

# Declaration of Peace with Nature

By **DR ÓSCAR ARIAS SÁNCHEZ**

PRESIDENT OF COSTA RICA AND 1987 NOBEL PRIZE LAUREATE

ÓSCAR ARIAS SÁNCHEZ is President of Costa Rica and 1987 Nobel Peace Laureate. Born in Heredia, Costa Rica in 1940, 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 won a seat in Congress in 1978 and was elected secretary-general of the National Liberation Party in 1981. He served as President between 1986-90. In 1997 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. 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.

**F**ifty-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. Twenty 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.

Our country decided to declare Peace with Nature long ago, by this same name or by other names. We would not have come as far as we have if this were not so. 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. If we are to raise before the world a green flag of peace, we must be certain that this flag is not stained or torn.

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% 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. It is true that we have beaches that have won prizes for their cleanliness, but it is also true that our management of solid wastes is far from adequate. In summary, it is true that we are a country that respects the environment, but it is also true that we are a country that could respect it a great deal more.

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 (or "C-Neutral") by the year 2021. This is an ambitious goal, which will require the utmost effort on the part of all Costa Ricans and the next several administrations. We are going to compensate for the carbon dioxide that we emit, with equivalent amounts of oxygen, so that by or 200th birthday in 2021, Costa Rica will not contribute at all to global climate change or to the deterioration of the quality of the air we breathe. I do not speak lightly when I say this: abolishing net carbon emissions will be, for us, the equivalent of don Pepe Figueres's abolition of the military (or: the abolition of the military by don Pepe, as President José Figueres Ferrer was fondly known).

In the race to carbon neutrality, the Executive Branch will lead the way. I am happy to announce our first step of that race. Effective immediately, I am personally making a commitment, and I will ask all ministers, vice-ministers and presidents of independent executive organisations to do the same, that all our trips abroad are going to be carbon-neutral.

How are we going to do this? Based on a calculation made by the National Fund for Forestry Financing (FONAFIFO), each of us will personally pay the environmental cost of our trip. FONAFIFO will channel these resources into forest protection or reforestation. After the trip, each of us will receive a certificate proving that our carbon footprint has been compensated for. This way, when we fly away to far-off places to advocate for environmental responsibility, we will not just leave a white jet trail in the sky – we will leave a vibrant trail of green in the earth.

This is the first step toward carbon neutrality. Multiple actions must complement this effort, including a significant reduction in the tax on hybrid automobiles and other vehicles that use renewable energy, in order to speed along the transformation of our vehicle fleet into one that does not harm the environment or spur climate change.

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.

## Costa Rica commits to becoming carbon neutral by the year 2021

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. Which is why, through this Executive Order, the Executive Branch will give a clear signal that the peace we make is not just tangible, but obligatory; not just of the people, but led by the State.

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 thousand hectares. This expansion has already begun. We promised to plant 5 million trees in 2007, within the framework of an initiative dubbed “A que sembrás un árbol” (“Plant a tree”) by the Costa Rican youth who spearhead it. We have already planted a million and a half trees in 2007, and with the onset of the rainy seasons, we will plant the remaining three-and-a-half million. 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.

We are also expanding our systems of biological corridors, including a new corridor for macaws around La Cangreja National Park. These corridors ensure safe passage for birds and other animals in their natural homes, and guarantee the conservation of all species of flora and fauna whose habitats have been threatened.

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. In a letter from 1930, my grandfather Julio Sánchez, referring to a man who was encroaching on his farm, wrote: “When José Sing sold me ‘Dry Arm [the name of the plot of land] I could have made trouble. You know that the entire farm lies within the boundaries of the ‘Taboga’ property and that he cannot sell me what is mine. But what belonged to me was an untouched mountain, and Sing sold me cornfields, pastures, cleared land and a house to go with it. I had no qualms when I bought it; it was only fair.” 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, to make sure our children and young people grow accustomed not to subtracting trees, but adding forests, multiplying mangroves, and giving all the species within our borders an exponential value.

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 ►





## COSTA RICA

### We will support an international initiative to establish a tax on carbon emissions

◀ within our borders, within these man-made lines in the air. 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. So it is essential that Peace with Nature be a truly international initiative. Costa Rica can be a lighthouse in the storm, but to illuminate the path for the entire world, there must be a united front.

