

Declaring Peace with Nature

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ÓSCAR ARIAS SÁNCHEZ is President of Costa Rica and 1987 Nobel Peace Laureate. Arias studied Law and Economics at the University of Costa Rica and in 1974 received a doctoral degree in Political Science at the University of Essex, England. After serving as Professor of Political Science at the University of Costa Rica, Dr Arias was appointed Costa Rican Minister of Planning and Economic Policy. He served as President between 1986-90. Elected to a second term as President in 2006, he became the first Nobel Laureate in history to be elected to a nation's top office after winning that prize. He will serve until 2010.

Fifty-nine years ago, Costa Rica declared peace on the world, abolishing its armed forces, turning the musty rooms of its barracks into vibrant classrooms for its children. 20 years ago, the moral force of our nation propelled five presidents to sit down at a table and sign an accord that would help all of Central America lay down its arms. Today, in Costa Rica and around the world, another type of war is raging, and another declaration of peace is necessary: we must declare Peace with Nature and abolish the forces that destroy it.

What we intend through this new initiative is to bring renewed vigour to Costa Rica's ecological character, to make a qualitative and quantitative leap as we struggle to conserve our natural resources. Some might claim that of all the countries of the world, Costa Rica is the one that should feel least obligated to assume more environmental responsibilities. But if we are going to lead by example, we must own up to our own mistakes.

It is true that we are one of the few developing nations that has recovered part of its forest cover in the last twenty years, but it is also true that there is rubbish floating in our rivers and oceans. It is true that a quarter of our territory is legally protected, but it is also true that illegal logging takes place. It is true that more than 95 per cent of our energy comes from renewable resources, but it is also true that we continue to depend on fossil fuels for transportation and for many of our daily activities.

With this in mind, I would like to discuss four concrete commitments that, domestically, our country will make immediately: national carbon neutrality by 2021, starting with immediate action on the part of the Executive Branch; a set of environmental obligations for State institutions to carry out; an increase in forest cover and the size of protected areas; and the inclusion of environmental education in our elementary and high school curricula. These commitments are additional to the international obligations we have already assumed. We take them up because we believe that if Costa Rica can do it, with its small economy, there is no reason that other countries cannot do the same.

First, Costa Rica commits to becoming carbon neutral by the year 2021, our 200th birthday. Costa Rica will not contribute at all to global climate change or to the deterioration of the quality of the air we breathe.

The second domestic commitment is one we have just affirmed, with the signing of the Executive Order

requiring all State institutions to design and implement an environmental action plan. I am convinced that the State cannot require citizens to use resources responsibly, conserve energy, and respect environmental regulations if it does not first live up to its own standards.

The third commitment I have mentioned is an increase in our forest cover and the size of our protected areas. We are going to expand the system of Payment for Environmental Services through FONAFIFO to cover 600,000 hectares. This expansion has already begun. If we follow through with this initiative, we will become the country with the highest concentration of trees per square kilometre and the country with the most trees per capita in the world.

Finally, we commit, from this moment on, to promote a curriculum of sustainable development and environmental education in our elementary and high schools. This is a very serious commitment: if we want to change the world, we should start in our classrooms.

My generation, and the many generations before mine, grew up thinking that our great task was the production of food. This is what we were taught in school, that we had to extend the frontier of agriculture and cattle farming, had to 'turn over the mountain,' as they said back then, and 'turning it over' meant destroying our forests. Today we have to make sure we have exactly the opposite mindset. Our responsibility is to conserve the untouched mountain, and to pay to maintain it. If we are going to change our ways, if we are going to change the intergenerational attitude that compels us to 'turn over the mountain,' we must begin by changing the way we teach our children. So we are going to incorporate environmental science and the concept of sustainable development into primary and secondary education.

These four commitments are ones we make domestically. They represent the peace that we make with our small strip of land. But we do not wish to limit our efforts to the space within our borders. Carbon emissions anywhere in the world cause warming everywhere in the world. Droughts in one part of the planet cause famines elsewhere. We are not just witnesses to the environmental degradation of other nations – we are victims as well.

