

Great Iberá Park

A Common Horizon



CORRIENTES
somos todos!



Great Iberá Park



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A Common Horizon



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Foreword

The story of Iberá Park deserves to be told and retold many times. It is an example of teamwork and ideas brought to life. It speaks of governance and vision, but above all, of a profound love for our land. We, the people of Corrientes are, first of all, proud of what is ours, passionate even fanatical. And when we embrace something, we commit to it fully. So it is with Iberá. From being a “black hole” that caused complications, and seemed impossible to approach, it became the heart, the lung, and the driving force of the province.

Many decades ago, a group of brave people from Corrientes began the journey of protecting our natural treasures without fully realizing the magnitude of what they were setting in motion. That first step in conservation made it possible for Iberá to become an icon of worldwide tourism, wildlife watching, and species recovery. However, this did not happen by chance, nor was it an overnight transformation. It has been the result of hard work, study and research, of effort and commitment, but above all, of clear and sustained policies. Because there was careful organization, planning, and forward-thinking actions that seemed visionary, even utopian, for the time.

Corrientes sets a new precedent in the country by being the first and so far, the only province to have free green-winged macaws. It went from

being a place where the jaguar faced extinction to the province with the largest population of the species in the wild. What was once viewed as a “non-productive” area and a “challenge” has now become a tourist destination recognized among the best in the world.

Iberá has become a productive force and together with the neighboring towns, we have found a way to create a new economy for the province, one that aligns with the current need to respect and protect our natural resources and all living creatures. This worldwide shared model generates economic benefits, fostering pride and a deep sense of belonging among its people.

Iberá brings us global recognition for its natural beauty and efforts in species recovery. It educates by inspiring us to protect our natural resources, improves us by fostering awareness and responsibility, and challenges us to embrace change and strive for progress every day.

This journey has not been easy, and it continues. The challenges renew and multiply, but that does not stop us. We know exactly where we are headed, and with conviction and determination—above all, with passion—we continue to make history in our beloved Corrientes.

I invite you to explore this book, which traces the creation of Iberá Park, its origins, the path we’ve taken, the differences—at times incompatible—between key sectors and actors that we have managed to overcome, the wisdom of learning and listening to achieve a common goal, and the revitalization of our natural and cultural resources. Enjoy.

Gustavo Valdés
Governor of the Province of Corrientes

Introduction

“Iberá” means “shining waters” in the Guaraní language. Today, we recognize that these shining waters are the heart of the province of Corrientes. The Iberá Wetlands are among the most important wetlands on the planet. This unique ecosystem, with its vast stretches of freshwater, floating islands, and rich biodiversity, stands as living proof of nature’s power and its capacity for renewal. This understanding comes from 40 years of research by scientists from our university and beyond, who have worked to explore, describe, and understand the complexity of this ecosystem.

Its conservation and sustainable use present challenges that demand an interdisciplinary approach, and this is where the “nature production” project finds true purpose. This project in the Iberá parks has offered an innovative and forward-thinking response to these challenges. Its approach not only focuses on preserving the ecosystem but also aims to generate economic and social benefits for local communities through conservation. The guiding principle is that the environment, beyond being a resource to use, is a valuable heritage that can and should be managed sustainably for the well-being of all.

In this book, we offer a collective narrative: multiple voices that build this complex framework of sustainable development. We are proud

to be part of this process through an inter-institutional space like the (Iberá Committee). The pages of this book illustrate the importance of this approach, revealing how the reintroduction of extinct species, the restoration of degraded habitats, and the promotion of ecotourism have revitalized the Iberá Wetlands, turning them into a model of conservation and development.

Each chapter is filled with the passion and commitment of locals and professionals who have dedicated their lives to studying and protecting the Iberá Wetlands. Their work provides us with a deeper understanding of this fascinating ecosystem. It also offers an inspiring view of how science and collaboration can lead to innovative solutions for the most pressing environmental challenges of our time.

I hope this work becomes a source of creativity and knowledge for everyone interested in nature conservation and sustainable development. May it remind us of the importance of preserving our heritage and inspire us to act responsibly for future generations.

I am especially grateful to those contributing to this book. I also hope all readers enjoy it and share the Iberá vision with us.

Gerardo Omar Larroza
Rector of the Northeast National University



The system of wetlands is a realm of lateral, central, vertical, and horizontal mother waters. There are waters that even float through the air or slip beneath other waters, in the deepest, most independent, sunken depths... Beautiful yet eerie waters, forming that vast reservoir of all hues, which the French naturalist d'Orbigny compared only to the lakes and marshes of Africa. [...]

Iverá is habituated to the movement, both internal and external. Abandoned by the fiscal coffers. [...] And its men, the ignorant caretakers of the swamp, unaware of this task of beauty that fate has bestowed upon them. Some of them, former bandits, now tame; others, remnants of old bloodstained politics, who fled from the villages or the fields amid the shifting tides of political turmoil. Still others, born and raised there. All these men live by their own law: never to fight among comrades of the waters...

Francisco Madariaga (1927-2000), *Iverá: una comarca de la poesía*, in *Solo contra Dios no hay veneno*, in *Contradegüellos I. El tren casi fluvial*, Eduner, 2016.

The *Yvera* of Those Days

According to residents of Concepción, Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, the city of Corrientes, and other areas of the province that is home to one of the most diverse and extensive wetlands in South America, “there are still many people, even from Corrientes, who don’t know about Iberá.” They speak with a sense of regret, having long lived and worked in this world heritage site. Iberá—from the Guaraní *yvera*—means *shiny water* or *water that shines*, but few people knew of it, and even fewer enjoyed its radiance. At least, not until some official decisions and measures, such as the creation of the Natural Reserve in 1983. Those 1,300,000 hectares, now protected since 1983, may have been one of the key pillars of the process that eventually transformed the area into a popular tourist destination that now draws visitors from around the world.

Those who lived through that time recall that traveling to *Yvera*¹ felt almost like enduring a punishment. This remote corner, nestled in the heart of Corrientes, was a refuge for deserters. “When someone committed a wrongdoing, they would hide there because no one dared to go in after them,” locals recount. It was also the backdrop for myths and legends.

The Iberá Wetlands are situated in a geological depression with an extremely gentle slope, allowing water to accumulate and drain slowly. This depression was shaped by the Paraná River tens of thousands of years ago when it flowed through what is now the province, before adopting its current course. Over the past 3,500 to 4,000 years, climate factors, along with various geological and biological processes, have shaped what is now Argentina’s most important freshwater wetland (Laprovitta, 2024).

Iberá is home to an extraordinary variety of flora, with approximately 1,700 plant species. It also supports a rich wildlife, including capybaras, caimans, and species once thought extinct, such as the jaguar, giant river otter, and pampas deer. In its skies, some 370 bird species

“The capital city of Corrientes continually feeds the myth. Of its 150,000 inhabitants, perhaps only a hundred have ventured into Iberá. The rest believe that entire islands shift locations, that aquatic plants unexpectedly trap any boat, that in remote hideouts, hundreds of outlaws dwell, that piranhas devour swimmers, and that the *yarará* strikes down any intruder.”

Rodolfo Walsh, *Viaje al fondo de los fantasmas*, *Adán*, (5), 1996.

1. It is mentioned as *Yvera* in the Third Map of Paraguay, created by the Jesuit Company in 1732. Despite variations in spelling, the Guaraní name was preserved, eventually becoming Iberá, which is used today.





have been recorded, including the strange-tailed tyrant and jabiru stork.

Nevertheless, Iberá has traditionally been regarded as land primarily suited for livestock farming, rice cultivation, and pine plantations.

AMONG SUBSISTENCE LIVESTOCK FARMING, FAMILY PLOTS, AND HUNTING

“People in the area relied on livestock farming. Most had their small farms, which provided their food. Cassava was used to make starch and flour. They would bring only the essentials from the town: salt, rice, and pasta,” says Omar Rojas—“Don Rojas,” as this man in his sixties is known in Concepción del Yaguareté Corá—a lifelong

Flora and fauna in one of the wetlands with the highest biodiversity.
© Matías Rebak

cattle rancher and one of the many witnesses to Iberá’s transformation from a neglected region to a symbol of significance, embodied in projects and public policy.

Families raised their animals on their plots. Cows provided them with milk, while pigs and chickens were a source of food. “They also had their own eggs,” adds Antonia Segovia, his wife. At 20 years old, the couple began working together herding cattle at Estancia San Alonso, a privileged spot in the heart of the wetlands. This would later become a key site for ecological restoration efforts, elevating Corrientes as a pioneer in the region and across the country.

Many families from the various towns that make up the Iberá area raised animals and cultivated their land to “secure” their daily

The white heron, one of the more than 300 bird species that inhabit the wetlands. The capybara, typical of Iberá, represents peace and tranquility.
© Rafael Abuín

bread. Such is the case of Domingo “Mingo” González, a resident of Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, who grew up working the fields with his parents and siblings and is now a tour guide.

In those days, “many of the locals were hunters,” Omar Rojas explains. He didn’t have to kill animals because his father, “illiterate but intelligent,” as he says, didn’t permit him or his brothers to do so. “And that is something very important,” he emphasizes today, reflecting as a father of five and a tour guide. However, he did live through that time when hunting was as common as wearing leather garments. It was the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Mingo and his brothers didn’t need to hunt either, but “some hunted out of necessity,” he explains. He recounts how uncles and relatives would sell the hides to the town’s shopkeepers—the first middlemen—and the meat was destined for the family table.

“For us, the capybara was synonymous with food or a pet,” says Víctor “Chuli” Vallejos, a young man from Concepción del Yaguareté Corá who now works as a guide. He recalls backyards where orphaned baby capybaras were often brought home after a hunt.

The most prized species at the time was the river otter. It was a difficult animal to hunt, not only because they were already scarce in the wetlands, but also because they “were not easily caught.” When someone managed to do

“What *nico* will become of the rogues the police are after,” said Camba [Núñez], continuing after my ignorant reply. “These places have *co* always served as a refuge for people of all kinds. Because just think about it, why *ta ngaú* do they go rustling cattle if the wetland *nico* can bring in good money...” he kept reasoning, as though trying to find an explanation for the misdeeds of such people, concluding: “They’re just born rebellious...” Smoking slowly between sips of mate, night fell, and the nocturnal spirits began their eternal wanderings.

The scene takes place at Laguna Trin, located in the department of Concepción, on Tuesday, May 24, 1966.

Miguel Raúl López Bréard, *Diario de un mariscador. 30 días por los esteros, riachos y lagunas del Iberá*, Moglia, 2014.

Translator’s Note:
Nico/co: Commonly used in Guaraní-influenced Spanish, often to emphasize or add a colloquial tone. It can loosely mean “really” or “just.”
Ta ngaú: A Guaraní-Spanish phrase expressing hypothetical or unreal situations, similar to “as if” or “why would they even.”



Viewpoint of the Mariscador, Laguna Iberá, Carlos Pellegrini. © Viviana Pavón

so, “it made a difference; with the hides of four otters and a few others, you could buy a truck.”

They also earned the admiration of the other hunters. “It was like a prize,” Mingo says. Children hunted as well. “My family and I hunted for survival, but we didn’t sell what we caught,” says Saúl Aguirre, a young man from the *Ka’aguy* area, who, at 10 or 11 years old, would go hunting with his father and his brother Juan.

“It was our way to get by,” agrees Domingo “Mingo” Ávalos, a local who now offers tourists canoe rides pulled by horses. His photos have been featured in official promotional posters for Iberá and even in international magazines. Domingo is 51 years old and has been living off tourism for over a decade. But it wasn’t always this way. As a child, he learned that food made



it to the table when the hides of the animals they hunted were traded for goods. Together with his three brothers, he would accompany his father to provide for the family's daily sustenance. They were between 6 and 10 years old, and with spear in hand, they would venture deep into the wetlands. With those handcrafted spears—made by locals for hunting and protection—they played at being hunters. “We would compete to see who could kill the most animals,” Mingo recalls.

It was a matter of work, of survival. “Back then, there was no tourism here. We hunted capybaras and other animals to sell their hides,” adds Catalino “Cata” Ávalos, the second of four brothers, who, as an adult, went to Santa Rosa, the neighboring town, to seek

Interview to brothers
Domingo and Catalino
Ávalos in Concepción.
© Sebastián Bravo

The *mariscador* relied on hunting and fishing for survival. Their nomadic life, far from towns, helped preserve the Guarani language and traditions. They knew the lacustrine territory like no one else, navigating it expertly in flat-bottomed foraging canoes with the aid of a pole. It is the gap that separates outsiders, or even small-town folk. Initially, the *mariscador*'s activities were aimed at self-consumption. Later, due to the value of hides and feathers, it evolved into a form of trade between *mariscadores* and collectors.

[...]

These seasoned *mariscadores* have now become park rangers and stand as the foremost guardians of nature.

Parque Provincial Iberá, *Rasgos culturales*.
El “Mencho”, Cultura, Gobierno de Corrientes, 2015.

new opportunities. Cata speaks more Spanish and engages in the conversation with greater ease. Mingo, on the other hand, still avoids eye contact and speaks in fluent Guarani, addressing *Keneke*—as everyone calls Alfredo Zalazar—a local who became a guide and provincial park ranger. He arranged the meeting and served as translator during the interview.

But deep down, Mingo wants to tell his story—the story of his people, his community, his Iberá. That's why he opened the doors of his ranch, though not without first taking the necessary time to assess those who made their way to Felipe Cué, the area known as the gateway to the Carambolita stream in Concepción.

Leaning against the gate, Mingo, his son Nicolás, and Catalino—who was visiting for the patron saint festivities—saw *Keneke*'s truck approaching. They greeted him with their usual friendly smiles. It was essential for the well-known guide and fellow townsman to go ahead and inform the hosts about the visit, the intention to talk with them, and the desire to include their story in this book. The cautious wait inside the vehicle ended when Mingo nodded and opened the doors to his home and, in a sense, to a piece of his life.

With a quick gesture, Mingo hurried Nico, who ran off to prepare the mate—an unmistakable sign of warm Corrientes hospitality. Cata brought over a couple of benches, and the group gathered

under a majestic timbó tree, whose shade offered relief from the oppressive November heat. The occasional breeze cooled their sweaty bodies as the first words, introductions, and laughter began to flow. They waited patiently for Mingo “to ease into” the conversation, as one of the many guides who had crossed that distance—through water and vegetation—would later describe it. It is the gap that separates outsiders, or even small-town folk, from those who live deep within the wetlands.

Trust and openness gradually took hold, and the hosts began recounting how they transitioned from hunting capybaras and caimans to protecting and proudly displaying them. “We would head out in the morning and spend the whole day hunting. We’d hunt a good number of capybaras, using spears and dogs. There were no shotguns back then,” Catalino recalls of his childhood. Sometimes they went as a group; other times, in pairs. “And even in the cold, we still had to get into the water,” he adds. Capybaras were the most sought-after in those days, though anything they caught could be traded for food—little more than that at the time. When his father was young and hunted, “any animal was useful—and worth more back then,” he explains.

It was a capybara that left Mingo with a mark for life. “One day, it bit this finger,” he says, holding up his right hand, now missing its

thumb. He smiles today but still remembers the fright any young boy would feel. He was 10 years old when he hit his prey with a spear. Thinking it was already dead, he approached to grab it. But the animal, dazed and disoriented, tried to defend itself. “It turned on me,” he recalls.

A neighbor helped him out of the wetlands and took him to the provincial capital, where he finally received medical attention. “Back then, there were no phones or roads,” Cata adds. The story underscores the stark difference between those days and the present in this part of Iberá.

What was survival—and even a game for children—for the locals, represented commerce to others. Tractors and trucks would arrive from outside to venture into Iberá for days, especially during winter. They would head into the forest, the wetlands, and the ravines. “For instance, they’d set out in April and stay two or three months straight, returning with a haul of hides,” says Omar Rojas, gesturing with his hands to show the size of the collection of pelts.

The sale of animal hides during that time generated hefty profits, but only for the collectors and other members of the commercial chain, not for the expert hunters. The *mariscadores*—as the hunters are called in the area—didn’t receive money; instead, they traded a capybara hide for a package of yerba mate, and a caiman hide for essentials like a package of fat, matches, tobacco, sugarcane,

rice, pasta, or canned tomatoes. They made their trades and returned in their canoes, paddling back into the wetlands. Iberá supplied Europe with hides that, in the form of handbags, shoes, and coats, were displayed in the windows of renowned luxury brands.

HIDES AND FASHION: CRISIS OF A PRODUCTIVE MODEL

Time passed in the countryside as it always does—slowly but relentlessly. And the allure of the Iberá ecosystem was altered. Caught by spears or the sights of increasingly sophisticated weapons, the wildlife began to disappear. Dozens of species, including anteaters, peccaries, giant otters, jaguars, macaws, and other local animals vanished from the area. Some disappeared from the province entirely, while others vanished from the entire country.

At the same time, a gradual global shift in attitudes began to emerge. The trade in hides started to be frowned upon. The creation of garments at the expense of animal suffering and sacrifice faced growing condemnation, and clothing companies stopped purchasing hides that lacked certified origins. Hunting-sourced hides gradually lost their value.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, with species becoming extinct and the hide trade collapsing,

the *mariscadores* lost their means of making a living. The Iberá was losing its human inhabitants as well. Many locals abandoned their birthplace in pursuit of a better future.

Some stayed behind and found an alternative in rice farming. This type of farming opened up new opportunities for employment among former hunters. Boosted by environmental conditions and favorable official policies, this crop began to expand in the province. Large volumes of water are required for the flood irrigation system—to prevent the growth of weeds that compete with the grains—and the wetlands’ water abundance proved convenient. Consequently, several rice companies settled in the area, creating new sources of employment for many locals.



