

EL
TRIUNFO
HOME TO A
THOUSAND
WONDERS

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The El Triunfo Biosphere Reserve is located in the Chiapas Sierra Madre mountain range in Mexico. Established March 13, 1990, it extends over 119 177 hectares and protects some of the last areas of cloud forest left in Central America and of evergreen tropical forest on the Pacific coast. Sadly, El Triunfo has also become the haven for many animals and dozens of endemic endangered species, including birds like the spectacular resplendent quetzal (*Pharomacrus Mocinno*), the azure-rumped tanager (*Tangara cabanisi*), the horned guan (*Oreophasis derbianus*), the emerald toucanet (*Aulacorhynchus prasinus*), and mammals like the tapir, the mountain lion, and the spider monkey. The reserve has registered 378 birds, 55 reptiles, 112 mammals, and more than 2000 species of flowering plants. Fleeing from urban sprawl, deforestation, and mining, many species have found in El Triunfo a last refuge where they are fighting desperately to survive.

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All photos by Chico Sánchez.

One of the endangered species that lives in the reserve is the quetzal. Before going to the reserve, in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the people in charge of its conservation and our guide had already told us how difficult it often was to catch a glimpse of this mythical animal. They told us that some people go up the mountain and might even spend days or weeks there without seeing one. I'm thankful because I saw not only one, but many. One afternoon, one of them allowed us to come very close to him, making it possible to photograph him. Their camouflage is so good that even though it was right in front of me, it took a few moments to be able to distinguish it. Every encounter with a quetzal is magical and unique.





But, one of the lessons that these forests taught me was the importance of water. In nature, trees act as giant nets that retain rainwater and then distribute it, protecting the soil from erosion and regulating the temperature. Then, the water that these forests gather flows down in the rivers, carrying with it dried leaves and other organic matter that feed the valleys below and the fish living at the river's mouth. Water is also vital for producing electricity, a form of energy that is much cleaner than coal- or oil-based energy. Our society seems to have forgotten these forests' importance. When the trees are uprooted, temperatures become extreme, bringing droughts, heat waves, and cold nights; catastrophes also occur that our society then calls "natural disasters," but that we should call "human disasters." Da Vinci said, "Water is the vehicle of nature." Life blooms thanks to water, thanks to humidity. Taking this shot, I learned that El Triunfo, like us human beings, is made up mainly of water, of humidity.

The story of the fox in the photo is a great example of the survival instinct in nature. Its family had been attacked by a jaguar and he was the only survivor. Because he was weak and he knew that jaguars don't come near places where humans are, he risked his life approaching the shelter. But that decision saved him, since the people in the shelter love nature. But many others like him aren't as lucky. Because of hunting, the poisoning of smaller animals by chemicals used in the areas surrounding the reserve, and the loss of habitat due to mining and deforestation, the forest animals have less and less food; many, like this fox, desperate and spurred by hunger, creep close to towns where the humans kill them.





Hidden behind the light and shadows, the browns and greens, the reserve is a world of color. A lavender-colored leaf shows up against a green fern. El Triunfo taught me that inside something apparently uniform, like a green landscape, is hidden enormous variety. When you look at the forest up close, it changes and explodes into colors.





Despite all the efforts to protect it by Mexicans and foreigners, El Triunfo is seriously threatened. One of the many problems this forest's inhabitants face is the hunt for and capture of exotic species for sale. The hunt, which some have even called a sport when it is not done for survival, should be banned so that the animal populations can recover. Nature gives us much more if we admire its beauty, if we contemplate it. Fortunately, even though many of the visitors to these forests today are wearing camouflage suits, they've replaced rifles and death with cameras and life, spending their time capturing the beauty of the animals in freedom and not killing or trapping them.



One of the best known inhabitants of the reserve is the *dragoncillo* (*Abronia lythrochila*), an arboreal alligator lizard. This little dragon comes out of its home in a tree near the shelter to bask in the sun every day. When we arrived, he let us come within a few meters and watched us for a good long while and, then, slowly disappeared into the darkness of his home. This tree, so important for the little lizard, is nothing more than a piece of wood for our consumer society. Oblivious to the danger, this little alligator suns himself tranquilly without knowing that the machines are surrounding the reserve, just waiting for somebody ambitious to order its destruction in order to accumulate wealth that he will never be able to spend.

Coffee is one of the products raised in the area around the reserve. The cultivation of organic coffee has been one of the solutions that the people in charge of the reserve have found for trying to achieve a balance between agriculture and conservation. When we drink organic coffee, we're taking care of ourselves, too, since it has been shown that certain agricultural chemicals used today like poisons and herbicides also endanger our health. Consuming organic products not only strengthens your health, but also that of the planet. **MM**

