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Green Phoenix: Restoring The Tropical Forests Of Guanacaste, Costa Rica



Synopsis

Can we prevent the destruction of the world's tropical forests? In the fire-scarred hills of Costa Rica, award-winning science writer William Allen found a remarkable answer: we can not only prevent their destruction--we can bring them back to their former glory. In *Green Phoenix*, Allen tells the gripping story of a large group of Costa Rican and American scientists and volunteers who set out to save the tropical forests in the northwestern section of the country. It was an area badly damaged by the fires of ranchers and small farmers; in many places a few strands of forest strung across a charred landscape. Despite the widely held belief that tropical forests, once lost, are lost forever, the team led by the dynamic Daniel Janzen from the University of Pennsylvania moved relentlessly ahead, taking a broad array of political, ecological, and social steps necessary for restoration. They began with 39 square miles and, by 2000, they had stitched together and revived some 463 square miles of land and another 290 of marine area. Today this region is known as the Guanacaste Conservation Area, a fabulously rich landscape of dry forest, cloud forest, and rain forest that gives life to some 235,000 species of plants and animals. It may be the greatest environmental success of our time, a prime example of how extensive devastation can be halted and reversed. This is an inspiring story, and in recounting it, Allen writes with vivid power. He creates lasting images of pristine beaches and dense forest and captures the heroics and skill of the scientific teams, especially the larger-than-life personality of the maverick ecologist Daniel Janzen. It is a book everyone concerned about the environment will want to own.

Book Information

File Size: 6188 KB

Print Length: 340 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press (January 9, 2003)

Publication Date: January 9, 2003

Sold by:Â Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00WBN4THO

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #1,232,999 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #44 in Books > History > Americas > Central America > Costa Rica #517 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Science > Environment > Ecology #568 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Science > Nature & Ecology > Natural Resources

Customer Reviews

Without duplicating the book description, I'll just explain why I would recommend this book to anyone interested in conservation. Although the creation of Guanacaste Conservation Area -- which combines pre-existing national parks and added land between and around them, along with a marine sector -- is unique in representing the world's only large-scale tropical forest restoration project, the story illustrates elements common to nature conservation projects in general. These include the importance of understanding the local ecology (in this case, especially forest succession and the necessity of controlling fires); political aspects, both local and national (Costa Rican president, parks service, etc.); how money is raised and land purchased or otherwise secured; and ways of involving people from the local area in conservation and the importance of that. I have just returned from Guanacaste and was impressed by the program that trains local people as "parataxonomists" to help with the huge task of identifying and cataloguing the area's many species. Another program gives instruction on natural history to children in local schools. The result has been an important cultural shift toward appreciating nature and the many benefits it provides. The writing is sometimes long-winded and ponderous, but the careful recounting of details was worthwhile, and the integration of interesting snippets of tropical biology and anecdotes of the people involved made it an enjoyable read.

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