A Language of Its Own

The Guarani spoken in Corrientes is a linguistic variety of the Tupi-Guarani family, spoken throughout South America. While it could be categorized as an Indigenous language, ethnography frames it as a distinct native or vernacular tongue. Most speakers, or those who recognize Guarani in their personal histories, are people who generally do not see themselves as Indigenous. This is one reason why data on the number of Guarani speakers in the province and Argentina remains uncertain.

For many years in Corrientes, an ideology banning the use of Guarani took hold, justified by claims that it was a language of remote areas, socially inappropriate in certain contexts, and a barrier to mastering Spanish. As a result, children were the primary targets of prohibitive practices against its use.

The sociolinguistic landscape of Corrientes today is evolving into a scenario where Guarani, its speakers, and their self-identifications are gaining increased recognition. Passed in 2004, Law N° 5598 designates Guarani as an alternative official language of the province, aiming to incorporate its teaching at all levels of the educational system, though it's still not regulated. This marks another step in its early 21st-century resurgence. In 2024, two decades later, the Northeast National University (UNNE) created the Free Guarani Chair, which is a significant milestone in the continuing journey toward visibility.

Carolina Gandulfo, UNNE, 2024.



Exploring the Shining Waters

Alicia Guadalupe Poi

Union of Galarza Lake through the Isiri Canal, which connects it to Laguna Luna. Crossing the canal, the lake expands to the scale of the sea. © Alicia G. Poi

Iberá's water shines brightly into the traveler's eyes in the lakes, where rainwater is captured in basins with sandy bottoms. The vast lakes, aligned to the East, are interconnected by expansive marshlands, with channels 2 to 4 meters wide. On the sandy ridges to the West, thousands of smaller, shallower, rounded lagoons are scattered across a landscape of grasslands, reed beds, and palm groves. One of the unique features of this wetland is the extensive area occupied by shallow, waterlogged lowlands covered in vegetation, along with the seamless connection between the various elements of its landscape.

Iberá receives its water from local rainfall, collecting over 2,000 mm in wet years and less than half that amount during dry spells. The rhythms of flooding and drought shape the characteristics of the wetlands and they regulate its pulse of life. Rivers do not flow into Iberá, although it is bordered by the Paraná and Uruguay rivers. Due to the slope of the land, excess water in the wetlands eventually flows into the Paraná through the Corriente River, which is its main collector.

The subtropical climate impacts the rarity of frosts and causes water temperatures to range from 8 to 33 °C between winter and summer. Lake waters are rich in oxygen, a vital element for aquatic animals, particularly fish. The water in the wetlands is darker and more acidic than that of the



lakes, taking on a deep brown hue. The system changes during prolonged droughts, when the channels dry up and the lakes lose depth. During the rainy season, especially after heavy rainfall over short periods, the channels carry acidic, dark waters from the wetlands, reaching even the large lakes and the Corriente River.

One of the unique traits of Iberá's waters is their transparency. Despite their dark hue, they nurture the growth of algae unseen by the naked eye. A milliliter of water may contain several thousand algae adapted to floating in large lakes and fewer than 1,000 in running waters. The crystal-clear lakes provide a haven for submerged plants rooted to the depths, whose flowers can be seen above the surface. The floating meadows of waterlilies, their leaves, and blossoms adorning the water's surface while their long stems anchor them below, are perhaps the most captivating—valued for both their scenic beauty and cultural significance derived from legends.

In the wetlands, plants anchored to the bottom, with towering stems and leaves rising 2 meters above the water's surface, dominate the

"A strong storm was approaching, and we crossed Laguna Iberá—returning with heavy waves—and the cormorants, usually seen perched on branches along the shores or fishing by the banks, were lined up in the water with only their heads visible" (Alicia G. Poi).

landscape. These plants, known as palustrine, contribute organic matter rich in lignin each year, giving the wetland water its characteristic color. Many of them grow on *embalsados*, floating mats formed along the edges of lakes by successive layers of decaying plant material. These organic layers, which can grow over 2 meters thick, support shrubs and serve as pathways for caimans, capybaras, and even deer. In the larger lakes, these *embalsados* break away due to wind action, forming floating islands—another of Iberá's unique features.

The expansive reed beds with slender stems rising up to 2 meters tall along the edges of the great lakes, captivate travelers, drawing birds that feast on their seeds.

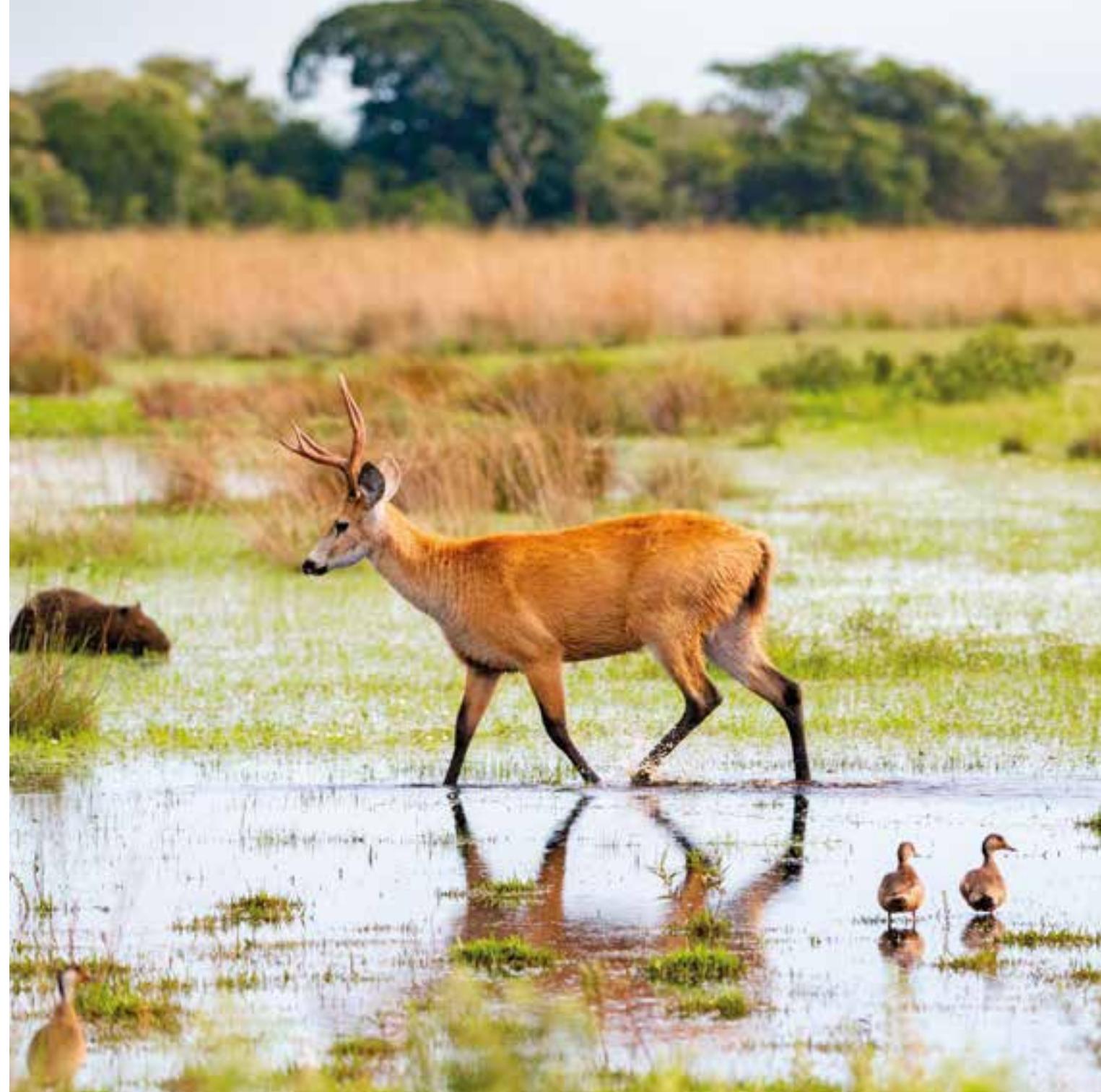
Algae and vegetation, along with decaying organic matter, form the foundation of Iberá's intricate food webs. Microscopic creatures, smaller than a dot on this page, drift suspended within the water and among submerged plants. They thrive on algae and organic debris, serving as sustenance for insects, mites, and small fish.

Over four decades, the team led by Alicia Guadalupe Poi and Juan José Neiff studied the aquatic ecology of Iberá.
© Juan José Neiff

Thousands of tiny insects, smaller than 1 mm, seek shelter and food among submerged vegetation meadows. Most live only their “youth” underwater, later emerging as adults to take flight—like mosquitoes, dragonflies, and mayflies. Alongside them, we find tiny mites and worms, as well as larger freshwater-adapted shrimp. Few invertebrates are herbivorous; a high proportion feed on dead organic matter resulting from plant decomposition and its associated bacteria.

There are 126 fish species recorded in Iberá, many of which are small in size, such as mojarras, killifish, banderitas, butterflyfish, and urquisho. Many of these feed on small invertebrates. Larger fish, such as pirambebas and piranhas, are carnivorous and prey on these smaller fish.

The Iberá Wetlands offer a glimpse into a truly unique phenomenon among Argentina’s surface waters. Rainwater, nearly pure and with minimal nutrients or salts, nurtures the growth of vibrant vegetation, capable of producing organic matter amounts comparable to or exceeding those of land-based crops. Studies reveal a key insight: the life visible above the water is supported by tiny creatures floating within it, inhabiting aquatic vegetation or decomposing organic matter. As the saying reminds us, “what is essential is invisible to the eye.” Human interference, such as adding nutrients, could alter the water’s balance, spurring the growth of new algae and upending the delicate food web. Similarly, human interference might reduce populations of animals like cormorants or caimans, indirectly increasing the number of their prey, such as piranhas. Any disruption to the natural order, its diversity, and its processes will inevitably bring consequences that must be carefully assessed before undertaking actions that could lead to irreversible changes.



I spent my childhood in that subtropical, aquatic countryside of central-northern Corrientes [...] A land inhabited by rustic gaucho people: natural poets, bearers of fervent kindness, boundless courage, and latent danger.

An isolated, atypical region within Corrientes, with lakes of golden-orange sands and expansive river-wetlands across sunken lowlands [...]

These lowlands are now basins of crystalline waters, filled with floating, mysterious, and blood-red sustenance: a shifting tapestry of green, black, fiery pink, and yellow hues, with palm-lined shores mirrored in the waters. Deep, eternal lakes with sea-like sands that seem to cradle their own suns and stars within their depths.

Francisco Madariaga (1927-2000), *Una acuarela móvil*, in *Contra degüellos I. El tren casi fluvial*, Eduner, 2016.

Foundations for a Sustainable Future

The Iberá region was long overlooked by official policy. In the history of Corrientes, this part of the province rarely captured governmental interest. On the contrary, it was seen as a nuisance. “It seems that in the 400-plus years of Corrientes’ history, the Iberá has always been a problem for politicians because they never knew how to address it, nor did they care,” says provincial senator from the Radical Civic Union, Sergio “Checho” Flinta, known as the main architect of the Iberá project under governors Ricardo Colombi and later Gustavo Valdés. He cites several reasons:

First, the economic cost; second, it was clearly neither included in the budget nor considered a political priority by government administrations; and third, there was no vision of utilizing that geography as a tourist destination [...] Accessing Iberá was difficult—you had to cross several

private lands, ranches, and gates. Even the province itself, to reach its own territory and the Provincial Park, had to go through private property. All of that posed a challenge. It was like a great black hole.

There was no vision for production, sustenance, or development. Even less imaginable was the idea of making a living through tourism and the *production of nature*.

The book *Historias del Yverá. Parque y reserva provincial* (El Argos, 2017) by José Fernando Laprovitta, an expert in Environmental Interpretation and Education, recounts attempts to drain or fill in the water bodies. At one time, after serving as a “lifeline for the *apupenes*,” sheltering Indigenous peoples, Jesuit missions, and Spanish and Creole communities, these lands were considered unproductive. Furthermore, being a strip of land that cuts across the map of Corrientes, “it was seen as an obstacle to the province’s internal communications, which is why it deserved drainage,” explains this tourism expert, social sciences graduate, and professor at UNNE. “Draining it would also provide additional land for agriculture and cattle

farming,” he adds in this work that recounts the history of conservation in the wetlands.

Historical records reveal that ecological awareness only began to take shape in the 1960s. “At the time, the idea of nature conservation didn’t extend to establishing parks or reserves. These aspects of environmental reality were confined mainly to scientific circles,” says this expert on Iberá.

However, early movements arose among a group of individuals who sought to change a reality that would allow Iberá to keep breathing. One ambitious idea proposed was to establish a large beach resort and water sports hub in Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, with the hopeful aim of creating jobs for locals and shifting them away from hunting.

CREATION OF THE IBERÁ NATURAL RESERVE

In 1983, the first significant government action in a promising region yet long overlooked took place. On April 15, the Iberá Natural Reserve was officially established under Law N° 3771, encompassing 1,300,000 hectares—just under half the size of the province of Misiones. Its primary purpose was to conserve natural resources. Conservation was defined as “the rational use, compatible with the needs of

economic and social development, while preventing qualitative deterioration, depletion, or disruption of ecological balance.”

This was the first step taken by the province of Corrientes after committing to the conservation of wildlife and specifically the Iberá system, while promoting low—and zero—impact tourism activities. This initiative was inspired by the Ramsar Convention, an international treaty signed by Argentina in 1971, which marked the beginning of global awareness about wetland conservation. Another milestone followed a year later with the Stockholm Convention and the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

The creation of the Iberá Natural Reserve represented a significant achievement that, as books and records indicate, was driven by the initial efforts of early advocates and visionaries in Colonia Carlos Pellegrini. Among them was Ince Apóstol, a naturalist and taxidermist who witnessed the extensive poaching in the Iberá system during his expeditions to collect specimens of reptiles, mammals, and insects for the Bernardino Rivadavia National Museum of Natural Sciences in Buenos Aires, where he worked. A proud Correntinean, and later a resident of Carlos Pellegrini, Apóstol began seeking ways to establish a park where species could be protected.

Like Juan Leonardo Aquino, a native of Mercedes who, first as mayor of his city, then as provincial finance minister, and later through the Iberá Foundation, dedicated himself to this “quixotic mission,” persistently campaigning for legislation to safeguard a natural resource of unparalleled ecological, cultural, and strategic significance. Like Pedro “Perico” Perea Muñoz, remembered as the first defender of Iberá, who, as a government official, was responsible for the early stages of promoting and establishing the Reserve. And Vicente “Pico” Fraga, who, alongside Apóstol, was appointed to form the Iberá’s first team of park rangers.

“We’re turning all of this into a reserve,” declared former de facto Governor General Juan A. Pita to Fraga when the Reserve was still merely an idea. As he spoke, his finger traced the entire outline of Iberá on a map of Corrientes. Vicente, a native of Mercedes and well-acquainted with the wetlands, hesitated and remarked, “It seemed like too much.” But the governor, resolute, replied, “No, we’re doing it all, but we’ll take it step by step.” Perhaps having been born in Corrientes soil gave the former governor extra drive to push forward with the initiative, which also drew from his knowledge of tourism and natural parks acquired during his years living in Bariloche.

1. Primitive Caingúa inhabitants of the Iberá, who named this region *Apupen*, a designation later adopted by some historians.

The Reserve needed custodians, and the idea emerged to employ the very hunters themselves, offering them financial compensation to make a living without resorting to hunting. Thus, the first *Department of Park Rangers* was formed, and Iberá began to be protected by its own people. These advances took place months before the self-proclaimed National Reorganization Process came to an end, although the intentions behind it were not fully understood. “At that time, no one in Corrientes understood anything about conservation,” says Fraga, who had returned from Salta, where he had been living and working as a veterinarian for the Argentine Army.

At that time, a list of future wildlife rangers was drawn up—mostly young and not so young hunters, who knew the area like the backs of their hands, and neighbors of Apóstol and Fraga, which proved key in gaining their trust for a proposal they barely comprehended. “I believe that most of them, even those who have passed on, never truly understood the magnitude of their work. But they trusted,” Fraga says today. Meanwhile, he proudly gazes at a framed list of names hanging in his office—those of Iberá’s first defenders: Ramón Molina, Domingo Cabrera, Humberto Rodríguez, Ramón Cardozo, Bernardo Fariña, Ramón Piedrabuena, Bruno Leiva, Ramón Baldovino and Félix Rodríguez.

“They wanted to know what all this was for, or for whom. I told them it was meant to help the



Domingo Mingo Cabrera, remembered as “the last mariscador” (1958–2023), in 1983 joined the first group of *ñanderekoharas* (“guardians of our land” in Guarani).
© Rafael Abuín



“The most significant cultural change was being equipped with the tools to conserve, care for, and safeguard our environment,” explains Juan Ramón Moreira, a tour guide, as he showcases the *botador de tacuara* (canoe with bamboo pole) and some *chuzas* (hunting spears) at the Interpretation Center in Concepción. © Moira Insaurralde

people of Pellegrini live better. But they didn’t understand. How were they supposed to live better without hunting?” Fraga asks, grateful for the trust these men placed in him.

The main duty of these transformed wetland hunters was to fight poaching. They carried out this work from the first ranger station in Carlos Pellegrini, located in the San Martín department of Corrientes. That small rural town, 360 km far from the provincial capital, blessed by the waters of Laguna Iberá, started to develop almost spontaneously and rudimentarily toward nature-based tourism.

From there, the first Iberá rangers patrolled the entire region. Sometimes alone, sometimes with police assistance. Locals would inform them, back when there were no cell phones. “We

carried out thousands of operations alone, in the middle of nowhere. Sometimes we encountered people with weapons. But we never had a major issue, except once,” recalls Fraga, explaining that one night he had to miss a wedding because he was notified about a truck full of poachers. With police backup, they set out on the road, intercepted the vehicle, and found capybaras and other animals. The driver accelerated, attempting to evade the confiscation, initiating a pursuit. On that cold winter morning, the rangers and police managed to prevent the escape, arrest the poachers, and rescue the animals.

