



# Support for the Heart of the World

Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta · Colombia

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta rises abruptly from the Caribbean coast of Colombia, and just 42km inland the snow-capped peaks reach an altitude of 5,775m. It is the world's highest coastal mountain range.

Due to its size (approximately 17,000 km<sup>2</sup>), altitudinal variations and tropical position, the Sierra Nevada has considerable biological and hydrological importance. The geographic characteristics of the mountain range have allowed for many unique plant and animal species to thrive, and its 35 river basins provide fresh water for some 1.5 million surrounding inhabitants, agriculture and industry.

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is also sacred to the 30,000 indigenous people, from four main ethnic groups, that still inhabit the region and practice centuries-old traditions. They believe that *Cerro Gonawindua* (the highest peak) is the center of the Universe, and that the mountain's health controls the health of the entire planet. It is the "Heart of the World".



## Request for International Support

The indigenous people of the 'Heart of the World' invite international donors to participate in establishing a Special Indigenous Fund of US\$15 million, to guarantee their cultural survival and the conservation of strategic ecosystems and water resources in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia.

The aim is to recuperate and legalize indigenous territory in areas of ecological and cultural importance, to protect sacred sites of importance for the physical and cultural survival of the Kogi, Arhuaco, Wiwa and Kankuamo people and to enable traditional land-use practices and environmental management for the conservation of water resources.



## Indigenous Conservation Strategy

Since the 1980s there has been a process to recognise indigenous land rights in Colombia. The 1991 constitution established the multicultural character of the nation, with cultural diversity valued as one of its most precious assets.

Almost 6 million hectares of the Sierra Nevada have been handed back to the indigenous people, in the form of legally recognized areas called ‘resguardos’ (collective indigenous territory). This has enabled the partial recuperation of their traditional territory and led to many positive results such as improved living conditions, increased food security, and the strengthening of cultural and ritual systems. However, much of their traditional territory remains outside the resguardos, and even within the resguardos there are problems with illegal settlers and inappropriate land-use practices.

The indigenous strategy for the conservation of territory, forests and water resources in the Sierra Nevada is based on: firstly the recuperation of lands within the legalized resguardos; and secondly and the extension of existing resguardos to encompass what are considered priority zones.

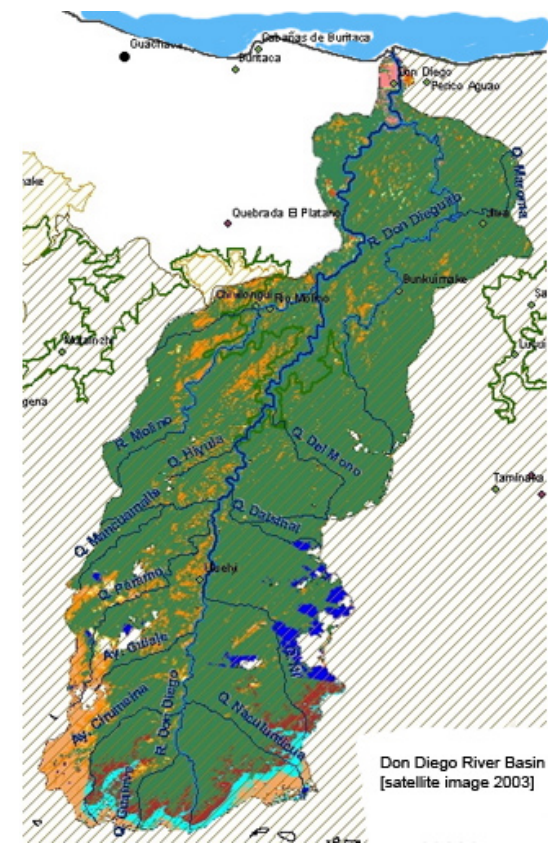
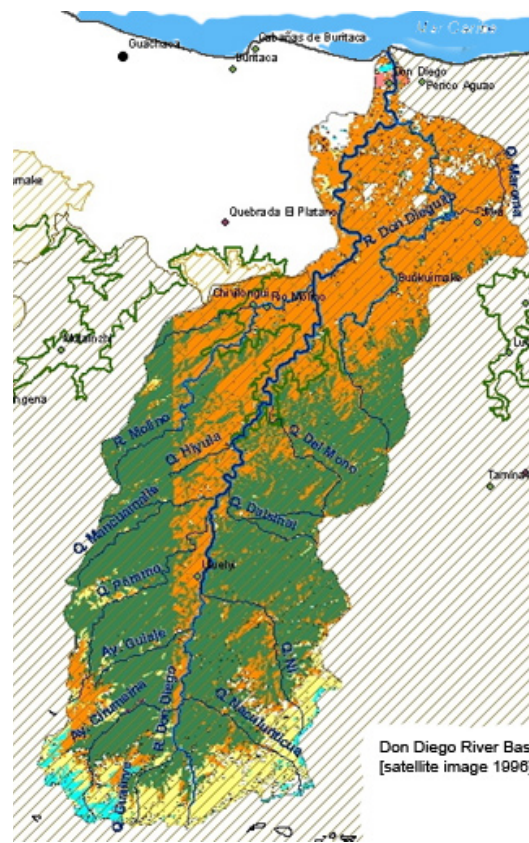
*First there was the sea, Everything was dark. There was no sun, moon, people, animals nor plants. There was just sea everywhere. The sea was the Mother. She was water and there was water everywhere. She was the river, the lake, the sea - and she was everywhere. She was called Gaulchovang.*