I would like to announce how actions that Costa Rica will promote on an international scale to lead the campaign for environmental protection and against global climate change: we will lead an international network of carbon-neutral countries; we will push for the

creation of a global system of compensation for avoided deforestation as a mechanism to protect primary forest; we will encourage lenders to swap debt for environmental protection and we will support an international initiative to establish a tax on carbon emissions.

Ever since Costa Rica made public its intention to become a carbon neutral country, two nations have followed our lead: Norway and New Zealand. I have no doubt that many more will join us, and we will make up an international network of carbon neutral countries.

The second action we will promote on an international scale is the creation of a system of incentives for countries to protect primary forest. One of the most obvious flaws in the Kyoto Protocol is that it recognises those who reforest, not those who deforest. The difference is crucial: the destruction of primary forest brings terrible consequences that cannot be reversed through reforestation, no matter how intense. Reforestation cannot protect river basins that have already been destroyed, cannot revive ecosystems that have already been violated, cannot re-establish life cycles that have already been interrupted.

Reforestation should always be Plan B. For this to be the case, countries such as Costa Rica, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo, Papua New Guinea, and Brazil should receive incentives that allow them to preserve their primary forests. It is not fair for countries which developed through devastating environmental destruction to ask us, the developing nations, to develop in such a way that protects the air they breathe, without providing anything in return.

The third international action that we will support is the implementation of mechanisms to swap bilateral external debt for environmental protection. History has offered the developed world a unique opportunity: to help developing nations breathe, in a financial sense, in exchange for protecting the quality of the air we all breathe. Countries such as Rwanda, Burundi, Ghana, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo need incentives to preserve their forests. When there are entire peoples suffering intense hunger and warfare, it is simply unjust to ask a country to make sacrifices to benefit nations that are not hungry, or sick, or uneducated or miserable. It would be better to establish a mechanism to forgive external debt that would allow these countries not only a higher level of environmental protection, but also a higher level of human development for their people.

The fourth and final action that Peace with Nature will promote outside our borders is an initiative proposed by Mario Molina, 1995 Nobel Laureate in Chemistry: a tax on carbon dioxide emissions. I know that this initiative will be difficult to achieve, because it involves a significant monetary cost. But, as Professor Molina has said, “the cost of doing nothing could be twenty to thirty times higher.”

Especially for nations like Costa Rica whose economies depend heavily on tourism, the cost of deterioration of our environment is far greater than the cost of its conservation. I have said it before and I will say it again: if we want there to be five-star hotels in Costa Rica, we must ensure that our quetzals, our macaws, our monkeys, our fish enjoy five-star accommodation as well. If we want to keep the engines of economic growth running, we are going to have to find other sources of energy besides fossil fuels. And if we want income to keep flowing into our businesses, first we have to make sure water keeps flowing into our rivers, underground aquifers, lakes, and seas.

These are the four actions we propose on an international scale. They comprise a clear and ambitious agenda that should not frighten us. Costa Rica feels proud to swim against the current and run unprotected into a hail of pessimism. We have already shown that we can be unique in the world, and we will do so yet again.

These actions, national and international, are products of the efforts of the Presidential Commission on Peace with Nature, and all its collaborators. It is time to act. We cannot wait for the rest of the world to act, because, although we have not run out of options, we certainly have run out of time.

No one has written the world’s last poem yet. No one can call themselves a historian of the end of our species, no one can chronicle our last days. There is still ink left in the well, and we have to decide what we will write with it: will we describe a desert scene, where death has been crowned king, or will we describe life, water, air and the sap of human spirit? Together, we must decide whether we will write the final poem of war, or whether we will write, at last, the poem of our Peace with Nature. ■

Costa Rica has committed to becoming a carbon neutral country by the year 2021

It’s not easy being green – but Costa Rica is leading by example