During their patrols, the now-park rangers often came across familiar faces—people doing exactly what they had once done. As the new protectors of the flora and fauna, they understood that way of life and the need behind it, having lived it themselves. But they also recognized the importance of their new role. They would explain that hunting was no longer permitted, that their purpose was to protect the wildlife. Some responded with excuses, others with anger, but the patrols continued. Hides were confiscated, and hunting was halted.

“They were a true example. The work they did was simply admirable,” reflects Viviana Pavón, a cook from Pellegrini who had a close view of the efforts of those first park rangers, including her father-in-law, Ramón Cardozo. All those early wildlife guardians, like Ramón,

“used to sell hides to support their families [but] later became the most dedicated protectors of Iberá,” she explains. She recalls the challenges they faced in those days, when there was no environmental awareness and hunting animals for food or trade was the norm.

With time, their hard work bore fruit. Iberá’s native wildlife began to reclaim their place—roaming the woods, grazing in the tall grasses, and venturing to the shimmering waters. No longer haunted by the sound of gunfire, they reemerged with the beauty that now captivates thousands of tourists.

A LEAP FORWARD. CORRIENTES CREATES THE IBERÁ PROVINCIAL PARK

While the path toward ecotourism was not yet clearly defined, the provincial government took steps to support the slow but steady progress toward development. In 1993, Law N° 4736 established the Iberá Provincial Park, also known as the Core Zone, an area of “absolute protection” within the Natural Reserve. This formalized the concept and brought structure to the group of people committed to protecting Iberá. That same year, the Directorate of Parks and Reserves was created within the government framework, officially establishing the Provincial Park Rangers Department.

Over the years, the solid foundations were laid to nurture and encourage the arrival of other key players in the development of Iberá as a tourist destination. This progress was built on the dreams and efforts of the people of Corrientes—some well-documented, others nameless guardians of the wetlands—whose quiet determination ensured steady growth.

To the previously mentioned figures—Perea Muñoz, Apóstol, Aquino, Fraga—was added the cattle rancher and extraordinary wildlife enthusiast Marcos García Rams. In his historic ranch, San Juan Poriahu, located in Loreto, on the west side of Iberá, he boldly embraced nature tourism centered on wildlife observation. As a pioneer, he showed that cattle farming and tourism could coexist on the same land. Also joining the effort was biologist Aníbal Parera, who dedicated many years to studying Iberá and publishing his findings, along with environmental advocates who recognized Iberá as a treasured jewel. Specialists and scientists from UNNE and other universities studied the soil, water, fauna, and flora. Non-governmental actors began to work for its conservation, including Fundación Iberá in Mercedes and Fundación Vida Silvestre Argentina.

Miguel Reynal himself, founder and president of Fundación Vida Silvestre Argentina, introduced Iberá to conservationist Douglas Tompkins, who was actively acquiring lands

worldwide to transform them into parks and protected areas. Invited by the National Parks Directorate, Tompkins and his wife Kristine toured Baritú National Park in Salta and Calilegua National Park in Jujuy, both awaiting expansion. Seizing the opportunity, Reynal invited this American philanthropist to explore José Antonio Ansola’s lands for sale in Concepción. Reynal thought the significant biodiversity of these lands could be ideal for establishing a park.

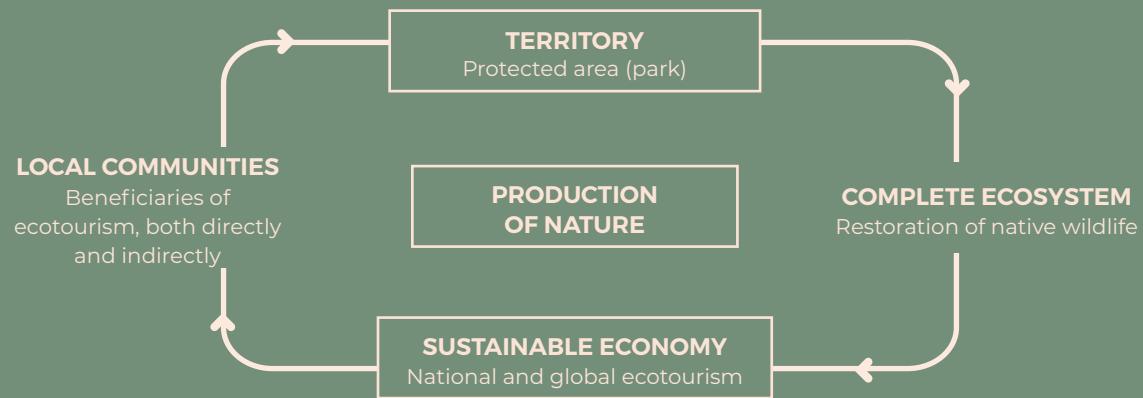
What is Production of Nature?

Production of Nature involves working holistically to restore an ecosystem that, due to its scale, encompasses a wide variety of environments and wildlife. By restoring endangered species and reintroducing those that have disappeared, this process ensures a balanced and sustainable ecological system over time. It also enhances the appeal of a region whose natural and cultural characteristics make it a tourist destination and, in turn, a driver of local development.

The Iberá Wetlands is a paradigmatic example. More than twenty towns in the area surrounding the Great Park benefit directly and indirectly from this production model, whose cornerstone is ecotourism.

Local residents, organizations, and officials have worked together to forge agreements that optimize the use and conservation of environmental resources and the ecosystem's diversity. They have created a lasting legacy by celebrating their unique traditions and transforming local practices into cultural treasures. Thousands of tourists visit Iberá every year, contributing to its increasingly specialized and diverse tourism services. This, in turn, generates long-term economic benefits while fostering a model of sustainable nature-based tourism that respects both the environment and cultural heritage.

Four Main Pillars of Production of Nature





A Natural Paradise of Plants and Landscapes

*María de las Mercedes Sosa and
María Betiana Angulo*

In Santo Tomé, Estancia El Timbó.
© Ma. de las Mercedes Sosa

The Iberá ecoregion is celebrated as a natural heaven, brimming with life and vivid hues. Known as one of the most biodiverse wetlands, it harbors no fewer than 1,679 plant species, the majority of them native. This incredible ecosystem encompasses a wide variety of habitats: it is a depression hosting floodable and flooded environments, expansive water bodies (lakes), as well as floating islands, wetlands, and reed beds. In higher areas, islands emerge as elevated patches of dry land, with small remnants of forests (Paraná rainforest), palm groves, and open savannas (grasslands and meadows), creating a breathtaking natural balance.

In this natural paradise, plants take center stage. On one hand, there are those that germinate and thrive in water, either fully submerged or floating, known as aquatic plants. These species flourish in calm waters, such as lakes and open areas of the wetlands, as well as in flowing waters like those of the Corriente River. They are also found in creeks, streams like Carambola, canals such as Isiri, and natural gullies. On the other hand, there are *amphibious* or *marsh plants* that grow along the shores of water bodies, rooting themselves in the soil beneath while their stems, leaves, flowers, and fruits remain above water. These resilient plants adapt to environments that may be permanently or temporarily flooded, enduring even prolonged periods of drought. Within these habitats,

one can find marshlands, swamps, lowlands, and springs, where water surfaces and flows toward the Iberá hollow.

Both aquatic and amphibious plants are among the most abundant species, serving crucial ecological functions by offering food and refuge to a variety of birds, fish, and insects. They also help oxygenate the water through photosynthesis, a process that preserves the distinctive purity of the wetlands. Although these species are widespread throughout Iberá, certain ones have a more localized distribution. The *irupé*, known as the queen of aquatic plants, is one such species, thriving exclusively in the southwestern region of the system, near the source of Corriente River.

We cannot overlook the astonishing floating islands created by *embalsado* vegetation. These islands act as dynamic refuges, with their roots trapping organic material and hosting sturdier plants or even those that grow on land. Over time, they become firm enough to support careful footsteps.

The diversity of the wetlands is truly remarkable, with carnivorous plants serving as a fascinating example. These plants have a unique ability to thrive in environments low in nitrogen and mineral salts. How do they achieve this? By capturing small insects in their “traps,” tiny balloon-like structures called utricles. This feature is what gives them their scientific name, *Utricularia*. When in bloom, they stand out in the lake with striking yellow patches. Another carnivorous plant found in the area is the *Drosera*, often associated with peat bogs. This plant ensnares its prey with sticky glandular hair. In these peat bogs, the *Drosera* coexists with distinctive plants like mosses and ferns, forming a unique assemblage that further enriches the wetlands’ incredible diversity.

On solid ground, the vegetation is equally fascinating. There are hygrophilous forests closely linked to watercourses or bodies of water that provide constant humidity. This vegetation is locally referred to as *monte* and is often associated with reddish-yellow sandy hills and areas near lakes, wetlands, marshes, and streams.



Prosopis forests are also found here, named for the prevalence of roman cassie, ñandubay, and black carob trees. These open forests are primarily located on the eastern side of the system, extending southward. Generally, both hygrophilous forests and *Prosopis* forests function as plant communities structured in three levels. The upper level consists of tall trees, such as pink trumpet tree, *ibirá pitá* and *jacarandá*, notable for their vibrant blooms. Below them, a mid-level of smaller shrubs thrives, while the ground level is covered with herbaceous plants. These rich communities also include climbing plants, epiphytes that grow on other plants, and even parasitic species that rely on others for sustenance.

But that’s not all. Alongside the forests are the Iberá savannas, home to tall grasses and isolated small palm trees, known locally as *yatay poñí* (*Butia paraguayensis*), which are no more than 4 m tall. These savannas stretch across both sides of the Iberá hollow, covering sandy hills or gently undulating terrain, adding even more hues and shapes to this natural paradise.

Team from the Northeast
Botany Institute (Ibone),
field research day.
© Ma. de las Mercedes Sosa

The region has faced fires during drought periods, making it essential for us to become involved in its conservation. Data collected through surveys by research institutions, such as the Institute of Botany of UNNE-Conicet and the General Secretariat of Science and Technology of UNNE, aims to assess the affected vegetation mass and closely monitor the restoration of vegetation, particularly in untouched natural areas. This valuable information emphasizes the need for active collaboration from society, as forests play a crucial role in offsetting and reducing the carbon footprint—the volume of greenhouse gas emissions produced by human activity—and help mitigate climate change.

In conclusion, the Iberá Wetlands are a treasure of biodiversity, where each plant uniquely contributes to this visually breathtaking scenery, turning it into an unmatched natural treasure.



Bernardino Díaz is one of these hunters. His gaucho look and speech make for an unusual sight as he crosses the fields on foot, an otter in each hand.

[...]

As a gaucho hunter, Díaz is a natural wanderer. Every two weeks, he leaves the ranch he shares with his mother, buys his supplies, and ventures “deep into the wilderness,” carrying his traps and his spear. Alone, he walks across the floating vegetation for astonishing distances.

“What do you walk in?”

Startled, he looks at his feet.

“Well... just in *alpargatas*.”

But most likely, he walks barefoot.

[...]

Rodolfo Walsh, Lavado de cerebro, in Roberto Arlt y Rodolfo Walsh, *El país del río. Aguafuertes y Crónicas*, UNL, Eduner, [1996] 2016.

Translator's Note:

Alpargata: a sandal usually having a fabric upper and a flexible sole (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary).

An Unusual Presence, a Groundbreaking Project

It was 1997 when Douglas Tompkins began his journey into Iberá. This American businessman and ecologist was dedicated to conservation, restoration, and environmental activism. During his visit, he fell in love with this area of Corrientes. “It’s the South Africa of South America, but empty, it’s missing the animals,” he reportedly remarked when he saw it from the air.

“When we first arrived here, I couldn’t wait to get back on the plane and leave this place,” Kristine Tompkins often recalled, reflecting on her first experience in Iberá during the blistering summer in Corrientes. The oppressive heat and relentless mosquitoes quickly drove Tompkins’ wife away. Yet, “I thank God for what Doug envisioned during that trip,” she says, still wondering, “Who could have imagined this would be the place where we learned the most?” It wasn’t love at first sight for Kristine, but over time Iberá captured her heart, becoming the

place where they built their home and lived for many years.

“He already had a clear understanding of the conservation work happening in South Africa, especially in parks. So, when he saw the place, instead of discarding it because it was empty, he saw an opportunity to work, reintroduce species, and protect,” says Marisi López, a representative of Fundación Rewilding Argentina, formerly Conservation Land Trust (CLT), the organization Tompkins founded with his wife, and which began working in Argentina in 1997.

This woman from Corrientes, who joined the team almost by chance but proved essential to the project’s progress, says that Tompkins was a visionary. “He had very long-term, ambitious goals, and he was achieving them.” He saw this gem in Corrientes as an opportunity to invest in conservation, and began his work. He purchased Estancia San Alonso, located on Isla San Alonso, in the heart of Iberá. This 50,000-hectare property, which Tompkins had flown over earlier, was owned by the Ansola family. Later, he bought Estancia Rincón del Socorro, located 38 km from Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, where he created a 30,000-hectare nature reserve.

He continued purchasing other properties, moving closer to his goal of acquiring biodiversity-rich lands for conservation, eventually transferring them to local and national authorities for ecological benefit.

But Tompkins’ entry into Iberá was not as simple as paying for land or refurbishing an old estate. That was not his goal either. Since he was 40, Tompkins had returned to his love for nature, much like the days of his youth when he would climb, surf, and ski across the globe. He had built a successful career in the textile industry with brands like The North Face and Esprit, but alarmed by the environmental damage caused by the sector, Tompkins decided to shift his focus to conservation.

He started doing this in different parts of the world. He first lived and worked in Chile, then arrived in Argentina. But in the country, he was seen as just another wealthy gringo coming to seize natural resources for business. His interest and supposed environmental intentions in areas of high ecological value seemed suspicious. Just like the Chileans, the Argentinians couldn’t understand—and even less believe—that two rich Americans would buy land to donate it.

AN ECOLOGIST IN THE LAND OF THE JAGUAR

When Tompkins arrived in Corrientes, he wasn’t warmly welcomed. Locals regarded him with distrust and skepticism, while producers grew alarmed at the prospect of an economic model far removed from cattle ranching, logging,



News portals of Corrientes and Buenos Aires media.

and rice farming. The provincial government, perceiving a potential threat, resisted his efforts as well.

“He’s here to steal our water,” proclaimed headlines in Corrientes and national media at the time. For many, the idea didn’t seem far-fetched. Year after year, reports and warnings from global organizations like the United Nations (UN) and UNESCO highlighted the risk that water or oil could ignite World War III. Climate change only deepened these fears, with water increasingly viewed as a potential flashpoint for the 21st century’s most significant geopolitical conflicts.

When Tompkins arrived, Omar Rojas—“Don Rojas”—was one of many who didn’t understand him and even questioned the foreigner’s sanity:

To us, he was a madman. To regular folks, he was a madman. Because he thought the exact opposite of how we did. Coming here and saying: I bought this because I'm going to create a park, and once it's ready, I'm going to give it away. That made him seem even more insane.

Now, he chuckles as he recalls the story, admitting he's become a follower of Tompkins. "It seemed ridiculous to us back then—saying, *We're going to bring jaguars here*, when before, we used to shoot them."

Tompkins started his journey by acquiring over 150,000 hectares of land, introducing an environmentalist vision, suggesting what should be done in the Iberá which sparked a heated debate in Corrientes society. Many considered him an "extreme environmentalist" because he proposed removing cattle from the potential tourist zones. The proposal was perceived as a conspiracy against Corrientes' traditional productive activities, mainly agriculture and livestock farming.

This marked the beginning of a clash with agricultural sectors. It was hard to believe that a foreigner would come to a "forgotten corner" thousands of kilometers away from his homeland, buy land, and donate it to turn it into parks. At the very least, it raised suspicions. Nevertheless, Tompkins pursued his mission on the land he bought in Iberá: "to create Argentina's

largest natural park, bring wildlife species that had vanished back to the area, and foster an economy rooted in nature tourism," as stated on the website of the exclusive inn that Estancia El Socorro has been turned into.

TOMPKINS' PROJECT

After an unsuccessful attempt to forward his conservation initiative through two civil society organizations connected to ecology, the former businessman decided to transform the corporation he had acquired (Santa Teresa Agropecuaria) into the Conservation Land Trust Argentina foundation and build his own team. He recruited Sofía Heinonen, a biologist whose dedication and expertise he knew well from her work with the National Parks Administration (APA) and her collaborations with UNNE. Between 1986 and 2000, she worked on mammal surveys alongside colleagues from the northeastern Argentine technical delegation of UNNE. Her scientific work, followed by field assignments, gave her the chance to deepen her understanding of Tompkins and his ambitious conservation vision.

Being deeply involved in biodiversity work, she welcomed the arrival of the foreign philanthropist and his environmental goals without the skepticism shared by others. "We



Don Rojas, a tour guide, considers himself a local of Iberá, a deep knowledge-holder of the wetlands, born and raised in Concepción del Yaguareté Corá.
© Sebastián Bravo

always knew Iberá was a treasure, so it didn't seem strange to us that someone would want to protect it," says Sofía Heinonen.

In 2005, she was invited to join the foundation and take on the ambitious mission of creating a national park, reintroducing the jaguar, and saving other endangered species. "It seemed incredibly interesting and challenging to me [...] I saw the opportunity to carry out the project successfully, with Doug's completely selfless approach to donating everything, restoring it, generating an economy, and handing it over to the government."

Known for her passion and determination by those close to her, she moved to Estancia Rincón del Socorro near Carlos Pellegrini with her two young children. There, alongside the children



of employees and some from Carlos Pellegrini, they attended a rural school where they not only learned the basics of the curriculum but also developed a deep connection with nature, embraced the surroundings, and coexisted with wildlife.