I would like to announce four 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; 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

– a moral wall against the egotistical ambitions of some, who would continue to profit at the cost of our future.

It will be a network of countries saying in many languages, from many places, under many flags: “we will not give up on life on Earth.”

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. Think for a moment of the Winged Victory of Thrace, of the frescos of the Sistine Chapel, of Altamira Cave; think of the Pyramids of Giza or the Great Wall of China – none of these works can be reconstructed, none can be replaced. The same is true of primary forest. It is one of our planet's great works of art. We cannot substitute it for replanted forest just as we cannot replace the Taj Mahal with a replica.

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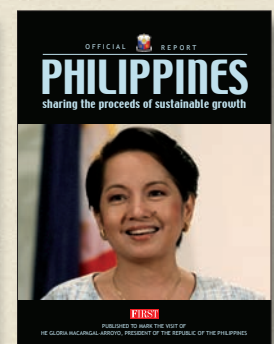
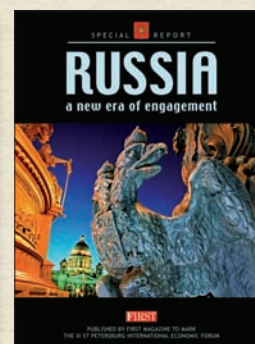
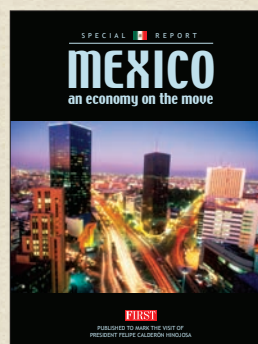
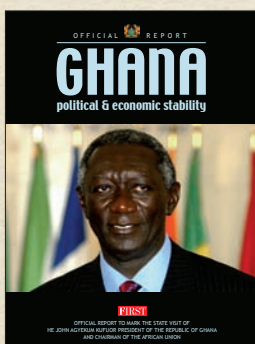
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Reforestation should always be Plan B. For this to be the case, countries such as Costa Rica, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo, Papua New Guinea, and Brazil should receive incentives that allow them to preserve their primary 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. The entire world may begin to asphyxiate in a few years, but developing nations have felt a certain kind of asphyxiation for quite some time. The crushing weight of bilateral debts they are unable to pay, and the interest on them that rises like foam on a polluted river, causes these countries to drown. 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, incentives a little more palpable than a mere call for international solidarity. Because when there are entire peoples suffering intense hunger and warfare, when misery, sickness and ignorance rule, it is simply unjust to ask a country to sacrifice 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.

If, over the years, developing nations have asked for loans from the developed world to cover their costs, it is also true that, when it comes to natural resources, the developed world owes them a great debt. It is time to settle accounts.

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." Or in the words of my good friend, former Harvard President Derek Bok, who visited us exactly twenty years ago, "if you think education is expensive, try ignorance." Likewise, if we think Peace with Nature will be expensive, we need only look at the great costs of continuing to be at war.

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, even the jungle rodents we call tepezcuintles (in English, 'agoutis') 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. We have always struggled on behalf of supposedly "lost causes," and we have registered over two hundred years of victories. 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. More than 150 people have worked and continue to work on this project, ad honorem. Dr Franklin Chang led a similar effort to create a 50 year plan for Science and Technology in Costa Rica, which in itself will be an indispensable tool for reaching the goals of Peace with Nature. Because, as Franklin has noted, "we are all astronauts on the big spaceship that is Planet Earth." We feel proud to count him as part of our crew, and to know that the Strategy for the 21st Century will be a guide for our journey.

It is time to act. We cannot sit back and wait to see what results from our collective inertia, as if we were sitting in the theatre watching a Shakespearean tragedy. We cannot wait for the other countries to sign the Kyoto Protocol, cannot wait for them to decide what they will do beyond the Kyoto Protocol, cannot wait for the scientists in other parts of the world to invent miracle solutions, cannot wait for their coal plants to stop expelling fumes, for them to invest in public transportation or drastically raise fuel efficiency standards. 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.

I began my remarks by referring to the first poem in Western literature – a poem of war. But 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 use it to write: 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. **F**

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