after a 400km trek through Caquetá, earning him the nickname "Forest Gump of the Amazon." (Photo: Manuel Ortiz)

"We Colombians have not been able to apprise ourselves of the treasure that we have in the Amazon," insists Rozo. "It has not been a priority for us."

Deforestation in Colombia rose sharply following the signing of the peace accord with leftist FARC guerillas in 2016 as areas once off limits due to the conflict became open to rampant land grabbing. Caquetá and neighboring departments have seen some of the highest rates of deforestation in the country. While a slowing trend appears to be emerging, significant challenges remain, including illegal mining, narcotics, and an expanding agricultural frontier.

Turning that around requires education, a key component of Escuela Bosque's mission, says Rozo, pointing to various structures across the property which in time will serve as classrooms, workshops, and lodging. Rozo envisions similar projects in other regions of the Colombian Amazon where visitors and local farmers alike can come to experience and learn about the forest's role as a source of both life and livelihood.

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Garcia peels back the cover on a beehive, one of close to a dozen that serve as educational tools for visitors to Escuela Bosque. (Photo: Manuel Ortiz)

"Education helps to raise awareness. But the kind of education we are aiming for inspires action. If I want to teach sustainability, I can't be a normal teacher. I have to be a sustainable entrepreneur."

Pointing to a row of beehives that line a nearby hillside, Rozo says the honey they produce is, like all aspects of Escuela Bosque, an educational tool demonstrating the vital role bees play in the local ecosystem and, critically, their potential to generate a sustainable income for families.

"That is the other half of the battle," Rozo says. To bring projects like Escuela Bosque to scale, sustainability needs to be economically feasible for local families. "My biggest challenge is not so much engaging with my neighbors here but getting consumers in Bogotá and beyond to recognize their role in preserving these forests."

EII Colombia Coordinator María Adelaida Fernández has spent the past several years working with local stakeholders and the regional government in Caquetá on the design and implementation of a low-emission, forest-friendly development strategy.

"Sustainable development is a long process. It doesn't happen overnight," says Fernández. "We are building a foundation, but to strengthen it we need greater access to national and global markets."

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Large swaths of cleared forest are part of the landscape in Caquetá, where an expanding agricultural frontier threatens the long-term health of Colombia's Amazon. (Photo: Manuel Ortiz)

Fernández and her team are currently involved in several projects in Caquetá, all designed to bring more resources to the region by increasing the value of standing forests. These include efforts to improve access to credit for local cattle ranchers who are transitioning to more sustainable business models, as well as gaining deforestation-free certification for sustainable cacao producers. The latter would ensure access to key markets that are now considering policies to limit their exposure to commodities linked to forest loss.

Fernández is also coordinating a project that aims to help the regional government in Caquetá become eligible to sell carbon credits on the rapidly expanding global carbon market, potentially generating valuable incentives to keep forest standing.

"Right now, the forest does not provide economic opportunity. This is all people can count on to feed their families," says Fernández, pointing to Caquetá's seemingly endless expanse of cattle pasture. "They are doing what they know they can to put money in their pockets every day."

Image available online: view image

Cattle ranching is the backbone of the economy in Caquetá and a major driver of forest loss. (Photo by author.)

Ascending a long flight of stairs Garcia disappears into the wall of trees that surrounds Escuela Bosque. Minutes later, sweat falling from his brow, he is crouched over a small sapling, which he carefully removes from the soil and places in a nearby container for transplant to the nursery below.

Under normal conditions saplings must wait for larger trees to fall, creating an opening in the canopy for much-needed sunlight to reach the forest floor, before they can grow. Garcia is accelerating this process, nurturing the saplings before replanting them in previously degraded or cleared forests, bringing life where once death prevailed.

With the right support, Garcia and Rozo maintain Escuela Bosque's model offers as an alternative model to the business-as-usual approach of trading in natural resources for quick injections of cash, a tempting and perilous option as Colombia confronts an array of social and economic challenges.

“There used to be just one house there,” Garcia says, pointing to a small cluster of homes at the foot of the hill below Escuela Bosque. “Now there are 10.”

In Colombia and across much of Latin America, Covid 19 drove thousands to flee their homes in the city, arriving in rural areas like Caquetá where the weight of pandemic restrictions was lessened by greater access to fresh food, open space, and clean air. Patches of cleared forest surround the newly built homes while in the distance a narrow column of smoke rises toward the sky as felled trees are burned to create new pasture.

Standing over the nursery, Garcia tends to what will in time replenish what has been lost. “I feel tranquility here, and for me tranquility is happiness.”