At Rincón del Socorro, Heinonen formed a diverse team, with strong participation from local actors, reflecting one of the core principles of the Tompkins project: giving local communities an active role. By involving the locals, she aimed to help them appreciate the value of their land and traditions, empowering them to defend and take pride in their heritage. The goal was to create a new way of life, where tourism could offer both a sustainable livelihood and a reason for them to stay in their homeland.

After many years of effort, the jaguar returns to its natural habitat. Beyond its ecological importance, it holds significant cultural value. Myths, legends, songs, and poems reference this iconic species that Corrientes is recovering.
© Fundación Rewilding Argentina

They began working on several fronts. First, they focused on land acquisition, habitat restoration, and active species management as tools for conservation and wildlife management. Then, they turned their attention to reintroducing extinct species—there were many missing from the Iberá. The giant anteater, pampas deer, green-winged macaw, bare-faced curassow (*mitú*), peccary, tapir, ocelot, and giant otter were just a few examples. “There’s no better place in Argentina to do this work than Iberá,” says Heinonen. “It has everything: space, prey, and the ecosystem to make the experiment successful,” explains this biologist, who sees herself as an activist and conservationist by nature. However, the task wasn’t easy. “No one in Argentina or South America thought

In 2007, the first pair of giant anteaters was released. Today, more than 200 individuals of this species live freely in Iberá.
© Fundación Rewilding Argentina

it was necessary to reintroduce species, so the regulations and laws weren't helpful," she explained in numerous interviews.

With nearly everything stacked against them, they began the program in Iberá. "There was no prior experience with wildlife conservation in Argentina," remarked biologist Ignacio Jiménez, who was the Conservation Director at CLT, in the documentary *Rewilding Iberá* in Spanish (Fundación Rewilding Argentina, YouTube, 2019). He recalled discussions with scientists and conservationists, many of whom were skeptical about the feasibility of species reintroduction. Convincing authorities, academics, and society to embrace the ambitious vision of restoring lost fauna required determination, added Jiménez, a Spanish expert in Wildlife Management and Conservation.



American stork © Edwin Harvey
Female howler monkey © Vicente Pico
Caiman and capybaras © Marisi López
Pampas deer © Comité Iberá

In your glistening waters where the sun awakens, majestic wetland, your beauty is seen. Heart of Corrientes — Loreto, Pellegrini, Concepción— lands blessed, forever serene.

Beneath the infinite sky mirrored in your waters, where a golden dorado glimmers so bright. A *pombero* capybara wears an irupé for a hat, caimans and hyacinths, all under Iberá's moonlight.

Palm groves and lakes, reeds and floating weeds, here, the deer claims its throne with great felicity. even the wild birds lend music to nature, and capybara colonies guard Iberá's mystery.

Corazón de Corrientes – Mario Tessare/Paulo Ayala

Translator's Note:

The Pombero is a mythical creature from Guaraní folklore, particularly popular in Paraguay, northern Argentina, and southern Brazil. Known as a mischievous forest spirit, the Pombero is often depicted as a small, stocky man with a scruffy appearance, a wide-brimmed hat, and hairy body.

Mission: Restoring a Complete Ecosystem

With steady determination, the reintroduction of extinct species envisioned by Tompkins got underway. The giant anteater, one of Argentina's most distinctive and remarkable mammals, extinct throughout the Corrientes province, was the first species reintroduced to the wetlands. Thanks to agreements with neighboring provinces, the first specimens arrived in 2007. In a ceremony attended by locals and then-Governor Arturo Colombi, the first female anteater was welcomed. Fifteen years later, over 300 giant anteaters thrive across five distinct populations in Iberá. This ecological triumph earned the project widespread recognition from conservationists and scientists, paving the way for further reintroduction efforts.

The focus then shifted to the Pampas deer, a species primarily threatened by poaching and the transformation of its natural grassland habitat into pine plantations.

The project to conserve, rescue, and restore the Pampas deer in Corrientes was launched in 2009, developed by experts from Conservation Land Trust (CLT) and Fundación Flora y Fauna Argentina. At the time, the foundation was in its early stages, guided by CLT to carry forward Tompkins' conservation legacy.

The reintroduction of the Pampas deer, declared a Provincial Natural Monument, enhanced the project's credibility. This success opened the door for the restoration of other species, such as the collared peccary, which had last been reported in Corrientes forests in the early 1820s, according to records by French explorer Alcide d'Orbigny.

The vibrant green-winged macaws also made their return. These magnificent birds, described in historical texts from the 1700s and 1800s, soared through the skies of northern Argentina. At least two species were known to inhabit the region: the glaucous macaw (*Anodorhynchus glaucus*), or *gua'a hovy*, now fully extinct, and the green-winged macaw (*Ara chloropterus*), or *gua'a pytá*, which disappeared from both the province and the rest of the country. These colorful birds serve an important ecological function, dispersing fruits and seeds, and contribute to the region's growing appeal as a tourist destination. With training, flight exercises, predator recognition, and feeding with native fruits, free-flying macaws were once

As I rounded a large wetland, I spotted a large one [male deer]. Without hesitation, I called out, and the group rushed after it. But it was in vain, as the deer entered a wetland and we couldn't get it out... A grim silence fell over the vast marshes, the refuge of deer and other mammals, all seeking refuge from human presence.

Alcide d'Orbigny, *Viaje a la Laguna de Iberá*, in *Viaje a la América Meridional*, Futuro, 1945, pp. 265-271.



again spotted in the Reserve. “The only place throughout Argentina where you can see them in the wild is Iberá, in the northern portal called Cambyretá, near Ituzaingó, Villa Olivari, and Loreto,” proudly says Marisi López (a key figure at Fundación Rewilding Argentina).

THE RETURN OF THE JAGUAR

“Isla del Disparo (Island of the Shot) is so called because, at one time, tigers lived there, but then men arrived, and during the encounter, someone fired a shot. Some say it was the men, others say it was the tigers, but in the end—as always—it was the men who remained. All that is left of the Iberá tigers is their memory and the huge traps rusting away in some old houses.”
Rodolfo Walsh, en Roberto Arlt y Rodolfo Walsh, *El país del río, Aguafuertes y Crónicas*, UNL, Eduner, [1966] 2016.

“The reintroduction of the anteater in Iberá stands as a groundbreaking experiment in Latin America,” Mario Di Bitetti.
© Comité Iberá

Then it was time for a major challenge: bringing the jaguar back to roam freely and safely in Iberá, where it had not walked for over 70 years. Known as jaguar or *American tiger*, it is the largest feline in the Americas and the continent's top land predator. Its return promised to restore balance to the ecosystem, as a predator capable of hunting and consuming large prey. "Top predators like these keep prey animals more vigilant, closer to their shelters or escape routes, and allow other species to flourish, thereby enhancing biodiversity," explains Sofía Heinonen, a biologist, environmentalist, and executive director of Fundación Rewilding Argentina. Drawing from the knowledge she has gained over time and her ongoing efforts to communicate what they do in Iberá, Marisi López explains:

When the top predator is present, its prey becomes more cautious, avoiding wide, open spaces. The capybara, for instance, prefers to graze closer to cover, almost in hiding. And where it does not eat, grass and shrubs grow. This brings insects, or perhaps it allows deer to feed on that grass. However, without the jaguar, capybaras feed indiscriminately, disrupting habitats and leaving no food for insects or grazing opportunities for deer. The result is an imbalance caused by the overpopulation of one species within the ecosystem.

With several men from the caravan, I galloped ahead of the carts. One of the first One of those in the front spotted a jaguar lying in the grass. The animal quickly fled, and the entire group gave chase. It reached a wetland and plunged into the water, narrowly avoiding two lasso attempts, moving slowly in the water [...] What was most striking was how the sight of a jaguar terrified the horses. One must truly know them to make them move toward this feline because its scent could get an entire herd scattering. The horses galloped toward the beast, prodded by spurs, twitching their ears, struggling to hold back. It was a forced gallop and there's something strange about it.

Alcide d'Orbigny, *Viaje a la Laguna de Iberá*, in *Viaje a la América Meridional*, Futuro, 1945, pp. 265-271.



In many interviews, Sofía Heinonen shared that Tompkins "dreamed of bringing back the top predator, the jaguar, because he had seen the change in Yellowstone National Park, in the United States, when the wolf was reintroduced." He also recognized the vital importance of adjusting the local economy so that the species wouldn't become extinct again: "Because at that time, livestock farming was the main activity, and if the community viewed the jaguar as a threat to their livestock, they would kill it once more. That's why it was essential to develop nature tourism."

The ecological significance of this animal led to the establishment of a Reintroduction Center dedicated to breeding and rehabilitating

Rewilding Argentina and Centro Aguará have successfully reintroduced 17 green-winged macaws to Corrientes.

© Comité Iberá

jaguars. In Isla San Alonso, in the heart of the wetlands, Fundación Rewilding Argentina created expansive wildlife enclosures spanning up to 30 hectares. The goal was to breed two jaguars from zoos so that their cubs would grow up entirely wild. These enclosures were also designed to house wild animals from shelters in neighboring countries that could potentially be released back into the wild. “For two years, they were raised in enclosures, hunting for themselves without human contact. These were the ones we released—Corrientes’ first jaguar cubs born and reintroduced as wild animals,” recalls Sofía Heinonen.

The reintroduction process required great effort and time, but it was worth it. A cornerstone species essential to the health of the ecosystem was restored to the Iberá Wetlands. And—much to everyone’s surprise—it sparked a unique sense of pride among the people of Corrientes. “We found that in Corrientes, there’s a patriotic bond with the jaguar—or yaguareté, as it’s known here—because people see it as part of their historical and natural heritage. That connection made a big difference,” notes Ignacio Jiménez. Originally from Valencia, Spain, he had been living in Argentina for about six years. He recalls, for instance, local school children lining up with balloons, songs, and joy to greet the first jaguars in 2015.

Although it had been extinct for 70 years, the jaguar never disappeared from the culture and identity of the Iberá people. Through murals, artistic expressions, myths, and stories, the jaguar endured as a symbol of Corrientes’ courage and bravery.

At CLT, major progress in species reintroduction was achieved through carefully designed projects grounded in exhaustive research. These projects advanced only after obtaining the necessary approvals. “We design projects with a methodology that demonstrates the threats leading to the animals’ extinction have been overcome and that conditions are now right to bring them back,” explains Sofía Heinonen. She also detailed how the process would work: “which individuals would be selected, their origins, how they would be monitored post-release, how they would be supplemented initially until they adapt to the new environment, and how the protection of these reintroduced species would be planned to prevent hunting or issues as they disperse to other areas,” adds the coordinator of these efforts.

Marisi López explains more about the process:

Before bringing an animal back, we investigate whether the species once existed in Iberá. To do this, we consult sources like researchers and explorers, as well as local residents who may have

The interest of the Northeast National University (UNNE) in the Iberá’s natural heritage has been longstanding and has allowed for a deeper understanding of its biological diversity. Research conducted by the Institute of Botany of the Northeast (Conicet-UNNE) and the Center for Applied Ecology of the Litoral (Conicet-UNNE) stands as proof of this commitment. Between 1999 and 2002, the General Secretariat for Science and Technology funded research projects on Iberá, carried out by local researchers alongside specialists from other universities. The results of these investigations, published in a comprehensive graphic work, represent key contributions to understanding Iberá’s fauna, flora, aquatic ecosystems, and legal framework. In 2012, UNNE continued its research within the framework of the *Iberá+10* program, a large-scale endeavor due to the vast territory involved and the number of scholarship holders and researchers from UNNE, scientific institutes, and other national universities who participated. It expanded upon previous findings by adding new areas of study: plant resources, sustainable production, public health, and climate change.

Alicia Guadalupe Poi, UNNE, 2024.

seen it. For example, in the case of the jaguar, which did not go extinct that long ago, older people claim to have seen it or heard stories from their parents. We also investigate whether the environment is suitable for reintroducing the animal—whether it is protected, for example, as part of a national or provincial park where hunting is prohibited; whether it will have a habitat, enough forest or grassland depending on the species; and whether there is sufficient food, like prey. Additionally, we work with local communities so they take ownership of the species and understand the natural, cultural, and even economic value of the return of these animals.

As explained in the book *Rewilding in Argentina* (Sebastián Di Martino, Sofía Heinonen, and Emiliano Donadío, Conservation Land Trust, 2022), the process of releasing the jaguar is done progressively and carefully: “First, they go into an acclimation pen, where they stay for a while. At some point, the door is opened, and the animal leaves when it wants; it isn’t pushed out. It exits, the door remains open, and it goes back in and out until it realizes it can be free.”

Added to this are bureaucratic procedures required when introducing species from other provinces or countries. The process involves obtaining permits and navigating formalities, which can complicate and significantly delay the work. This is reason enough to avoid undergoing



the process in vain, such as for animals that were never native to the area, as some critics have claimed. The Rewilding team insists that all reintroduced species are native, though they were driven to extinction by direct or indirect human activities, particularly hunting. “We had to work to increase their populations or even bring them back. But all reintroduced species were clearly key to that ecosystem,” says Sofía Heinonen.

As executive director of the Foundation, she highlights additional efforts critical to the protection and conservation of the region. Habitat management is a key focus, particularly fire management, especially after the catastrophic fires that occurred in Iberá during the 2020 pandemic.

Collared peccary. One of the extinct species that rewilding has managed to reintroduce. Today Iberá has 100 specimens.
© Matías Rebak

The following summers, aggravated by the province-wide drought.

Efforts were also directed at eliminating exotic species. “These are domestic animals that turned wild, like wild boars and axis deer, which originated elsewhere and have increasingly spread in Iberá,” explains Heinonen.

In line with this, the government of Corrientes declared the “invasion” of boars (Law N° 6543) and axis deer (Law N° 6657), which later permitted their hunting to tackle this issue, which affects producers across the province and the country.

Regarding the flora, progress is being made with the control of pine trees. “Sometimes, the wind carries their seeds, and pine forests begin to grow in grasslands where they don’t belong.

Tobuna arrives at San Alonso. Douglas Tompkins witnesses her first steps on Corrientes soil.
© Comité Iberá

Other species, like privet or chinaberry trees, have also spread from old ranch plantations, becoming invasive and disrupting Iberá's native landscape," Heinonen explains.

At the same time, significant efforts are made with neighboring land owners and staff to help them understand the importance of the jaguar's presence in the wetlands: "to ensure they no longer fear this animal they once hunted [...] and that they report sightings on their land or when they encounter other reintroduced species."

Finally, initiatives focus on minimizing risks from the neglect of public spaces caused by the surge in visitors and combating illegal activities like poaching. In such cases, alongside the presence of park rangers, Heinonen emphasizes that environmental education is crucial:

In order for people to stay alert and cooperate by reporting if they see hunters [...]. It is often the neighbors themselves who report illegal sport hunting, for example. It's also important to avoid animal runovers and control the speed of cars when they are driving through the roads that are part of Iberá.

IBERÁ: AN ATTRACTIVE FIELD FOR SCIENTIFIC EXPLORATION

The sustainable management of wildlife, public use, landscape restoration, and environmental planning "requires a deep understanding of the environment where nature production takes place," according to experts (Iberá Committee, *Great Iberá Park: Nature Production and Local Development*, [2015, 2017] 2020, p. 44). The work of managers and park rangers relies on existing knowledge or, in the absence of scientific evidence, on common sense. This is why the Iberá Committee asserts that:

It is essential for researchers to fill the gaps in knowledge in conservation biology, as well as in related fields such as soil science, climatology, paleontology, anthropology, sociology, economics, and even philosophy. This comprehensive approach enables a deeper understanding of how nature and society evolve over time, thereby improving the efficiency of ecosystem management and restoration. (Iberá Committee, *Great Iberá Park: Nature Production and Local Development*, [2015, 2017] 2020, p. 44)

Within this framework, UNNE has led numerous projects and publications on Iberá, promoting research across various academic disciplines. This effort has also been carried

out at the National Universities of Buenos Aires and Córdoba, and "by students from all parts of Argentina and abroad who choose Iberá for their doctoral or thesis paper," proudly states Marisi López, referencing dozens of undergraduate, master's, and doctoral theses, as well as the global interest Iberá attracts.

