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Colombia's national parks at a crossroads as new director installed

by [Aurora Solá](#) on 3 March 2021



- As Colombia's parks face brutal deforestation, a firestorm of criticism has erupted over the country's newly appointed director of national parks, Orlando Molano, who has no experience in environmental affairs.
- During the 17-year tenure of outgoing director Julia Miranda, eight new parks were established and Chiribiquete National Natural Park was expanded to become the world's largest tropical rainforest park.
- Environmentalists worry that under Molano's oversight the development of recreational infrastructure in parks could take precedence over the conservation of nature in a country where corruption is rampant.
- Colombia's national parks intersect critically with the fight against deforestation, although responsibility for controlling deforestation lies directly with President Iván Duque, not the national parks administration.

It happened the way it so often does in Colombia: the government announced a new official appointment and outrage ensued. As the year 2020 drew to a close, the minister of environment, Carlos Correa, himself newly appointed, informed the country via a tweet that the national parks administration would be headed by one Orlando Molano.

Molano, an architect with next to no experience in environmental affairs, now directs the government agency that safeguards a network of vital ecosystems across almost 20 million hectares (50 million acres) — around one-sixth of Colombia's surface area.

A group of [66 notables](#) from the academic and conservation sectors signed an open letter to Colombia's president, Iván Duque, indicating their concern over Molano's appointment.

The least charitable commenters include Gustavo Bolívar, a senator with the progressive Humane Colombia party, who derided Molano as "an environmental predator." Humberto de la Calle, chief negotiator of Colombia's 2016 peace agreement with the FARC rebels and perennial presidential candidate, declared that Colombia's national parks had been "orphaned."

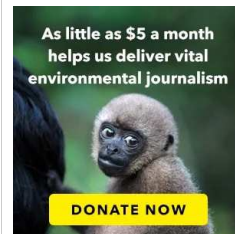
Is the uproar justified?

In fact, Molano does have experience in parks, only not the type with canyons, flocks of wildlife, and other feasts of nature. Under Enrique Peñalosa's last administration as Bogotá's mayor from 2016 to 2019, Molano was in charge of running the Instituto Distrital de Recreación y Deporte (IDRD), the capital's parks and recreation department. While in that office, Molano made a name for himself by remodeling [1,387 city parks](#). He built 60 new ones too, and 165 football fields with artificial grass, many of them [where trees used to stand](#). Molano is, in the words of one city resident, "the guy known for building jungle gyms and astroturf in city parks."

"To combat deforestation," [one Colombian lawyer](#) tweeted, "we will have the Peñalosa model in the National Parks: synthetic trees, synthetic courts, synthetic flooring, and bike paths."

One of the most august critics of the new appointment has been Manuel Rodríguez-Becerra, Colombia's first environment minister from 1993 to 1996, founder and president of the National Environmental Forum, and twice the president of the U.N.'s Forum on Forests. "It is a disgrace," [he wrote on Twitter](#). "Appointing Orlando Molano as director of National Parks is worse than appointing Orlando Molano as Minister of Finance."

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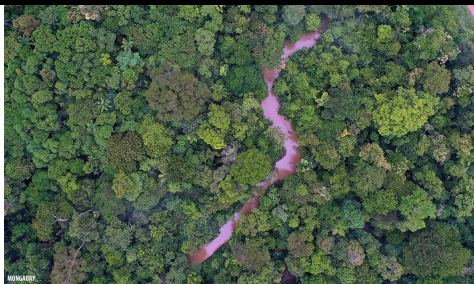
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Creek in the Amazon rainforest in Colombia. Photo by Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay.

Molano in, Miranda out

Some of the anguish surrounding the new appointment has to do with whom he replaced.

Julia Miranda headed the national parks administration (formally National Natural Parks of Colombia) for almost 17 years, during which time eight new parks were established in Colombia. That brought the number of nationally protected areas up to 59. The area of Chiribiquete National Natural Park, a precious patch of Amazon forest that also holds tens of thousands of [millennia-old rock paintings](#), was doubled. Today it is the largest tropical rainforest national park anywhere in the world. Under Miranda's leadership, [marine protected areas grew from 8.59% to comprise 13.31% of Colombia's waters](#), making the nation an overachiever in relation to at least one of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets (number 11).

Each of these achievements were hard-won. Placing new land under protection is a task that involves going head-to-head with the oil and mining lobbies, Colombia's largest industries, since [extraction is forbidden in national parks by law](#).

