

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Sucre

Stories from the Heart of Colombia A podcast by Procolombia

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Hello, and welcome to Stories from the Heart of Colombia, a podcast by Procolombia.

I'm Nick Perkins and I've been living in Colombia since 1999.

I love cycling, hiking and traveling to unusual places. For a long time, I'd been dreaming of visiting every Department in Colombia on one round trip, but I hadn't been able to do it until this year, when I was finally able to plan the trip of my dreams. A trip that would take me to each of Colombia's 32 Departments, plus its capital, Bogotá, to spend a day or two, exploring the magical geographies, witnessing their immense biodiversity and soaking up the majestic vistas, all while enveloping myself in the warmth of their peoples.

In each episode of the podcast, I explore emblematic places in one Department. On my journey, I learn about the customs and cultures of the people I meet, and I record a travel diary of their experiences, stories and legends. The diary becomes an intimate and very personal record of the flavors, colors and sounds I discover in this land of infinite horizons.

Colombia has something for everyone.

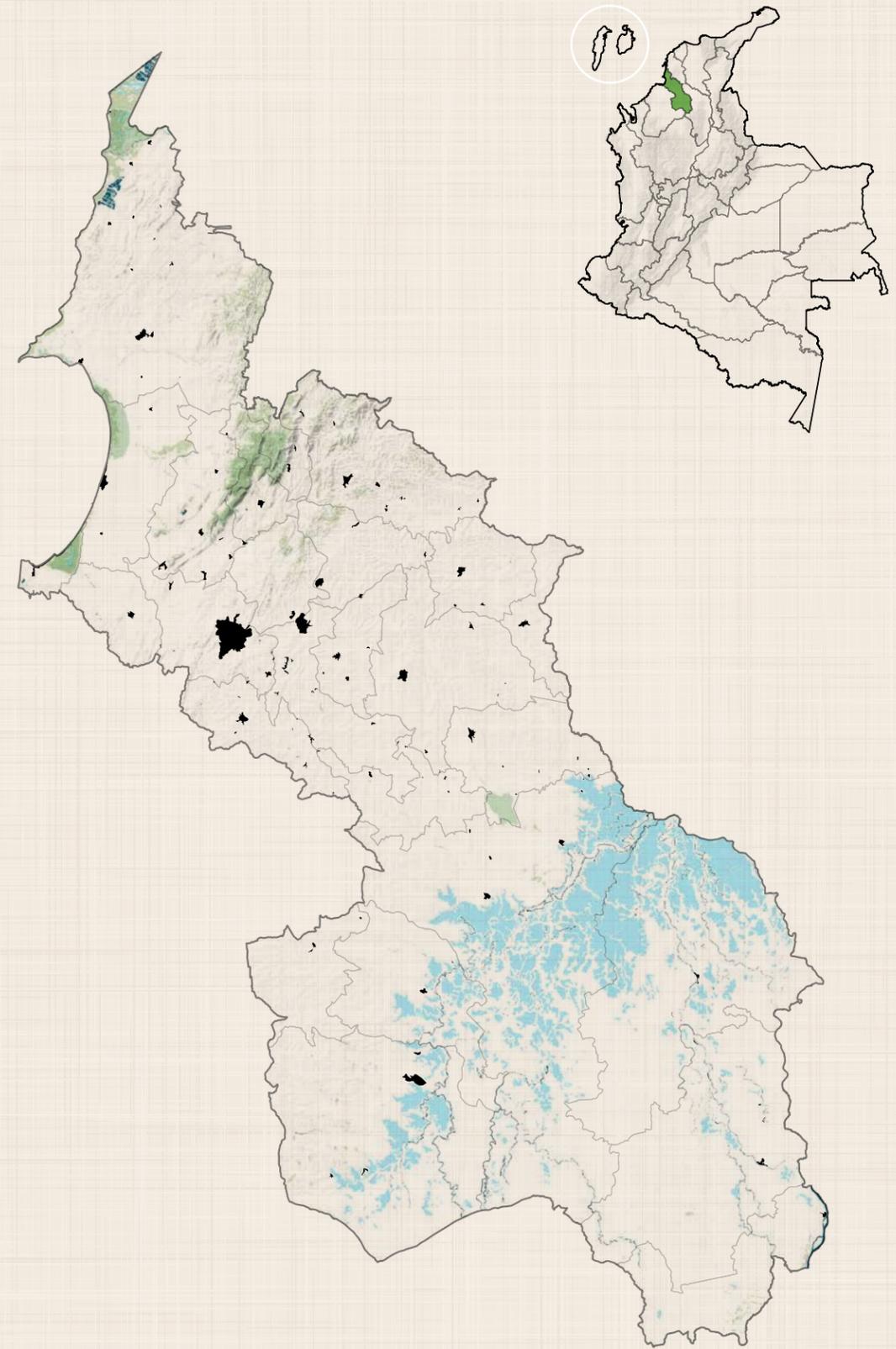
Join me on this unprecedented, sonic journey around one of the most diverse and fascinating countries on earth.

I'm Nick Perkins, and this is Stories from the Heart of Colombia.