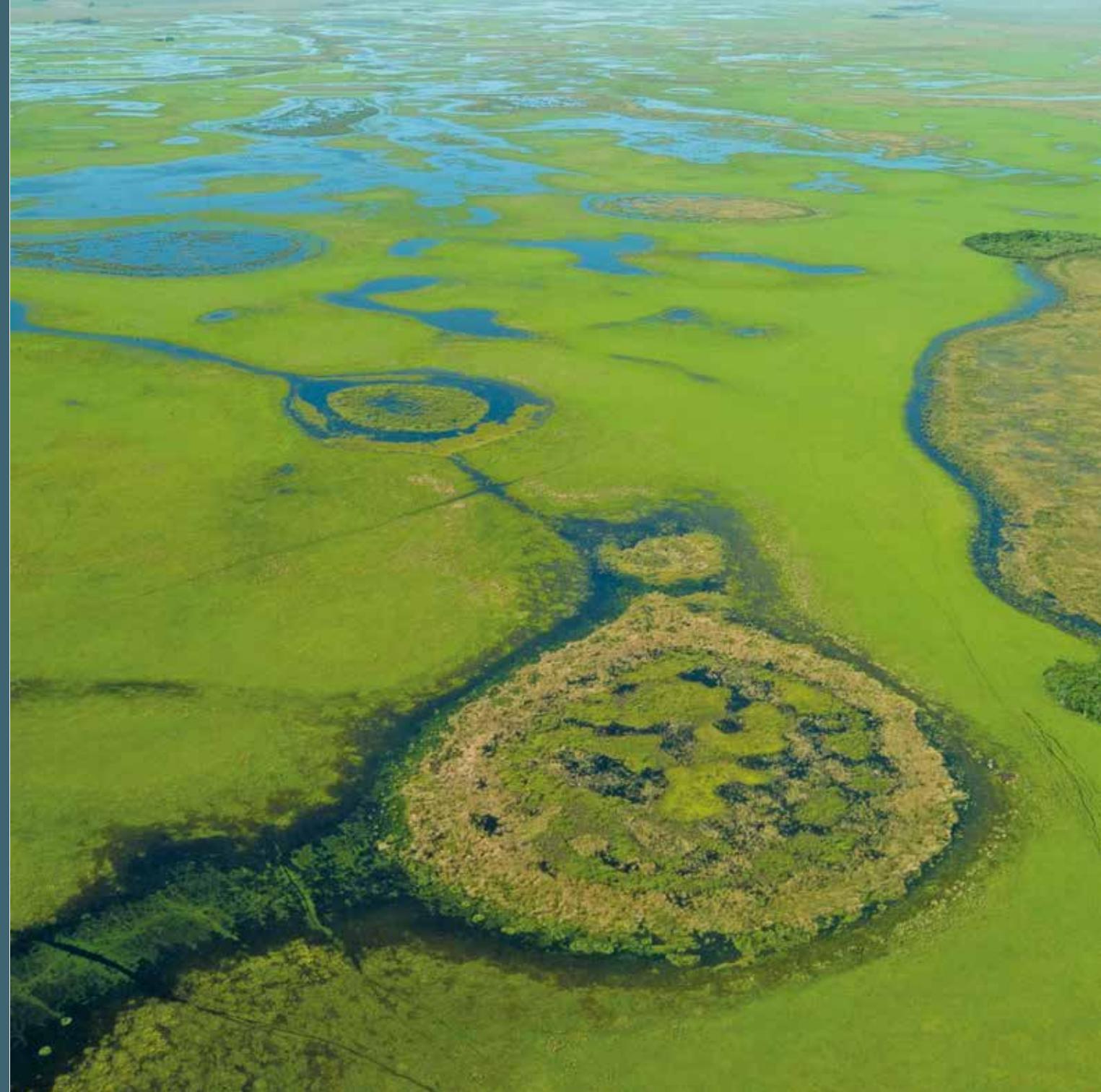
"Promoting research within the Great Iberá Park is essential not only for better land management but also as a significant contribution that Corrientes makes to the world," states the book *Great Iberá Park: Nature Production and Local Development*, published by the Iberá Committee in 2015, reprinted in 2017, and updated in 2020, p. 44. The wetlands are areas of high biodiversity value that provide crucial environmental services, and the data collected from Iberá, as noted in the publication, "will contribute to a deeper understanding of all wetlands and subtropical grasslands."

Another contribution to scientific research is the creation of the Iberá Macrosystem Research Center (CIMI), through an agreement between the provincial government and the Faculty of Exact Sciences at UNNE. Based in Concepción del Yaguareté Corá, CIMI carries out projects and initiatives focused on science, research, and monitoring of Iberá.

Great Iberá Park: Provincial and National Parks in One

Great Iberá Park is a collaborative creation, a *de facto* entity that combines the 160,000-hectare National Park—established on land donated by CLT-Rewilding Argentina—with the 600,000-hectare Provincial Park, making it one of the largest publicly owned parks in Argentina and one of the most well-preserved natural reserves on the continent. Located in the heart of Corrientes, the Great Park shares common conservation goals and values, while offering both direct and indirect investment opportunities, as well as local development prospects to more than twenty municipalities through tourism and nature-based industries. The two parks complement and enhance each other, merging highlands and water bodies that shelter the rich biodiversity characteristic of Iberá. Both parks share a management plan, renewed annually, which is developed collaboratively for the overall strategy and independently tailored to each jurisdiction.

The plan has been published in a summary book, distributed at all park access points, and is available to all stakeholders of Iberá. The results are publicly accessible and can be found online (Fundación Flora y Fauna Argentina, *Great Park: Planning and Governance, 2009-2019, 2019*).





The Jaguar, Symbol of the Resurgence of Iberá

Sebastián Di Martino

Cubs born at the Jaguar
Reintroduction Center.
© Fundación Rewilding Argentina

The last jaguar in Corrientes is said to have been hunted in the Paraná River, near Ituzaingó, in 1953. With the death of this large male, the region's top predator vanished. This is not an isolated incident—it reflects what happened to the jaguar across more than 95% of its distribution area in Argentina and over 50% of its global range, which once extended from the southern United States to northern Patagonia in Argentina. It wasn't just the jaguar that was affected by human activities; most large carnivores, herbivores, and frugivores disappeared from vast regions across all continents. The loss of these key species worldwide has led to the primary environmental crisis we now face: the loss of biodiversity, which in turn triggers or exacerbates other crises, such as climate change, health issues, the degradation of natural habitats, and the loss of potable water sources across the planet.

The uniqueness of Corrientes' story lies in the decision to reverse this degradation and to address the problem at its roots, restoring a complete and functional ecosystem through rewilding, in a territory that had been largely devastated and forgotten: Iberá. It was here, in 1997, that an American couple, Douglas and Kristine Tompkins, landed in a small Cessna. The vastness of Iberá convinced them that it was possible to restore the top predator and the rest of the wildlife. And

so began one of the most complex and successful chapters in global environmentalism.

Restoring Iberá involved, above all, a profound cultural shift that the Tompkins and their team were willing to undertake. Conservation went beyond simply protecting what remained. It was primarily about recovering what had been lost. To do this, active wildlife management techniques had to be developed, including capture, immobilization, transportation, confinement in enclosures, supplementary feeding, monitoring, and health management, among others. These techniques were largely unknown at the time. In fact, they were often viewed as threats rather than allies of conservation. Back then, the prevailing view was to leave nature to recover on its own, rather than intervene to reintroduce the species that had disappeared, including the jaguar.

The most logical approach to restoring jaguar population in Corrientes would have been to translocate wild animals from a source area that could provide individuals to Iberá, as had been done to recover other large carnivores such as tigers, lions, and cheetahs. However, the land was not yet prepared for this move, and the first step had to be the construction of a large reintroduction center. This center was gradually populated with breeding individuals from captivity, sourced from various zoos and wildlife rescue centers that courageously joined the initiative from the beginning. Slowly, the project progressed, and with successful results, more supporters joined in. This is how the first animals from Uruguay, Brazil, and Paraguay arrived. Even wild animals were translocated from these two latter countries, something that seemed impossible at the beginning of the project.

In January 2021, the first jaguars were released—24 years after the Tompkins arrived in Iberá, and nine years after the reintroduction center was established. During this time, the largest natural park in Argentina was created in Iberá, and the region's economy shifted toward activities related to wildlife tourism through the implementation of the

nature production model. For the first time in the world, the jaguar—top predator and the largest feline in the Americas—was reintroduced to a region where it had previously disappeared. The social and political support from the people of Corrientes for this initiative was crucial. This support was built not only on a thriving economy but also on the recovery of the strong cultural ties the people of Corrientes had with nature and their identification with the bravery and freedom symbolized by the jaguar.

Only three years after the first releases, Corrientes now hosts around 25 jaguars, making up 10% of the population still remaining in Argentina. Iberá is now the national park with the largest number of these magnificent felines in the country.

The success story could have ended there. However, many challenges remain, and they are becoming increasingly interesting. The jaguar population in Iberá is growing rapidly, and now it is time to monitor another key factor for its long-term sustainability: genetic variability. To achieve this, alliances have been formed with internationally renowned scientists whose research will help manage the population and ensure its survival for years to come. Another key aspect under study is the impact the jaguar population will have on prey species, such as capybaras, and competitors, like foxes. These interactions will have important consequences for the health of the ecosystem. It is expected that the return of the jaguar will not only affect prey and competitors, but it will also lead to an increase in species diversity in Iberá through the diversification of ecological interactions. It will reduce pathogen prevalence and even boost carbon capture and sequestration. This, combined with atmospheric oxygen, helps mitigate global warming. Gathering this evidence is essential to reinforce the need to restore ecosystems through *rewilding*, a task we are undertaking with renowned scientists from both Argentina and abroad.

Additionally, some jaguars are already dispersing outside Iberá Park. While this might initially be seen as a problem, it should actually be

viewed as an opportunity. Wildlife cannot be confined to surviving within protected areas, even those as vast as Iberá. Species must have the ability to exchange individuals between these safeguarded spaces, moving through a human-friendly matrix where coexistence is prioritized. Only this approach can ensure the long-term conservation of large mammals like the jaguar. Allowing the jaguar to inhabit areas with other productive uses is essential for the species' ecological survival and demonstrates a deep respect for other forms of life that, without our commitment, would not be able to survive on the planet today.

Finally, another great revolution is underway in Iberá and Corrientes. The first was the restoration of a degraded natural environment, bringing it back to its full functionality. The second, and perhaps the most ambitious, is for Iberá to serve as a source of endangered species to help restore other similarly defaunated areas. This is already happening—the jaguar is returning to the Impenetrable region of Chaco, largely through the release of animals from Iberá. Many other parks, both in Argentina and neighboring countries, require restoration. Iberá and Corrientes are now ready to lead this mission, just as they did with the pioneering return of the jaguar.



The moon sprinkles frost
on the swaying back of my reed-filled plain,
as the silent night,
tinted with spirits when the *suindá* complains.
And so, I go mariscando,
with paddle and canoe, I go mariscando.
The rushes whisper softly
the olden tales that once were told,
by the Basque Barnidio Sorribes,
on rainy nights in far Curuzú.

[...]

A pombero's omen lingers,
dwelling in the wetlands,
skin of *yarará* snake.
Amongst sarandí, the tero calls,
marsh wolves, *kiyá* and *yacarés*.
So the hide, I go mariscando,
with paddle and canoe, I go mariscando.

Yo voy mariscando – Antonio Tarragó Ros / Pocho Roch

Carlos Pellegrini: An Ecological and Touristic Town

When conservation efforts in San Alonso and El Socorro were well underway, Tompkins' CLT sought to expand the project through collaboration with local communities. One such community was Pellegrini, where nature tourism had been steadily growing, almost artisanally, for several years.

Established in 1912, Colonia Carlos Pellegrini sustained itself for nearly a century through livestock farming, rice cultivation, and hunting as its primary sources of income. During that time, young people often abandoned their town in search of a future elsewhere. “The kids would grow up and leave—to Entre Ríos, for instance,” recalls Viviana Pavón, a housewife who eventually joined the Iberá Chef Network as a cook. “They left because there were no opportunities here, neither to study nor to work,” she adds.

In neighboring provinces, nearby towns, or the city of Corrientes—even as far as Buenos Aires—many Pellegrini residents sought job opportunities or pursued further studies. Their town did not have a high school until 2002. “I finished high school in Mercedes,” shares Domingo “Mingo” González, who also saw friends, neighbors, and relatives leave for other cities in search of a better future. “All my classmates moved away,” he remembers.

The creation of the Iberá Natural Reserve in 1983 was pivotal and perhaps marked the starting point for this town transition to a service-based economy driven by growing tourism demand. The active involvement of the CLT and its team provided additional momentum to the growth of nature tourism.

“My community had to grow and reinvent itself to preserve its local essence while opening up to the world,” said its then-vice mayor—and later long-time mayor—Juan de la Cruz Fraga. He was referring to the transformation that began in 1996 with the opening of the first three lodges: Aguapé, Las Lagunas, and Ñandé Retá (our place, in Guaraní). “The first ones who dared,” they’re called today, referring to those who invested in tourism—a type of business that, back then, was poorly understood and far from a safe bet. “Everyone in Pellegrini wondered: Who would come here?” And indeed, as with any process, tourism developed very

gradually. “There were times when the lodges had no guests for three months,” Mingo shares. However, it slowly took root. “At first, it was just one lodge with four rooms, then it expanded to eight. Then another lodge opened, and then another,” Viviana Pavón recalls, describing how three visionary women recognized the area’s value and foresaw its tourist and commercial potential.

These initial investments created new job opportunities—the first in the tourism sector—particularly for women who had previously been dedicated to child-rearing and homemaking, while men worked in the fields or at rice mills. “Many women stepped up to lead their families,” says Viviana, who earned her first income in this field. She worked in all the lodges and gained valuable experience, paving the way for others to follow. Alongside these investments, training courses tied to the tourism sector began to be offered, enabling locals to develop new skills.

Viviana, for instance, took culinary courses: “We learned about plating and presentation.” Traditional recipes and homemade dishes were enhanced with details that made them more visually appealing and appetizing. “Tourists who stayed at the lodges left delighted,” Viviana recalls. “They said it was as if they were eating at home, thanks to the homely flavors of our dishes. And we were happy,” she says proudly.



Kayak excursions, a direct connection with the waters and wildlife of Iberá.
© Matías Rebak

Her experience reflects the reality of that time. As rice companies began to close, many men lost their jobs, including Viviana’s husband. During this period, she became the family’s sole provider until he found another job. Even after he returned to work, Viviana continued her role as a cook at the lodges. Later, when Red de Cocineros del Iberá (Iberá Cook Network) was established, she joined the initiative and continued her training, eventually graduating as a Gastronomy Technician.

Similarly, tourism also became a job opportunity for men. Mingo González started as a guide in Pellegrini until one day he was offered the chance to become a boatman, even though he had never entered Laguna Iberá. His drive and curiosity led him to read books about the area,



and later, he attended training courses. “That’s when I started seeing the ecosystem differently,” he says. At first, only a few locals participated in the training offered by the Directorate of Parks and Natural Reserves, the Municipality, or the Chamber of Tourism. However, as tourism grew and its benefits became evident, more and more locals joined in.

“I quickly realized that I loved nature and talking to people,” Mingo recalls. Alongside raising animals on his family’s farm, he began working in tourism, which is now his primary occupation. His brother, a park ranger, was a major influence in steering him toward this path. “He and the others who protected the local flora and fauna were my first teachers.”

AN ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITMENT

A few years later, the residents themselves decided to designate Pellegrini as an “Ecological and Touristic Town,” a pivotal decision that arose from a public consultation organized by the local government and the Corrientes Housing Institute (INVICO), following a series of community workshops. This marked the beginning of official measures to strengthen the town’s tourism identity, culminating in the approval of Environmental and Territorial Management Standards, Environmental Protection and Urban Hygiene Policies, and Construction Regulations, in collaboration with INVICO and the Ministry of Public Works and Services.

A region as rich in biodiversity
as it is in cultural heritage.
© José Sosa

Improvements in accommodations and gastronomy, the expansion of ranger and guide services, the growth of local crafts and entrepreneurial ventures, supportive public policies, and the collective effort to establish Pellegrini as a tourist and ecological hub all signaled a steadily brighter future.

However, along this path, a significant challenge emerged. “The problem is the rice fields,” they told then-Mayor, María Isabel Brouchoud. This form of production, which was rapidly expanding and becoming one of the province’s primary economic drivers, carried substantial environmental consequences. Rising demands for higher-quality and larger rice yields led to shifts in production methods that disrupted the ecosystem’s balance. Contributing factors included contamination from agrochemical use, soil exhaustion caused by monoculture, agricultural expansion and deforestation, watercourse modifications from infrastructure projects, and excessive water consumption. Fertilizer and herbicide applications polluted the environment and water resources, degraded soil, and depleted nutrients. These practices also harmed the health of nearby communities and threatened local fauna and flora.

The ecological danger posed by these companies and the obstacle they represented to the tourism goal—by polluting the

environment of the Iberá Wetlands—was raised by an authoritative voice: Sofía Heinonen, who was then a biologist at the National Parks Administration and is now the Executive Director of the Fundación Rewilding Argentina

“That’s when the fight against the rice fields began,” says Brouchoud about the process, which was supported by Greenpeace. “Activists even came and chained themselves to the water pumps or covered them with bags,” she recalls. Another initiative was *Salvemos al Iberá* (Save Iberá) campaign, which aimed to “ensure that environmental laws are respected and that areas protected by the state are not compromised by violations of these laws.” This was especially important since the rice fields in the Iberá Wetlands were located within the Provincial Reserve, in the upper basin of the Corriente River (the natural drain of the Iberá Wetlands), and at the edge of the Fernández, Trin, and Iberá lakes. “Our goal was to stop them from taking water from the lake [Iberá] and from spraying with glyphosate,” she explains, recalling that “the irrigation water would return to us, laden with pesticides.”

This was also a symbolic struggle. Rice represented a productive Corrientes, embodying labor and rural life. It was a vital driver of the provincial economy and, as such, was safeguarded by the government. Rice production accounted for nearly 30% of the



Traditional cuisine is another source of interest for visitors.
© Javier Ojeda Serdán

gross value of the province’s agricultural output and 43% of the national rice production, establishing Corrientes as the top rice-producing province in Argentina. “We are not against the rice fields,” they clarified. “It was simply a matter of organizing and doing things the right way.”

Beyond the environmental fight—which had already made progress by shutting down illegal rice fields and enforcing the province’s water code—over time, the rice industry began to decline due to market factors, leading to the closure of companies in the region. This controversy and the changes it brought resulted in positive outcomes for Iberá. Beyond environmental preservation, “we succeeded in making ourselves visible, so people know Iberá exists,” emphasizes the former mayor.

PELEGRINI STRENGTHENS ITS POSITION AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

Amid the environmental struggle against the rice fields, the authorities and community of Carlos Pellegrini forged a relationship with Douglas Tompkins, who settled in the area with his team. They quickly recognized the importance of rescuing and preserving the Iberá ecosystem in order to achieve the goal of turning the town into a tourist destination.

A trip to Chile helped them better understand the project. In 2007, the mayors of the municipalities surrounding Iberá—Mercedes, Chavarría, Concepción, Pellegrini, and Ituzaingó—visited Pumalín Park, where they saw the results of Tompkins and his team’s conservation work. Some returned convinced, while others remained aligned with the provincial government’s stance.

With Tompkins’ guidance, Pellegrini continued its efforts to establish itself as a tourist destination. The American philanthropist donated the Iberá Municipal Campground and the tourist information offices, and suggested decorating the spaces with local materials to highlight the town’s identity. “Today, the town’s aesthetic still follows this style,” says Isabel Brouchoud.