Since National Natural Parks of Colombia was established in 1960, its directors had until now been anointed high priests of natural heritage without controversy. They came from varied professional backgrounds — trained in anthropology, biology, law — but were invariably respected in their fields and earned the esteem of ecologists over extended tenures. Carlos Castaño served for 14 years at the close of the last century; the outgoing Miranda kept her position through five presidential terms under heads of state as divergent in direction and temper as Álvaro Uribe and the Nobel peace laureate Juan Manuel Santos.

"The policy [of stability] has been very effective," said Rodríguez-Becerra, the former environment minister, in an interview with Mongabay. "[Less than 10%](#) of the areas within the parks have seen deep transformations in land use," he said, citing data from the 2017 edition of the [Ecosystems Map](#) published by Colombia's Institute of Hydrology, Meteorology and Environmental Studies (IDEAM). Instances of deforestation notwithstanding, it's a remarkable amount of control over time in a state that has never even managed to establish a [monopoly on violence](#).

Like so many effective conservationists before her, Julia Miranda is an environmental lawyer, one of the first crop of green legal minds trained at Universidad Externado de Colombia, a prestigious law school. Like Molano, her successor at National Natural Parks of Colombia, she worked for Bogotá's famous mayor Enrique Peñalosa. But rather than a builder she was the chief of the Environmental Management Consulting Office at the Urban Development Institute. As director of national parks, Miranda pursued a strategy of social participation that sought to include Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and local farming communities in the processes of conservation.

By contrast, Orlando Molano holds an undergraduate degree in architecture, a postgraduate specialization in construction, and an MBA. In his aforementioned role as director of parks and recreation in Bogotá, he frequently came into [conflict with environmentalists](#) and otherwise apolitical city residents who resented that his vision for reformed urban parks required that trees be felled. He has never held a position in the fields of conservation or sustainability until now.

During her tenure, Julia Miranda garnered awards from global environmental organizations including the IUCN and the International Conservation Caucus Foundation (ICCF). Within Colombia, she received honors from the Ministry of Defense, which awarded her its highest civilian medal for exceptional service in the protection of Colombian heritage.



Sapzurro Bay, in the Chocó Department of the Darién region in Colombia. Photo by Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay.

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
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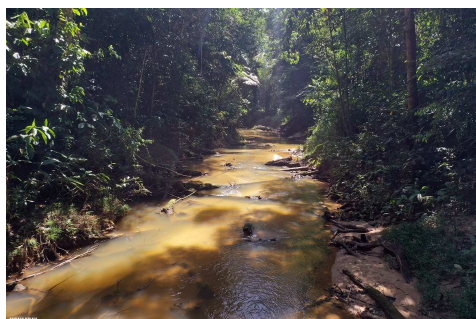
colors. Expansive upland bogs dotted with marcescent plants that look like high-altitude obelisks. Caribbean beaches hedged by boulders and watered by glacial creeks. Gargantuan swaths of rainforest with more bird species than any other country in the world. These are but a few of the treasures that lie within the protected areas that encase 17% of Colombia's land — well above the [global figure of 14.7%](#) — and are entrusted to the care of Colombia's national parks administration.

Such monumental natural wealth comes with monumental difficulties of management, so it is understandable that the appointment of an official unfamiliar with this vast domain has caused consternation.

Many national parks throughout the world are little more than so-called "[paper parks](#)," lines drawn on maps without the institutional muscle necessary to ensure their protection. The road from the declaration of a protected area to appropriate deployment of budget and institutional capacity for its effective conservation is often long and potholed. As an example, exquisite amphibian regions of Colombia have been declared [Ramsar wetlands](#) but are as yet lacking management plans and face severe degradation.

To address this gap, the IUCN, the global authority on conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources that brings together government and civil society organizations and hosts the World Parks Congress, has developed a [Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas](#). It's a kind of gold standard that celebrates parks that enjoy good governance, sound design and planning, effective management, and positive conservation outcomes.

Under Julia Miranda's leadership, five of Colombia's protected areas made it onto the IUCN's Green List, out of only seven in total for all of Latin America. Miranda was working to extend the standard to all protected areas in the country, including private ones.



Rainforest creek in the Colombian Amazon. Photo by Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay.

The battle over Tayrona

Given Miranda's acclaimed performance in leading national parks administration, speculation as to why she was replaced was fast, furious, and markedly partisan.

It was known that [Miranda did not wish to resign](#) her position. Even so, she had served for 17 years already; arguably, her time had to come eventually.

The most widely touted and incendiary explanation for Miranda's removal locates the cause in her staunch opposition to the construction of new hotels in Tayrona National Natural Park. Named after the [pre-Columbian Chibchan nation](#), it is one of Colombia's earliest and perhaps its most emblematic national park. A wonderland of forest, stone and shore, Tayrona rises from Caribbean beaches along the skirts of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta up toward high mountain lakes and ultimately glaciers. Its landscapes are the homeland of the Arhuaco, Kogui, Kankwama, and Wiwa peoples. At this intersection of Indigenous knowledge, natural wealth and private interests, Tayrona is a reflection of Colombian parks at large.