*The Mother was not people nor anything, She was “aluna”. She was the spirit of what was coming and she was thought and memory. The Mother only existed in thought, in the lowest world, in the deepest part, alone.*

*- origin of the Heart of the World.*

Specific areas have been prioritized due to their cultural, ecological and/or hydrological importance, or as strategic locations for halting further colonization, illicit drug cultivations, etc.

The Don Diego River basin (satellite images below) provides an example of the natural forest regeneration and the protection of water resources when traditional territory in the Sierra Nevada is handed back to the indigenous people. The river basin had suffered extensive ecological damage due to marihuana plantations and widespread logging. In 1994 it was included within the extension of the Kogi-Malayo-Arhuaco *resguardo* and by 2002 the ecosystem recuperation was visible.





*We use what the Mother has given us - from the sea to the snowcapped peaks - understanding that each place and site within our territory has a specific function and order, which we must know, respect and fulfill.*

*It is the legalization and extension of the resguardos that will allow for the recuperation and consolidation of our traditional territory and sacred sites. This is vital for the preservation of the environment and our culture, for keeping balance in the Universe.*

*- words of the 'mamas' - spiritual authorities of the indigenous peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.*

<http://www.tairona.org>  
- for information about the Heart of the World.

**CTC**  
Consejo Territorial de Cabildos



## Launch of a Special Indigenous Fund

This request is for international support to establish a Special Indigenous Fund for the Sierra Nevada, so that the indigenous people can effectively deal with the problems and conflict - including social, environmental and cultural deterioration - being experienced in the "Heart of the World".

The Fund will also enable the recuperation of 338,000 hectares of traditional indigenous territory in prioritized areas and river basins within nine municipalities around the Sierra Nevada.

Expected results from an initial five-year phase include:

- The protection of over 80,000 hectares of prioritized territory, within existing and extended resguardos.
- The protection of traditional knowledge and practices of the indigenous peoples of the Sierra Nevada, recognizing their role in the conservation of ecosystems and biological diversity.
- Strengthened traditional land use and management practices that preserve the culture and indigenous knowledge and promote food security.
- The conservation of water resources for regional and global benefit.

It is hoped to raise US\$ 15 million for the implementation of Phase 1 of this Special Indigenous Fund, to recuperate and legalize indigenous territory in areas of ecological and cultural importance.

The Fund will be administered jointly by UNDP and the indigenous organizations of the Sierra Nevada to guarantee the best use of resources and the successful outcome of this proposal.

A visit to Washington D.C. for the launch of this Special Indigenous Fund is being organised jointly by UNDP and the Inter-American Development Bank. **For more information please contact:**

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