The amount of sustainable work offered by tourism was increasing. “For men, women, and children. Entire families found opportunities,” ensures Brouchoud.

Over time, Viviana began making regional jams and developed her own brand, Arasá (*guava*, in Guaraní). This entrepreneurial venture also created jobs for other locals, even from neighboring towns. Using fruits she collects from her hometown, she makes jams and sweet treats, adding labels designed by a local entrepreneur in Mercedes. Meanwhile, Mingo, who continues to be the lead guide at

Rincón del Socorro lodge, saw an opportunity to start his own tourism business. “A year and a half ago, I began offering kayaking excursions [...] it’s slow, but it’s going to grow,” he says confidently, motivated by the progress he’s witnessed in his town.

Viviana and Mingo, along with the whole town, saw the benefits of tourism spread throughout Pellegrini. “The change has been massive. In the early 90s, there wasn’t even electricity. Now, there are sewers too,” says the man who has lived in Pellegrini for 44 years. “We now have drilled wells; no more water from hand-dug ones,” adds Viviana, pointing out another significant change. “The houses that once had mud walls and straw roofs are now made of ‘concrete.’ Those who left and returned now can’t believe it.”



The sun dispels the stars
from the Iberá sky.
A kiskadee spreads its wings and darts
to a jacarandá tree up high.
In the reeds, a shadow
that perhaps no one will see
starts to move, it's alive.
The moment to reel in has begun.

The line pulls, there's a tremble,
you hooked a *manduvá*.
Reel it slowly, with care.
If it snaps, you'll face *vare'a*.
Please don't let it pull.
Don't let its mouth tear while you fear.
You've already caught it with the treble hook.
One day more. Thank you, Lord *Ñandejara*.

Kuimba'e – Rafael Antonio Solá

Translator's Note:

Vare'a: hunger, in Guaraní.

Ñandejara: our Lord, in Guaraní.

Kuimba'e: male, in Guaraní.

Manduvá: a river fish.

“Come in, See, and Enjoy”

The official boost to establish Pellegrini as a tourist destination extended to the provincial legislature, where Iberá still lacked the attention needed to secure provincial support on its path to becoming a recognized tourist destination. Later, from her seat in the Senate, Isabel Brouchoud organized a trip for senators to visit Iberá, Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, and witness the developments firsthand.

The team from Douglas Tompkins' foundation were already collaborating with the authorities and the community of Pellegrini as a result of the environmental struggle against the rice fields. They provided legislators with information and demonstrated the value of conservation and ecosystem recovery as essential steps toward transforming the area into a tourist destination. They recall, “It was like a three-day intensive course.” During this visit, alongside the re-elected mayor, Juan de la Cruz Fraga,

they recognized the urgent need to address infrastructure and development projects for the town, as the surge in tourism exceeded all expectations. Sustainable tourism was becoming a key driver of growth for the region.

“The legislators returned full of enthusiasm. They saw the potential,” says Senator and former mayor of Pellegrini, Isabel Brouchoud. Ironically, Senator Sergio Flinta, who would later become the government’s main proponent of a tourism-focused Iberá, was not invited on the trip. Given his ties to the provincial government and his role as a trusted confidant of Governor Ricardo Colombi—then still firmly opposed to Tompkins and staunchly defending the provincial production system perceived as under threat—the organizers assumed Flinta would never consider such an invitation.

The results of that journey began to manifest in the provincial legislature. On November 6, 2014, during its session, the Senate approved Brouchoud’s proposed law declaring Colonia Carlos Pellegrini the Provincial Capital of Biodiversity.

In addition to the environmental and territorial regulations implemented by the municipality, the development of Colonia Carlos Pellegrini was bolstered by public policies from the provincial government aimed at the comprehensive protection of the Iberá macrosystem. Notable examples include the January 2002 designation

of the Ramsar Site¹ “Lagunas y Esteros del Iberá,” which encompasses the town, and the proposal submitted to UNESCO to recognize the Iberá macrosystem as a World Heritage Site.

Steadily, like the gait of horses now pulling canoes with tourists, Pellegrini became the first—and, for a time, the only—tourist destination in Iberá. “We like to say that the magic of Iberá started here, in a place that lay asleep among the reeds,” says Diana Frete, a proud local *chamamé* singer and former vice-mayor of the town, who lovingly sings of her town.

The deep transformation became a fact because we realized we had to be the leaders and key players in the new opportunities that unfolded. We succeeded by staying true to our own approach, embracing self-worth and valuing the environment around us. We trusted our neighbors despite the challenges and fears that arose, welcomed help from those who chose to settle here, and organized ourselves to harness the best each person had to offer. (Juan de la Cruz Fraga, in Iberá Committee, *Colonia Carlos Pellegrini. Una comunidad rural desarrollada en el Parque Iberá*, n.d., p. 8)

1. The Ramsar Convention is an Environmental Treaty established by UNESCO on wetlands considered to be of international importance. Its objective is the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands as a contribution to sustainable development worldwide.

*Guá, my Pellegrini, my little town,
A forgotten dream of Juan Ramón,
Just like your “raft,” you remain the same,
Humble and hopeful,
Amidst the reeds and floating marsh,
In love with a dream that’s yet to start*
[...]

*Néike, ‘ña Eusebia Falcón,
Place your blessing upon my brow.
I’m leaving now, my little town,
Though deep inside, I’m bound somehow.
Néike, che áma of God, look at me,
I wish I could stay, but I must go,
Seeking a job, a better wage,
A harsh necessity, I must go mante*
[...]
Mi pueblito azul - Julián Zini

Translator’s Note:
Guá: an expression used in Corrientes to show fear or admiration.
Néike: “come on” or “let’s go” in Guaraní.
Ña: (contraction of *doña*) Lady/Mrs.
Che áma: “my soul” in Guaraní.
Mante: “I have no other choice” in Guaraní.

The town that once saw its residents leave in search of a better future began to flourish alongside the bulrush and cordgrass. “Fewer than 500 residents remained, though Pellegrini had once been home to nearly 2,000 locals. I left at 12 years old because there was no secondary school. I settled in Corrientes, and not a single day passed without longing for home,” shares Diana, who felt in her soul what the great Julián Zini captured in his *chamamé Mi pueblito azul* [“My little blue town”]. Diana lends her voice to this song, echoing the sentiments of countless fellow townsfolk who felt that same uprooting. As tourism began to transform her village, Diana was able to return in 2006, “determined to support Pellegrini on the path it found, in harmony with nature.”

NEW ACCESS POINTS

Fundación Rewilding Argentina strengthened in Pellegrini “the vision we wanted for all of Iberá,” recalls Sofía Heinonen (biologist and executive director of the Foundation). This wasn’t just about conservation, but also about fostering local development through nature tourism. They opted for mutual support, and from there, CLT and the municipality began working together.

“We wanted to protect the entire area, not just a small part,” says Marisi López (representative of Fundación Rewilding Argentina), pointing to Iberá on the map of Corrientes that she always carries with her. “Because until then, Iberá was just Laguna Iberá in Pellegrini. And the rest wasn’t considered Iberá... partly because there was no other access. To reach the Provincial Park, you could only enter through that portal.”

Situated on the eastern side of the provincial map, closer to Brazil than to the capital city of Corrientes, Pellegrini wasn’t a place frequently visited by locals. Instead, it served as a gateway for nature lovers and specialists who understood the value of Iberá, or as a tourist destination for people from neighboring provinces like Misiones. “Pellegrini was more connected to Posadas or Buenos Aires. So, people coming from Misiones knew about Iberá, but the people of Corrientes didn’t,” recalls Sofía Heinonen, adding, “What we had to do was open a gateway from Iberá to the rest of the province.”

With the creation of a national park, as Tompkins had envisioned, public and free access points were essential. Fundación Rewilding Argentina purchased land adjacent to the future park. “Unlike private owners who would put up gates and restrict access, when the Foundation buys land, it removes the gates and repairs the roads,” says the person currently leading the process of opening and donating

tourist portals and establishing public access to Iberá Park.

Marisi López explains that, in line with the open park concept Tompkins brought from the United States, Iberá should be seen as an integrated system:

He taught us that the best legacy was to create national parks—places for everyone, without distinctions or social barriers, and that endure forever. “Come in, see, and enjoy,” was his concept.

Strategically, the Foundation purchased lands connected to towns such as Ituzzaingó, San Miguel, and Concepción, among others. “Since the Park is mostly water, the Foundation acquired higher lands, where the animals live, to combine lowlands with water and highlands, creating a richer and more diverse park,” she adds.

A Scenic Route

Between 2009 and 2010, CLT moved forward with the Scenic Route project, driven by a determination to open more access points to Iberá and a strong conviction that park—both as protected areas and tourist destinations—serve as engines for economic growth and local development, with active community participation ultimately reaping the benefits. This initiative aimed to connect communities



The start of the Scenic Route project became a moment of joy and celebration for the entire community.
© Marisi López

through paths designed to showcase the most appealing natural and cultural landscapes, where native wildlife and local traditions took center stage.

“A scenic route,” explains Marisi López, “is expansive, with different public access points so that people can enter Iberá from various locations.” It is a route intended to stimulate towns that might have been left behind. López adds:

The fact that they have access to Iberá fosters a tourism opportunity because visiting the area requires hotels, guides, museums that need upkeep, restaurants, homes offering meals, folklorists performing for tourists, artisans, and cooks. All of this creates economic activity, breathing new life into the town.

She remembers the sweltering siestas waiting for a meeting with the mayor, sitting either in her vehicle or on a bench in the plaza because there was no lodging, no restaurant, or even a service station. Occasionally, she waited at a neighbor's house, always greeted by the characteristic hospitality and generosity of the people of Corrientes. "Today, you have places to eat, buy water, or even work with internet access," she says proudly, reflecting her affection for Iberá and its people.

The Scenic Route project also had an environmental and economic purpose. As Iberá grew as a tourist destination, the influx of visitors risked overwhelming the area and driving away wildlife. Ensuring the distribution of tourism across the region became essential—to protect Iberá's ecosystem, spread economic benefits, and create broader opportunities.

To implement the project, the support of the authorities and the community of Carlos Pellegrini was crucial. The then-mayor, Fraga, played a pivotal role as the key link to other municipalities blessed by Iberá. Local leaders gathered there and witnessed firsthand what was unfolding: a town that had discovered nature tourism as a new engine for development. Equally essential was the relentless dedication of Marisi López, who took it upon herself to engage with the mayors of neighboring towns. Numerous meetings were

held in each of these towns, where the value of ecotourism in the area and the importance of their active participation were emphasized.

After several meetings and trips, the ten municipalities surrounding Iberá signed a document expressing their intent to join the initiative. In 2010, representatives from these towns, along with locals and park rangers, gathered at Carambola's portal with Tompkins to mark the launch of the Scenic Route and celebrate the unification of the towns with a shared vision of conservation and local development through nature tourism.



Yes, sir. I can attest,
Corrientes has *payé*.
No matter how much you smile
thinking “what foolishness!”
These are simple, ominous words
from one who has always loved
their homeland... I say again:
Corrientes has *payé*!
Let its landscape speak,
its Paraná, its Batel,
its Îverá, its Corriente,
its Miriñay, its Aguapey...
[...]
Yes, sir, it does have it,
how could it not have it?
Flavors proclaim it:
its warm *chipá heité*,
its syrupy sweets,
its cassava and honey treats.
Its accordions echo it,
with the soul of *chamamé*,
its guitars whisper it,
and as darker it gets,
they mimic in their strings
the trills of the *corochiré*.

Corrientes tiene payé – Osvaldo Sosa Cordero

Translator's Note:
Payé/paje: magic, charm in Guaraní.
He'íte: very delicious in Guaraní.
Corochiré/korochire: Turdus.

The Ups and Downs of a Development Model

For nearly five years, Conservation Land Trust (CLT) worked locally without losing sight of the need to align these efforts with a provincial government that remained skeptical about the Tompkins project. To this end, there were attempts to bridge the gap. Some claim that letters were sent to then-Governor Arturo Colombi and Minister of Production Alfredo Aùn, informing them of Douglas Tompkins' decision to donate land to the province. These versions also claim that the letters went unanswered. However, a meeting did take place with the provincial governor one Sunday morning at the official residence by the riverfront of the City of Corrientes. It is said that this was the first approach to the provincial government.

In both society and the government of Corrientes, many still found it hard to believe that a foreigner would buy land and donate it

to create public parks. “But when they said Tompkins was coming to take the water, to gather mud for NASA, and that he was destroying schools and spreading all those stories, I didn’t believe it,” says Senator Sergio Flinta, who began to see a potential connection with the environmental project.

From his seat in the provincial Senate, he introduced several initiatives: a request for reports from the government of Arturo Colombi when the land possession conflict in the rural area of Yahaveré (Department of Concepción) flared up, gaining attention both in the matter and on the public agenda, as well as a bill proposing an ecotourism plan for the area. “This is when I started drawing attention to the issue, mainly from Tompkins’ people,” says Flinta, reflecting on what could have been a “strategy.”

While campaigning for the 2009 general elections, the senator accompanied the candidate for governor Ricardo Colombi on his provincial tour, and during a visit to Concepción, “we saw the old chapel with its roof destroyed,” Flinta recalls. This 18th-century sanctuary had significant historical value: it was the site where Manuel Belgrano prayed before the image of St. Francis of Assisi on November 26, 1810, and where he enlisted Pedro Ríos, the young boy known as Tamborcito de Tacuarí, who later participated in the Paraguay campaign. To Flinta, the chapel also held sentimental value:



Old chapel of Concepción del Yaguareté Corá (18th century).
© Ayelén Mercado



The chapel was restored and now houses the Belgrano Historical Museum, in Concepción.
© Cristian Cardozo

it was where his mother had been baptized and where his siblings had received confirmation.

Then, he recalls, “I told Colombi [Ricardo], if we win the election, the only thing I’ll ask of you is that we rebuild the chapel.” The Frente de Todos party won the provincial elections, and Ricardo Colombi returned as governor. Soon after, the chapel was restored. “But then, what do we do with the restored chapel? Because right next to it stood the new church, where masses were held for the parishioners. So, I thought about turning it into a museum. I gathered people, raised funds, and many contributed, and we created the museum.” Flinta’s account highlights a key moment in the history of Iberá as a government initiative: “That’s when I envisioned Concepción as a potential destination.”

Over the years, the government had taken steps to promote development in the area, focusing particularly on the town of Concepción. Investments included the construction of roads and routes, electrical grids, and restoration projects. Yet, the vision for transforming the area into a tourist destination remained in its infancy. While closer than before, still the government's perspective was somewhat removed from Tompkins' vision and the almost ten-year-work by CLT and Fundación Rewilding Argentina.

However, a more environmentally conscious global context and local political circumstances encouraged a stronger official commitment to Iberá. The electoral race that returned Ricardo Colombi to Ferré's chair also elevated Carlos Mauricio "Camau" Espínola, a prominent opposing Peronist, to the position of mayor of the provincial capital. Establishing a national park was one of the cornerstone proposals of the former Olympic medalist.

Losing control of the main municipality in Corrientes and four other key districts to their historic rival, the Justicialist Party (PJ), was a significant blow that prompted internal reflection within the provincial Radical Party. Tourism, a central focus in the PJ's campaign proposals and speeches, stood out as a point of divergence. While the ruling coalition also envisioned tourism in its plans, it struggled to

reconcile this vision with Corrientes' deeply rooted, cattle-driven economy.

The possibility of merging this with the model of nature tourism and production promoted by Tompkins in the area emerged as a viable option. In this context, a closed-door meeting between Flinta and the conservationist took place in a municipal office in Pellegrini, where provincial authorities had gathered to participate in a local festival. Although the meeting yielded no concrete outcomes, it marked a significant step toward fostering collaboration.

Meanwhile, skepticism and critical voices persisted. "Their goal is to completely restrict production so that producers are forced to leave," warned Fundación Iberá Patrimonio de los Correntinos, an organization established in Mercedes in response to what they perceived as a threat to the sovereignty of the wetland. National media echoed accusations from producers, NGOs, opposition legislators, political party leaders, and others, alleging evictions of families, road closures that deprived producers of water access, and other grievances attributed to Tompkins. Ultimately, these claims were found to lack evidence and were dismissed. Even within academic and scientific circles, objections were raised regarding the projects, strategies, and procedures.



THE STRENGTH OF CONVICTION

By this stage, CLT had already amassed notable achievements, marking progress despite lingering skepticism. For Tompkins, the most effective way to respond to doubts, criticisms, and outright attacks was through action. Marisi López (a leader of Fundación Rewilding Argentina) recalls that she often called him to share situations where she faced hostility, and his response was always the same: "The more they criticize, the harder we work. Time and facts are the only proof here. You can explain if you like, but what will really matter are the results, the work itself."

Being a native of Corrientes made the challenges even more personal for her. Even

El Tránsito, Concepción, September 2014, shortly before travelling to Chile. Sofia Heinonen, Sergio Flinta, Douglas Tompkins, and Marisi López.
© Comité Iberá

her own family often struggled to understand her dedication to a cause that still faced negative press. She regularly encountered uncomfortable situations, such as running into ruralist acquaintances—staunch critics of Tompkins and his project—at her daughters' school gates or during social gatherings.

At Tompkins' foundation, they held a steadfast belief that Iberá could evolve from an “unproductive” territory into a forward-thinking one. They envisioned it as a green lung in the heart of Corrientes, interconnecting the province, generating income through ecotourism, and creating genuine employment opportunities for the residents of the more than 20 municipalities it encompassed, directly or indirectly.