In May 2019, former president Álvaro Uribe, the political patron of Colombia's current president, issued a harsh and public criticism of Miranda's national parks administration. "It's unacceptable that President Duque declares tourism to be Colombia's new oil, but then National Parks sets up obstacles that prevent development and tourism infrastructure in Tayrona," [Uribe said](#).

Many saw this as a [thinly veiled declaration of support](#) from Uribe toward the sisters Claudia Dávila Zuñiga and Beatriz Dávila Zuñiga and their ambitions for Tayrona. Through their company, Sociedad Promotora Arrecifes, they have been working since at least 2008 to secure permits for [two hotel projects inside the national park](#), a Six Senses resort, and another venue called Los Ciruelos. The women are sisters of José Francisco Zuñiga, who, by his own admission, became mayor of Santa Marta in 2004 thanks to the support of Hernán Giraldo. The latter is in turn a convicted criminal and commander of the Tayrona Resistance Front of the paramilitary United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), known for the most [degrading assaults on human rights](#) during Colombia's civil war.

"Circling Tayrona are a bunch of families that make House of Cards look like Sesame Street," one analyst told Mongabay, speaking on condition of anonymity.

There have been [reports of secret meetings](#) held in the backrooms of the Colombian Senate to influence the destiny of Tayrona. Miranda herself said the process of updating Tayrona's management plan had come under pressure. Before she resigned, she signed off on [a fine worth about \\$1.3 million](#) on a

"I won't let them cut down a single tree," Miranda told [E! Espectador](#) in 2013, referring to Tayrona.

Last month, after Miranda's exit, the governor of the department of Magdalena, in which the Tayrona park is located, presented a letter to the Ministry of Interior arguing that the four Indigenous peoples of Tayrona should be involved in the management of the park. "We have been working to declare Tayrona a world heritage site, in the face of the commercial interests of those who put economic returns before the welfare of the community of Magdalena," [he said](#).

Despite this history, [Miranda publicly expressed doubt](#) that her opposition to these projects in Tayrona was the reason for her dismissal, saying the jurisprudence for parks is solidly in line with conservation interests. But it is clear that in her long tenure as leader of National Natural Parks of Colombia she has been a bulwark against commercial development in the country's protected wildernesses.



Caribbean sea at Parque Tayrona in Colombia. Photo by Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay.

Sharing sublime space: Tourism and conservation

National parks, by their very nature, exist in a state of tension between the aims of conservation and of human enjoyment. When properly managed, this tension can be productive, since as citizens get to know their parks they become more committed to their perpetuation and the care of nature more broadly. Conservation must be the first consideration in parks, but tourism can also provide livelihoods for local communities that in a country like Colombia may otherwise resort to livestock ranching, timber harvesting, or other practices that impinge on a park's biodiversity.

But the balancing act between these two interests is always a delicate one. Given Orlando Molano's background in construction and the country's tendency toward the undue influence of private interests in politics, his critics worry that the development of recreational infrastructure could take precedence over the care of nature.

These anxieties are illustrated in an article published by Actualidad Panamerica, Colombia's beloved satirical website, which joked that under the new administration, Chiribiquete National Natural Park would reinvent itself as [Chiribik-t](#), a theme park boasting mechanical attractions including water slides, a Ferris wheel, ATMs, and a "glyphosate experience" ride. "It should be a park for everyone," Actualidad Panamerica eulogized sarcastically, "not just for a few rich, progressive, homeschooling, ayahuasca enthusiasts from Bogotá."



Rio Don Diego valley, a former coca-growing area in Colombia. Photo by Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay.

Who answers for deforestation?

Like national parks everywhere, those in Colombia encounter threats from deforestation, fragmentation, over-harvesting, pollution, invasive species, and climate change.

But in Colombia, parks face the additional [threat of assassination](#).

Last year, under mortal threats from illegal armed groups, park rangers evacuated from the Amazonian national parks. The threats were not empty: Yamid Alonso Silva Torres, a 38-year-old ranger at El Cocuy National Natural Park, was murdered on Feb. 6, 2020. One year later, there are still [four rainforest parks](#) (Puré, Yaigojé Apaporis, La Paya, and Cahuinari) to which rangers have been unable to return.

Responsibility for halting deforestation and ensuring security in Colombia's parks cannot lie primarily with the national parks administration. Rather, it is the direct purview of the president, Iván Duque, who alone has the power to deploy the military and marshal other agencies within the executive.