Sucre

In today's episode I found myself in the department of Sucre, on Colombia's northern Caribbean coast, and I'm actually right now sitting in a canoe. We got in the canoe just on the seashore and started to row inland into the Ciénaga La Caimanera, which is a mangrove forest ecosystem, very common in this area of the world. And I'm with Jason Miranda –young guy, 21 years old– local, new generation. He's studying Law at Cartagena University and he still works in his family business on the weekends. And I'm also with Argemiro Araújo, who's one of the older generation, and I'm gonna talk to them both about what the Ciénaga ecosystem means

for the local environment and the local economy, and what tourism means to them. The opportunities that it's brought to their lives and, of course, we're gonna talk about the nature tourism opportunities in the mangrove forest. The flora and fauna that you can find here.



Argemiro tells me that he's been living in the area for more than 50 years. He started off as a fisher and as a woodcutter; at the time there was less consciousness than we have today. And he would cut down the mangroves in the mangrove forest, and sell them. People would use mangrove to build houses. And so, I asked him what he does now, and he said he's... He works in tourism now. He said he used to be able to make around thirty thousand pesos a day from fishing and selling wood, and he can now actually make almost double that by taking people on tours. So, not only has tourism provided him with a less arduous work, but it's also given him increased economic opportunities. And then the side effect, the byproduct of that is that he's not cutting down the mangrove forest anymore; so, the ecosystem has recovered and the mangroves are back to almost their original states from a situation where the ecosystem was actually in danger.

So, Argemiro tells me that unbelievably people used to come here and hunt the alligators and he said, you know, on a weekend 20-30 years ago people would hunt 5-6 alligators, and that's obviously prohibited now. It's completely prohibited to hunt the alligators and the local community ensures the compliance with the law because their ecosystem and a lot of that tourism income depends on the alligators being here because of course tourists absolutely love seeing an alligator hiding in the roots of a mangrove tree as they drift past in their canoe.





So I'm sitting here with Jason Miranda. Jason's one of the new generation of people, of locals here, he's actually only 21 years old, so he's grown up in a time of environmental protection and recovery, so I'm interested to hear his take on what the mangrove forest means for him.

So, Jason is telling me that he's a Law student and in his free time, as I mentioned before, he takes people on tours around the mangrove forest. And I asked him what the mangrove forest means to him, and he said "It's incredibly important to me. It's a... It's a source of income for me and my family, but it's also a source of food." Somewhere in the region of 70% of the fish that he and his family eat breed in the mangrove forests, so without the mangrove forest the fish can't breed and there would be no fish for him and his family to eat. And obviously the tourism income provides some of the opportunities. Jason also told me that in actual fact for a tree to reach its full, adult size can take up to 50 years and that's why the community realized that environmental protection of these forests is so vitally important. He said, you know, that it takes just a few minutes to cut one down, but it takes 50 years for it to grow back. So, you know, something had to be done, and in his lifetime what he's seen is this progress of recovery and of environmental awareness.

So I asked Jason about his decision to study Law and do something very different to what anyone else in his family has done. And something which took him out of the context in which he grew up, and he said he was interested in Law principally because he sees it as a way of continuing to defend and protect

his environment. He said if you look at, you know, environmental law, it's really important that we have people in our community who can understand and manage environment law in a way that ensures that it's applied and is used to protect our environment.

So, we're right in the middle of the mangrove forest now, we're in a tiny little channel running between the roots that rise up out of the water. They look like... Looks like the trees walked here, they're almost like some form of alien legs that have helped them to walk and place themselves where they are. And as you look into the forest, the further you look the more roots you can see; it's just roots and roots and roots coming up out of the swamp.

So, Jason was telling me that there are five principal types of mangrove. The main one that we're seeing as we drift through the forest is the red mangrove. And something I didn't realize before: the mangrove roots that come up out of the water and sustain the tree trunk are principally for support, and the mangrove actually gets its sustenance from another type of root which grows back down from the branches and dips into the water. So, as you're looking at the tree you've got the roots holding it up. And then, from many of the branches, there are what appear to be branches sort of flowing down back into the water; they're



actually not branches, Jason's telling me, they're in fact roots, and that's where the tree extracts the nutrients it needs to live.

An eagle just landed on a tree next to us and just sat watching these people drift through its environment. And I asked Jason what other types of birdlife we'd typically find in this mangrove forest. And he tells me that there are great bird watching opportunities, all sorts of species; some exotic, some not. A few that he mentions are the great blue heron, great egrets, great herons, neo-tropic cormorants, kingfishers, pelicans, gulls, sparrow hawks and all sorts of other types of bird, which habitually visit this mangrove forest and we should be able to see pretty much any day that you chose to come here.

When I asked Jason about what level of legislative protection there is for this particular mangrove forest, his answer was really interesting because there is none. There are certain parts of legislation which are overseen by what's called the 'CAR' (the





Corporación Autónoma Regional), but he said really it's a community-led initiative, so the community understands the value of the mangrove forest to them and maintaining this ecosystem as a source of tourism income

and as a source of food. And so, it really is the local community that decided to stop unsustainable practices and it's great to see a community come together for their own good and for the good of all humankind.

I had a lovely morning on the canoe with Jason and Argemiro talking about life, the world and everything, and exploring the mangrove forest and listening to them talk about the conservation efforts here; that it had such a positive effect on the local natural environment. In just a few short years humans have stopped

being a threat to the local fauna and the corresponding increase in animal life and the tranquility of being able to explore a mangrove forest where outboard motors are prohibited has meant that this area has become a popular tourist destination that provides multiple sources of income for the local inhabitants.



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