The new “production of nature” concept, an appealing aspect of the conservationist project, had yet to convince the provincial government—official rejection led to public resistance. Amid this social discredit and rejection from the productive sector, Governor Ricardo Colombi firmly declared, “To anyone proposing to turn Iberá into a national park, let me be clear: Iberá is and will always belong to the people of Corrientes. We will do whatever it takes to defend it.” Back then, “Colombi referred to us as pseudo-environmentalists,” recalls Marisi López, reflecting on those political speeches in which the provincial

leader harshly criticized them. “There was no way I could approach him or get a meeting. He ignored me.” Tensions between the foundation and the government had reached a peak. The foundation's proposals were met with skepticism; the future was uncertain, and working conditions were difficult.

Faced with this situation and knowing that Sergio Flinta was one of Colombi's most trusted men, López began a pilgrimage through the halls of the provincial legislature. Armed with brochures, she repeatedly tried to convince the senator, only to leave his office with the same negative response. Yet, convinced of the project's benefits for Corrientes and the world, she kept coming back.

After numerous failed attempts, López returned to the senator's office one day with a decisive invitation: to visit San Alonso, the heart of CLT's operations. He accepted the invitation, and during the visit, they witnessed the transformative work Tompkins' team had accomplished and their ambitious plans for species reintroduction. “I believe that's when he saw and realized something needed to be done—and done together,” López recalls of that 2013 visit.



I saw a tall, slender young man standing by a beautiful chestnut horse, saddled and ready, just a short distance away. We greeted each other, and he introduced himself as Francisco Madariaga, around twenty years old.

[...]

His father owned a farm in the nearby town of Concepción, but they had bought a house in Saladas, where the family moved to live. Francisco, a student in Buenos Aires, spent his vacations with his parents. That year, he had just finished high school [...]

In the late afternoons, we would often head to the lake where we kept a canoe. On some days, the north wind would push a thick green blanket across the water, blocking our boat's docking spot. In those moments, Sorrentino would row while Madariaga, on his chestnut horse, tied a rope to the canoe and pulled it free. It was something to see—the horse, spurred on and frightened, leaping forward to break through the floating greenery that surrounded it.

Gerardo Pisarello, *En el recuerdo de los años*, Ánfora, 1983.

With a Spirit of Governance

Following their visit to San Alonso to witness the nature production model firsthand, the next step—now with the governor's cautious approval—was a trip to Chile. Douglas Tompkins guided Senator Sergio Flinta, then Secretary General Carlos Vignolo, and a small delegation through Conservation Land Trust's (CLT) rewilding projects in South America as an integral conservation strategy along the Patagonia Parks Route. They had created national parks for environmental protection and nature tourism. They worked on three core elements: creating national parks, restoring ecosystems, and fostering community engagement.

The delegation toured Pumalín National Park and other sites among seven proposed parks and three slated for expansion. “We realized this man [Tompkins] had genuinely forward-thinking ideas,” Senator Flinta reflected. They saw the results of two decades of work, which

had overcome early criticism and distrust, much like the challenges in Corrientes. In Chile, they observed how the initiative transformed communities. Locals thanked Tompkins for opening parks with trails, campgrounds, and jobs. They admitted initial skepticism but expressed deep gratitude for the changes these efforts brought to their towns.

During their stay, they had the chance to spend time together, deepen their understanding of one another, and discuss the Iberá Project. One pivotal conversation stood out: Tompkins proposed his vision of creating Argentina's largest national park within Corrientes' wetlands. To realize this, the foundation would donate land and anticipated that the provincial government would do the same with the Provincial Park's lands. Senator Flinta firmly rejected the idea: "The park will remain Corrientes'."

That night, Marisi López feared everything they had painstakingly built was crumbling:

All the trust we had earned, even though people warned us it wasn't wise to mix government with the foundation. On the final evening at Doug's home, following an otherwise pleasant dinner, Senator Flinta inquired when the Carambolita campsite at the Carambola Portal would be completed. This was a site they had toured months earlier after one of their then-clandestine meetings at Estancia El Tránsito, a property owned

by the foundation at the time. Tompkins' reply was unequivocal: "I'll build the campsite when you donate the park and make it Argentina's largest national park."

The discussion escalated into a prolonged and heated argument. Words were exchanged on both sides, and the previously amicable tone disintegrated. What had been a highly productive trip now felt irreparably tarnished. "I felt betrayed," Flinta later admitted, accusing Marisi of orchestrating the trip under false pretenses and conspiring with Tompkins. To worsen matters, the group was stranded on a remote island in southern Chile with no immediate way out. Marisi found herself caught between two immovable forces that had ceased to hear each other:

Both had very strong tempers, and in the end, it was just a matter of winning. I felt trapped; on one hand, Doug was my boss, and on the other, Flinta and his team were my guests, with whom I not only had to continue the trip [we still had the same number of days left in another park further south, with Kristine Tompkins as the host], but with whom I had been building a relationship based on trust—and he [Flinta] felt I was betraying him.

Recovering from such a heated argument—perhaps more intense than anticipated—



Trip to Pumalín National Park,
Chile, February 2015.
© Comité Iberá

proved challenging. However, over time, its significance became apparent as it addressed critical concepts for the future. Following the dispute, the province focused on demonstrating its ability to manage the Provincial Park with standards comparable to those of National Parks. This effort culminated in a strategic agreement: the foundation would donate its lands to create a National Park, while the provincial lands would remain as a Provincial Park. This collaboration paved the way for Argentina's largest protected area, the Great Iberá Park.

The momentum to replicate a Chilean-style conservation project in Corrientes only grew stronger. "To achieve this, we knew we had to deepen our collaboration with Douglas Tompkins," the senator reflects. "His expertise was as crucial as his lands."

As this vision materialized, the Corrientes government began turning plans into reality. In Concepción, for instance, they facilitated the donation of properties to the province, which later became the Interpretive Center and La Pilarcita Museum—important landmarks for Iberá's growing ecotourism scene.

These plans were consolidated during the following meeting between provincial leaders and Tompkins' team. Held at Estancia El Tránsito in the Carambola area of Concepción, participants included Sergio Flinta, former Minister of Tourism Inés Presman, and Director

of Parks and Reserves Vicente “Pico” Fraga. Representing CLT were Marisi López, Sofía Heinonen, Ignacio Jiménez, and Pascual Pérez, a native from Mburucuyá who played a key role in community outreach. Sergio and Marisi achieved what once seemed unattainable: bringing the teams together to establish a common agenda.

Though not yet public, this meeting marked a turning point in their collaboration, as Tompkins’ team presented their vision and initiatives to the provincial government. “That’s when we realized the projects aligned perfectly,” the senator remarked. Both sides shared the goal of making Iberá more accessible and connecting it with the people of Corrientes because our “residents wanted to see Iberá,” he added, echoing the sentiment of the provincial population. For the first time, the video *Corrientes vuelve a ser Corrientes* (Fundación Rewilding Argentina, 2023, YouTube) was showcased, encapsulating the spirit of Iberá’s restoration efforts. Its message resonated strongly with the government’s plans and objectives. Together, they progressed in opening new access portals, a task that involved constructing roads, paving streets, ensuring energy supply, providing essential services, and training the local community. That meeting in September 2015 laid the foundation for what would later become the Iberá Committee.

A PUBLIC-PRIVATE CO-GOVERNANCE

Meanwhile, in Corrientes, efforts to shape Iberá as a strategic development initiative were taking root. “One of the pillars that made this possible was the development of the Participatory Strategic Plan (PEP), which largely serves as the guiding framework for the vision of the province we, Corrientes residents, aspire to,” noted Sebastián Slobayen, then Secretary of Provincial Planning.

Slobayen highlighted the inclusive nature of the plan’s development: “It emerged from the grassroots, from every institution and resident of Corrientes, across all the province’s localities.” He also emphasized the role of UNNE in overseeing technical and academic coordination. “The PEP allowed us to define the province’s desired profile and determine the direction for its development. It was like outlining a vision for growth,” the official stated. The plan identifies Iberá’s development as a strategic, environmental, and tourism project within its key productive sectors.

Iberá’s promise as a tourism hub drew attention from many, including Javier Kuttel, a tourism entrepreneur who worked with his brother. After discovering Pellegrini, he began incorporating it into his offerings. In 2011, at Pellegrini’s inaugural Bird and Wildlife Fair, Javier Kuttel reunited with an old friend, Sergio Flinta, from their university days at UNNE.

Flinta shared his vision for his hometown, sparking Javier’s interest and inviting him to become part of the initiative.

After years in Brazil studying the model carried out in Bonito—famed for its ecotourism—and managing a business in Maceió, this Entre Ríos native visited Concepción and was captivated by the town and its community. “It’s an ideal destination for tourism, with its nature, history, and culture,” he told the senator. Drawing on his expertise in local development, Javier Kuttel supported the idea of implementing a governance system to advance Iberá’s development. Originating in the 1980s, this approach, which emphasizes public-private co-governance, was adopted by the provincial government during the 2011 legislative campaign.

After the resounding victory of Peronism with Cristina Fernández as the presidential candidate, and as provincial elections approached to elect legislative representatives, the ruling Radical Party established a working group that brought together diverse perspectives and voices. Following the local elections, where the governing coalition secured a decisive victory, Flinta proposed creating a similar working group to focus on Iberá.

Building on prior collaboration between the government and CLT, the formation of a shared platform gained momentum, incorporating officials from government sectors such as

Tourism, Parks and Reserves, Culture, and NGOs. Flinta reflects on the early, informal stages of this team, now fully established, which became pivotal for Iberá’s development as an ecotourism icon:

And that’s where we formed a working group. We talked about what Concepción was like, what it already had, the museum we had built, and what was still missing. We discussed the initiatives for San Miguel, the plans for Loreto, and the additional needs of Pellegrini. From those discussions, we began shaping what would later be known as the Iberá Committee.

The Committee focused on the development of Iberá Park and its surrounding area, which includes the municipalities around the reserve. In this collaborative space, multiple stakeholders gathered to work on a conservation and development project for the region and province. Actors who had once been on opposing sides came together, united by a shared spirit of governance innovation.

Another key influence on this initiative was the Governance Information System (SIGOB), a regional service of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). SIGOB addresses the needs of UNDP offices across Latin America and the Caribbean and promotes a shift towards a more citizen-centered management

culture in alignment with the 2030 Agenda. Within this framework, “a monitoring system, a management dashboard, and follow-up on all government policies for decision-making by top authorities” were developed, recalls Slobayen. He considers this aspect to be foundational to the Iberá government plan, known as *Pacto Correntino*. “This not only enabled a thorough and organized record of all government actions, but it also established a structured working process. That’s why I see it as so significant. It defined a framework where various actors came together to address a shared issue and seek solutions based on a common vision,” he explained. This working model and approach were later replicated in the Iberá Committee.

“Once we partnered with the provincial government, progress moved much faster,” says Marisi López, highlighting the advantages of this collaboration. Together, they traveled through the towns, presenting the Iberá project to the mayors, local authorities, key community figures, and the public. Numerous meetings were held with local leaders and key stakeholders, organizing events where the ongoing work, projects, and particularly the new opportunities were showcased, along with talks and training workshops. The mayors, relieved by the partnership, were pleased with the joint presentations. They recognized the benefits for their towns and communities and felt reassured

that they no longer had to choose between supporting the government or the NGO making promises of development and jobs.

Some initial skepticism among the public gradually faded: “When they saw the investment plans we made, how we were organizing training for young people, especially to form guide teams and improve the park ranger corps,” Flinta notes, among many other projects led by the Iberá Committee.

The project, presented by the provincial government in a collaborative effort with the Fundación Rewilding Argentina and other social and private stakeholders, gradually built the trust necessary to bring it to fruition. The fusion of these previously opposing parties—now aligned behind a shared vision benefiting the region, province, country, and even the world—bolstered the credibility of the Committee, as well as that of the conservation work led by Tompkins’ team, which was already showing remarkable results in the wetlands. Gradually, the latent concerns within the productive sector began to dissipate: “They started to see that everything that had been said about Tompkins at the time wasn’t true. All the fears they had were unfounded; the proposals put forth by CLT didn’t interfere with the productive system,” Flinta explains. Rather than obstructing the province’s productive activities, the initiative



- | | | | |
|-------------------|----------------------|--------|--------------|
| Forestry Industry | Production of Nature | Pine | Vegetable |
| Rice Industry | Tourism | Rice | Tobacco |
| Citrus Industry | Port | Orange | Yerba Mate |
| Textile Industry | Bridge | Cattle | Aquaculture |
| Wool Industry | Airport/Airstrip | Sheep | Software |
| | | Honey | Floriculture |

sought to establish a new driver of progress: the production of nature. As proof of this, the senator highlights the territorial boundaries:

We said: “Well, here we produce nature, and from here onward, everything that needs to be produced can be produced. But this territory [the entire Provincial Park] is monitored and managed by the province, while the National Park territory will fall under national oversight. Meanwhile, we continued our efforts in Iberá.”

It was a matter of bringing order on the provincial map—determining the most suitable type of production for each area or region. Just as some lands are ideal for livestock, rice cultivation, or forestry, that “seemingly unproductive area” in the heart of the province turned out to be perfect for producing nature. The type of economic benefit that turns it into production comes through wildlife observation tourism. This represents a new, regenerative economy that distributes income more equitably. Men, women, young people, and adults alike can all participate in the wide range of activities that a remarkably appealing park like Iberá is capable of generating, concludes Marisi López.



One only needs to sit on the veranda, choosing a new focal point each evening—or returning to the usual one. The result is the same, yet always different. Simply sitting there, without effort, allows the body to gradually transform into pure gaze.

[...]

By the gate leading to the reservoir, three blond brothers, wearing knitted light-blue wool berets, walk down the path. They were born mute, and they're called "the Arandas" in the plural because they're always together.

They're never seen far from home and never ride horses. The Payubre [Mercedes] is the heart of their walks, the center of their world [...] With their green eyes and identical smiles, they settle each time at a different estancia homestead, where they begin braiding fine, pale leather strips, which they later use to craft luxurious tack.

Cristina Iglesia, *Mirar el campo*, in *Corrientes*, Beatriz Viterbo, 2010.

Protecting and Defending What's Ours

The project on conservation, tourism, and production of nature, now better understood by the various stakeholders who began working collaboratively, was steadily being consolidated in the Iberá region. It became necessary to bring in more human resources and training to strengthen the monitoring and care of the territory and to professionalize tourism services. This is how Adrián Kurt, who now coordinates the team of park rangers in Concepción, came on board. Originally from Misiones, he first arrived in Pellegrini, initially with the intent of defending Iberá from Douglas Tompkins. That's how he saw things, based on what he had heard on news channels while working as a park ranger in his red-soil homeland: "He came to Corrientes knowing Tompkins as the mistake of letting in a gringo who came to fence off state-owned lands, someone the government was selling land to,

a private North American buyer paying dollars, and so on,” he recounts today.

Invited by the Government of Corrientes, he arrived, began to explore the area, meet the people, and observe the work of Conservation Land Trust (CLT) up close. He also received essential explanations from his then-boss, Vicente Fraga, and had the chance to talk with colleagues. “I didn’t understand it so quickly. They told me all the good things, but it took me some time to fully grasp the logic behind the project. I kept thinking there must be something more to it; after all, no one gives anything away for free,” he recalls. Over time, his perception would change radically.

In addition to recruiting park rangers and guides from other provinces—as initially happened in Carlos Pellegrini—the Iberá Committee recognized the importance of implementing tourism training programs to involve more locals. These programs aimed to enable them to welcome visitors, organize itineraries, and guide tourists on the distinctive features of the wetlands, as well as the towns and rural areas. For this purpose, specialist Fernando Laprovitta conducted the first guide training course organized by the provincial Directorate of Natural Parks.

TRAINING FOR TOURISM: FROM DISTRUST TO ENTHUSIASM

Not many locals signed up. Few saw a future in it. “Why would I take the course if no tourists are coming?” thought Saúl Aguirre, now a guide at La Pilarcita Museum. He worked in landscaping for the green spaces department of the Municipality of Concepción when someone suggested he take the guide training course. But, as he recalls, “I didn’t understand the concept. Why would I train for that?” he wondered.

In their hometown, Saúl and his brother, Juan, attended a rural primary school, arriving every day on horseback. The 40 minutes of galloping didn’t prevent them from studying, as their parents had always encouraged. To continue their studies, they moved to Concepción. As small-scale producers, their parents cared for animals and the family garden: “It was for personal consumption and barter, cash wasn’t common in the countryside, and exchanges were made with neighbors—a chicken for vegetables.”

Their father found a job as a janitor at a school in Concepción, and the family moved, except for their 14-year-old brother who chose to stay working on the farm. “Secondary school was very hard for us in the town,” Saúl says. This is because education in the countryside was not the same. “Teachers would talk to us about power

and square roots, and we didn’t understand anything. Meanwhile our classmates from town would say, ‘Yes, teacher, we covered that in fifth grade.’” He recalls feeling a little embarrassed by this gap. Saúl and his brother decided to leave secondary school and start working.

Eight years later, Saúl resumed his studies and completed secondary school at a night school. In 2013, he joined the second guide-training course. He did it mostly out of curiosity, but the course ended up meaning much more to him than just becoming a guide. Shy and reserved, he recalls how Professor Laprovitta—whom he remembers fondly and with gratitude—helped him develop social and communication skills. “I improved so much that I got a job as a guide,” he says from the museum in the heart of the town, where he has worked for 10 years.

Saúl was another young man from Iberá who saw the possibility of a future in the capital city of Corrientes, in other provinces, or in Buenos Aires, a future he couldn’t find in the village. “At one point, I thought about leaving, but I didn’t want to... My brother didn’t leave either,” he adds happily. This is because in 2014, an Agricultural Technical Degree program opened, and Juan Aguirre was able to study. This led him to a job at Fundación Rewilding Argentina. “What’s interesting about it, and what tourism also provided us with, aside from the opportunity to work, is the chance to study,” says this young

La Pilarcita Children’s Thematic Museum in Concepción del Yaguareté Corá opened in September 2013, housing a large collection of dolls belonging to artist and writer Marily Morales Segovia. Pilar Zaracho, the 4-year-old girl who tragically lost her life after falling from the cart she was traveling on with her family, as she tried to reach the doll that had fallen, is “La Pilarcita.” Since then, miracles have been attributed to her, offerings are made, promises are fulfilled, and people visit the museum created in her honor.

man, who arrived in Concepción to continue his studies and plans to enroll in the Tourism Technical Degree program.

