



## Fire Management in Costa Rica: A Novel Experience

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*With a population of approximately 300 million inhabitants and a total area of 500.000 square kilometers, Central America is located within the fire belt surrounding the Pacific Ocean, on tectonic plaques that constantly hit one another releasing energy, as well as with a large number of volcanoes permanently active and the continuous presence of hurricanes.*

*Forest fires represent one of the most important elements that destroy natural resources, which are increasingly becoming stronger within this region, and are being recognized as real catastrophes.*

Forest fires and slash-and-burn practices are not uncommon in Costa Rica, affecting the country's rich biological diversity and the quality of life of its citizens. Officials and private individuals dedicated to protecting, conserving, and developing natural resources, have long worried about this.

To deal with the problem, Costa Rica launched in 1997 a National Fire Management Strategy that defines the general guidelines to be followed for establishing institutional programs aimed at reducing forest fires and the use of burning in agricultural ecosystems.

The attendant legislation stipulates that preventing and controlling such fires is a matter of public interest that the authorities must support in every way they can. The law also requires the establishment of forest fire brigades and regional commissions, and encourages the participation of civil society in the entire process.

The Presidency of the Republic also set up by executive decree a National Commission on Forest Fires, as part of the National System of Conservation Areas (SINAC) of the Ministry of the Environment and Energy. Several national institutions of the public and private sectors and civil society are represented at the Commission. It has become the forum where participants can develop, discuss, support, coordinate, and follow up on the actions required to implement the National Fire Management Plan.

A National Technical Committee (COTENA) includes the managers or coordinators of the Fire Management Plan in each of the country's conservation areas. Their main task is to provide technical support for decision-making by SINAC, as well as to coordinate the fire reduction efforts of all the conservation areas, which have their own plans or programs.

An annual National Fire Management Action Plan brings together all the projects developed by the institutions that comprise the National Commission, and is given official backing by the Environment Minister and the President of the Republic.

As a "branding" tool and as a mechanism for effective national and regional dissemination, the official mascot of forest fire prevention and control is *Toño Pizote*, a coatimundi cartoon character whose image must appear in all the materials developed for awareness-raising campaigns. For instance, the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) uses Toño for the current campaign.

Children's Brigades help primary school students to realize that there must be a change of attitude towards fires in natural settings. They learn about the environment, the causes and effects of its alteration by fire, and the measures that can be taken to prevent such destruction.



Toño Pizote

Officials of SINAC receive the invaluable assistance of the Volunteer Forest Firefighters, proof of the commitment of civil society to the reduction of fires in the wild or in farms. So far, the strategy has worked: the number of hectares plagued by fires has fallen significantly, improving the odds for the conservation, rehabilitation, and restoration of biological diversity and a healthy environment.

*For more information, please contact:*

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