President Duque has committed to zero deforestation in protected areas and a 50% reduction in total deforestation by

address forest clearing. It is led by the National Council Against Deforestation, which makes decisions on where to act based on information supplied by IDEAM, the environmental studies institute. The [national parks administration does not even have a seat](#) on the council, which is led by the minister of environment, to which the parks unit reports. Under Operation Artemisa, the armed forces and the Attorney General's Office are meant to work in harmony with environmental regulators to protect forests.

But according to Sandra Vilardy, director of the think tank Parques Nacionales Cómo Vamos, [deforestation in parks is on the rise](#) (particularly in the Macarena and Tinigua parks) because Operation Artemisa fails to take aim at the crime bosses driving it. In the most deforested regions of Colombia, [forest clearing and cattle ranching are but means to the end of land grabbing](#).



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Forest generating in former coca-growing area. Photo by Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay.

Measuring progress in parks

The independent think tank that Sandra Vilardy directs is a consortium of two of Colombia's most prestigious universities (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana and Universidad de los Andes), its foremost environmental newspaper (*Semana Sostenible*), an important human rights research center (DeJusticia), four private foundations, WWF Colombia, and the Wildlife Conservation Society. The enterprise was conceived in a conversation between Manuel Rodríguez-Becerra, Colombia's inaugural environment minister, and Alejandro Santodomingo, a Colombian billionaire and philanthropist.

"Parques Nacionales Cómo Vamos is an initiative of ten civil society organizations that want to present systematized and well-reasoned information to promote social participation and strengthen the governance of protected areas," Vilardy told Mongabay. "We also seek to influence public policy to improve the management of these great natural assets."

On May 22, the International Day for Biological Diversity, Parques Nacionales Cómo Vamos will publish its first annual report on the state of Colombia's national parks.

The report is based on a battery of indicators that have been developed by combining ecosystem data sourced both from the government and partner organizations, with social and economic information on factors such as agricultural activity and the presence of Indigenous groups — a kind of multilayered atlas of the places that concentrate Colombia's biodiversity.

These various streams of information have never been brought together before. The resultant exercise in geography will be published in a format that is interactive and free to download from the Parques Nacionales Cómo Vamos [website](#). The upcoming offering will include the initial report that will function as a baseline for future evaluations of the progress of the parks, in addition to an executive summary, maps, and infographics for non-specialist readers.

"These will be indicators that are robust and easy to understand," Vilardy said.

With this data made accessible, the government's performance will be subject to wider and more ruthless scrutiny than ever.



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Rainforest vegetation in the Amazon. Photo by Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay.

The wilds at a crossroads

Orlando Molano takes over as director of National Natural Parks of Colombia at a critical moment. Even as they suffer under internal pressures, Colombia's parks have never been more studied by science or more valued for what they can contribute to the global project of environmental redemption. Molano will also be managing the largest budget in the institution's history, thanks in large part to the success of his predecessor who grew the allocation for national parks [fourteen-fold](#) during her tenure.

Conference of the Parties for the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP15) and the next Conference of the Parties on Climate Change (COP26). Protected areas are typically an important tool for addressing urgent questions at the conferences.

Colombia has announced ambitious commitments to be made at both COPs. If the nation is to make good on its purposes, Orlando Molano will have to become one of the world's most important conservationists rather quickly.

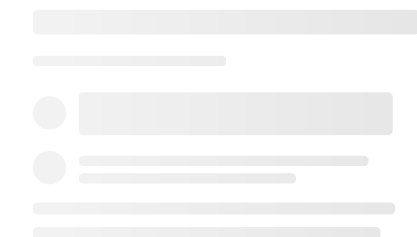
Molano earned his degree in architecture at night school. He was no stranger to work by then; orphaned at the age of 6, he spent his childhood hawking candy and Christmas cards on the downtown streets of Bogotá to make ends meet. An ethic forged by the rigors of poverty in combination with his sense of purpose as a re-maker of urban landscapes powered the astonishing feat of building a park a day for four straight years while a servant of the city of Bogotá.

Of course, at National Natural Parks of Colombia the mandate is to preserve landscapes, not precisely remake them. Nevertheless, if Molano can channel the formidable energy that he brought to his last job into real ecological conservation; if he can remain untainted in the face of political pressure; and if citizens empowered by the information synthesized at Parques Nacionales Cómo Vamos can exert the right kind of oversight — there may yet be hope for Colombia's national parks.

Banner image: Creek in the Amazon rainforest in Colombia. Photo by Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay.

Article published by [Genevieve Belmaker](#)

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