Lucrecia Fader was another student from that second course and one of the many people who had to leave their hometown in search of a better future elsewhere. At the age of 20, Lucrecia left Concepción and headed to Buenos Aires, holding promise of a better life. “I left in 1999 because I couldn’t find opportunities in Corrientes Capital, and even fewer here,” this young woman recalls, and the sadness returns to her eyes. Those same eyes had filled with tears when she moved to the great Argentine capital against her parents’ wishes, to live with a great-aunt. She found work at a clothing store and later at a boutique deli owned by an Italian family. She needed to keep herself busy and push away the “calls” from her hometown: “I had to avoid thinking about it, so I wouldn’t miss it and run back home,” she admits, and her voice still breaks. She studied and, after graduating as a radiology technician, began working at the prestigious Dr. Juan Antonio Fernández General Acute Care Hospital.

Over 1,000 kilometers away from her hometown, she would watch the news about Tompkins, “the North American who wants to take the water from the wetlands”—the very wetlands she had lived near for years but had never really known.

Lucrecia tried to avoid visiting her family because each goodbye became harder to bear. Besides, the money she saved on travel was more useful when sent to them. But every once and then, she would return. Occasionally, her heart would echo with greater longing. On one of these visits, fate stepped in. She met the man who would later become her husband: Adrián, a man from Entre Ríos who came to Corrientes to work as a tourist guide and ended up enchanted by the magic of Iberá and the *payé* of Corrientes.

Despite the distance, their relationship grew stronger, until Lucrecia made the decision: the idea of returning to her hometown lit up Lucrecia’s eyes. The possibility of a job and a better quality of life near her family and her love made the long-desired decision to return home easier. Concepción offered an opportunity once unthinkable: tourism as an economic engine. “Today I choose and enjoy this,” she says, comparing her current life, surrounded by nature, with the eight years she worked at Fernández Hospital, “in a place where the sun never shone.”

José Sosa was another young man who found a new life in the Iberá tourism project. He was 15 years old when he started working at the Interpretation Center in Concepción. His motivation wasn’t rooted in a real interest in the growing tourism in the region but rather in earning money to fund his graduation trip.



“Every October 12th, the day of Pilar’s birth, also the day of the Virgin of Pilar, a veneration and devotion begin at the sanctuary dedicated to this child in Cerro Puitá, where the accident occurred and where she was buried. The neighbors of the village light candles and hold a serenade. It’s like Gauchito Gil, who performs miracles,” says Saúl Aguirre.

“I didn’t do it because I liked tourism; I didn’t understand anything about it,” he admits.

It was 2012, and José began working secretly, as his parents didn’t want anything to distract him from his studies. But they found out and gave him a one-month trial. If he could manage to work without affecting his grades, he would be allowed to continue until he had saved enough for the trip to Bariloche. The challenge pushed him to put in extra effort, and his grades improved. At the Interpretation Center, he did a little bit of everything. His main job was cleaning, but he also helped with events and anything else that was needed. By that point, tourism had already sparked his enthusiasm.

José was in his fifth year of high school when the second guide training course was offered.

Saúl Aguirre, guide at La Pilarcita Children’s Thematic Museum in Concepción.
© Moira Insaurralde

He signed up and invited a few friends. It was there that he met other locals, forming a group “that realized there was an opportunity in Concepción,” he says.

The graduation trip came at the same time as the chance to fly over Iberá. José didn’t hesitate—he chose to explore the wetlands, that magical place so rarely visited by those who live nearby.

After finishing high school, José had to continue his higher education. Like many students from rural areas, he moved to a pension in the capital of Corrientes. “I couldn’t find myself,” a local expression José uses to refer to the nostalgia for his hometown. He returned to his village on the day the tourist guide licenses were being handed out. His studies gained official validity, and the work he had done until then became formalized. “We were also inaugurating the first office of the guides section, and we were establishing ourselves as a legally recognized association,” he adds, with a clear sense of belonging.

And at that event, he found his mother, who hadn’t expected to see him back so soon. Between hugs and tears, he shared his decision to stay in Concepción, a place that now offered him a future. “We received our guide certificates, we established our association, and the next day I officially started working with Adrián [Kurt],” he recalls from April 2014, when his parents gave him their blessing.

Being a Tourist to Offer Tourism

The people living in the communities that make up the “Iberá Tourism” region didn’t understand tourism because most of them had never experienced it. “Culturally, we don’t have travel instilled in us. We didn’t know what tourism was. We didn’t know how to be tourists. Many of us had never left our town,” reflects José Sosa. This was something the Iberá Committee also noticed. “We realized that they needed to learn and understand what tourism was, because you can’t present what you don’t know,” acknowledges Javier Kuttel from Fundación Yetapá, an NGO that joined the project. They support the goal of local development through ecotourism, “on three fundamental pillars: natural resources, culture and town history, and social capital. The benefits generated by these resources and culture should serve the local community as an economic asset,” explains this founding partner.

The Foundation understood that for genuine local development to take place, it was essential to promote the social capital that sustains and gives meaning to the process. In their vision, clearly stated on Yetapá’s website, they explain: “The goal of this local development model is for the community itself to host the tourists, and for this to happen, the locals must be prepared.”

Based on this premise, a group of future tourism service providers was introduced to what it means to be a tourist. Visits were organized

to the Iguazú Falls in Misiones, Mburucuyá National Park, and finally, Carlos Pellegrini—where tourism was becoming established. At these locations, they fully immersed themselves in the tourist experience: going on excursions, listening to guides, choosing meals from menus at restaurants where they were served food and drinks, and enjoying the services and comforts of hotel accommodations. All these unprecedented, amazing, and highly informative experiences introduced them to new roles, practices, and skills involved in tourism work. Moreover, they revealed the possibility of a promising life change.

“No one can offer what they don’t know,” states Kuttel. And for many residents of the towns surrounding the wetlands, it was necessary to get to know the Iberá itself before they could show it. José Sosa summarizes it this way: “Getting to know Iberá and its people was a discovery for us too. It went from being the unknown wetlands to becoming the wetlands and its people.”

Domingo Ávalos, from
mariscador to tour operator.
© Moira Insaurralde



I have a lovely little shack
Right in the heart of the wetland,
Where mockingbirds sing their chorus
And lapwings wake you at dawn's demand.
My shack is plain, like any other,
A wooden gate, an eucalyptus,
Two little dogs, a bigger one,
a stray rhea that comes and goes.
[...]
Few visitors ever make it here,
The village lies three leagues away,
You need skilled horses to cross the streams,
Swimming their currents to clear the way.
[...]
I don't want to leave this place,
Where else could I find my grace?

Chamamé de los Esteros – Mario Bofill

The Value of Local Identity in Tourism

The project to reintroduce species and preserve ecosystems naturally included a focus on the social and cultural dimensions: its people, distanced from tourism, whose identity is deeply rooted in the landscape and whose traditions define their way of life. Without listening to its inhabitants, valuing their knowledge and practices, and fostering their training and trust, the dream of showcasing Iberá to the world would not have been possible. The dual treasures of this vast protected area—the landscape and its people—offered a unique opportunity to enhance local economies and improve the quality of life for its residents. This focus was central to the Iberá Committee's project. One member concentrated on promoting sustainable local development through participatory work with residents, guides, artisans, entrepreneurs, and the municipality. In this effort, Fundación Yetapá, in partnership with CLT, formed

ComTur, a mixed local entity responsible for implementing the tourism development policies of Concepción.

GROWING FROM OUR ROOTS

Unlike Pellegrini, where development followed a model driven by private investors fostering tourism, in Concepción del Yaguareté Corá, the goal was to “create a locally-driven tourism initiative involving the residents, their own investments, skills, and traditions,” explains Javier Kuttel from Fundación Yetapá. This required engaging with the community: raising awareness, providing information, offering training, strengthening capacities, and reassessing customs and lifestyles. Mariana Balestrini, a consultant specializing in Economic and Social Development, joined the team that later formed Fundación Yetapá. Through this organization, they launched tourism-based development programs tailored to the Iberá communities.

Bienvenidos a nuestra casa (Welcome to Our Home) was Yetapá’s first program. Its main goal was to enable residents to provide tourists with high-quality accommodations and dining while offering the genuine experience of engaging with the local community and culture. Kuttel recounts that the initial challenge was overcoming the

skepticism of locals who doubted they could host tourists in their homes or have them try their cooking. Many couldn’t imagine anyone paying to see capivaras and *yacarés*—“those little creatures that sometimes get in the way.”

Helping residents appreciate the value of their surroundings and traditions was a key objective achieved through one-on-one discussions, workshops, and training sessions. These initiatives aimed to transform the region’s inhabitants into welcoming hosts for their community. Efforts included helping families upgrade their homes into potential accommodations by refurbishing rooms with existing materials, repurposing furniture, and demonstrating how, with resources already at hand, they could create entirely new spaces suited for tourism. Fundación Yetapá also organized training programs covering hygiene, safety protocols, guest relations, and other essential skills needed to kickstart tourism in Concepción. At the same time, the workshops encouraged community members to adopt a cooperative spirit.

Welcome to Our Home (Gastronomy). To shift the perception of their own culinary heritage—changing the mindset of “Why would tourists want to eat stew or *mbaipy*? That’s poor people’s food!”—it was crucial for locals to understand the cultural and, consequently, the tourist value of the dishes they prepared. These meals, often

associated with the life of an estancia worker, were exactly what visitors wanted to experience. The rice stew that simmered daily in the black pot was the comfort food travelers longed to taste. Residents needed to realize that Iberá’s tourism attracted people seeking authentic gastronomic experiences: sitting at a long table in the middle of a courtyard, shaded by a mango tree, where families gathered for Sunday meals. Even home kitchens held untapped potential as integral parts of the tourism experience.

The gastronomy program aimed to foster change by raising awareness and providing training to aspiring or established entrepreneurs in the culinary sector. Efforts focused on renovating dining spaces and family homes that provided meals to visitors. Assistance was given to enhance ambiance, improve spaces for greater comfort and hygiene, and create welcoming environments, while retaining a strong sense of local identity—always the identity. Soon, homes and restaurants were adorned with local crafts, showcasing the region’s artistry.

The Aguirre household, Saúl’s family home, was the first to undergo this transformation. The change came almost unintentionally, sparked by the young guide’s growing understanding of tourism. At the time, Concepción had only one or two eateries offering fast food. When a group of tourists from Buenos Aires asked Saúl if pizza, empanadas, and hamburgers were all

they ate, his response was genuine: “No, here we eat stew, *mbaipy*, cassava...” he began listing traditional dishes. “That’s what we want,” the visitors replied. Taken aback but driven by Corrientes’ trademark hospitality, Saúl invited them to his home and prepared *mbaipy*. “They left absolutely thrilled,” he recalls—not just by the delicious meal but by the unforgettable experience of being immersed in a magical place and its authentic culture. For Saúl, this moment was pivotal. He realized that through gastronomy—a skill he had mastered as a child, growing up around pots and wood-burning stoves—and with the support of tourism, he could create a new source of income. He welcomed tourists into his family home, marking the beginning of his culinary venture.

Yetapá was just one of many players involved in the effort to revalue local communities and their traditions. Various organizations and individuals contributed to preparing the Iberá communities for tourism development. Initially, however, many residents were reluctant to join the project, perhaps out of skepticism toward the unknown. Marisi López, a key figure at Fundación Rewilding Argentina, recounts how this initial resistance was addressed:

Initially, many residents said they wouldn’t engage in tourism, yet gradually they began renovating their homes to host visitors, making

cheese to sell, renting horses or canoes to explore the wetlands. It wasn't about imposing tourism on them; it was about helping them understand that tourism is a way for them to live and thrive on their own land—a land from which they were often driven away. At first, some even blamed Tompkins for their hardships. But the goal was the opposite. We didn't want them to leave. We wanted them to stay, to care for their land, their fauna, and their flora—and to find a better quality of life there.

The Iberá Committee knew change was a matter of time...

BUILDING A NETWORK

Reina Sandoval, a resident of Concepción, discovered a livelihood in culinary tourism. “My love for cooking comes from my maternal grandmother. It's her legacy,” she recalls, bringing to mind the excursions to gather mulberries, *aguai* berries, and other wild fruits her grandmother used to make preserves, which she traded for goods. Back then, Reina didn't appreciate the learning experience. Describing herself as a small, “grumpy” child, she accompanied her grandmother out of obedience rather than choice. She didn't enjoy it: “Do you know what it was like to come back from the woods covered in red bugs, peeling fruit, and

struggling with it all at six years old?” However, those recipes and culinary skills passed down by her grandmother eventually enabled her to achieve financial independence as an adult.

As a divorced mother of six, Reina initially found work as a cook in a school. The income wasn't much, but it was enough to ensure at least one hearty meal a day for her family. Later, she was offered a position as a cook in a restobar in Mar del Plata. The decision was heart-wrenching; she had to leave her children behind. With a lump in her throat that was sometimes easier to bear than the pangs of hunger, she set off. Within three months, she managed to bring her children to live with her. For seven years, they lived in ‘La Feliz’ (as Mar del Plata is fondly called), until a visit to her family in Concepción presented her with a new opportunity. She was invited to cook for Nido de Pájaros guesthouse. Used to working in front of the Mar del Plata casino and handling “20 orders a day,” Reina Sandoval initially thought she'd starve in Concepción. Despite her doubts, she accepted the job. Her first diners were Spanish tourists, for whom she prepared *mbaipy*. At the guesthouse, it was customary to cook in full view of the guests. In the open-air grill area, they witnessed every step of the preparation. It was then that Reina began to see the possibility of making a living from her culinary skills, right in her homeland.

“When they called me to join this network, I didn't think twice,” recalls Saúl, highlighting some of the benefits of being part of Cooks of Iberá: courses, updates, and the opportunity to connect with fellow cooks working to revalorize the region's cuisine. Before the network, most cooks worked in isolation, only hearing of others from afar. “Meeting, collaborating, and learning together—it was the best thing that could have happened to us.” In addition to cooks, the network also brings together local producers. The advantage of purchasing ingredients from local entrepreneurs ensures both the quality of the meals and that the economic benefits generated by tourism stay within the community. “I knew that in Mburucuyá, someone made cassava starch; Romina made starch. So, I bought homemade, good-quality starch flour. Getting to know each other as cooks and producers is incredibly valuable.” Saúl's experience taught him that including primary producers in the value chain was not just wise but essential for the growth of their shared goals.

The First Network: Cooks of Iberá

The gastronomy of Iberá, deeply rooted in Guaraní traditions subtly blended with Spanish-Moorish influences, became a focal point for tourism development. Thus was born ‘Cooks of Iberá’ (Cocineros del Iberá), a network established under the Iberá Committee to highlight the flavors, revive ancestral recipes, and promote local products. Gisela Medina, an experienced cook from Mburucuyá; Hada Irastorza, of Conservation Land Trust (CLT); and Estefanía Cutro, from INTA, joined forces, visiting villages to connect with producers and cooks eager to share their family recipes and culinary talents. Encouraged by the network's leaders, these men and women began training in areas such as plating, packaging, preservation, labeling, marketing, and sales. Today, they are sought after for events and fairs of the highest caliber nationwide, promoting and enhancing the Iberá brand.

From Concepción del Yaguareté Corá to Casa Rosada

With the Iberá brand as their foundation and the revival of traditional gastronomy from the wetlands, this group of Iberá locals achieved their first national recognition: cooking in Olivos. During one of the visits made by then-President Mauricio Macri to Iberá, he visited Concepción. The town had dressed up



for the occasion, and a fair was set up in the central plaza. Local producers were offering their typical dishes. Reina was there, and the president tried her traditional sweet potato pastries. She seized the opportunity:

“Mr. Mauricio, I have a dream: to cook at Quinta de Olivos. There’s just one problem: I didn’t vote for you.” Macri laughed, hugged her, and continued speaking with the people and touring the fair. In May 2018, Reina would fulfill her dream. In Olivos, together with the chefs from the presidential residence, Reina prepared a *guiso carrero de fideos* (cowhand’s stew with noodles) at the request of the president. Seated at the table with the workers, he praised the dish, Reina’s work, and that of Cooks of Iberá. Macri

Romina Farinon, a cook of Iberá, in a food fair.
© Natacha Espinoza

International recognition to Gisela Medina.

In its June 2024 edition, the prestigious Basque Culinary World Prize awarded a mention to Gisela Medina, a member of Cooks of Iberá, for her exceptional work using gastronomy as a driving force for development. This recognition simultaneously highlights the work of the culinary network and the traditional gastronomy of Corrientes.

introduced her, shared part of her story, and highlighted the opportunities that ecotourism was generating in Concepción. He also spoke about the Iberá Wetlands, the conservation efforts, and the region’s rich flora and fauna. The next day, Reina’s house was crowded with journalists, and her phone was constantly ringing with messages and calls from local and national media. The impact of the presidential contact brought the network more purchases, more invitations to local, regional, and national events, and more publicity for the Iberá brand.

In May 2019, the Ministry of Tourism of the Nation invited Cooks of Iberá to participate in the Neo Workshop Federal, Argentina’s largest tourism exhibition held by the Federation of Tourism Chambers in Buenos Aires. Saúl Aguirre was invited to represent the network at the event. While he was thrilled with the invitation, he confessed feeling the weight of representing not just his colleagues but his entire province.

Saúl and 23 professional chefs from cities across Argentina—from La Quiaca to Ushuaia—cooked and served their dishes. The tasting event was a success. He teamed up with chefs from Chaco and Misiones to prepare a lamb casserole accompanied by *quibebe*. Each of them brought products from their provinces to offer at the NEA (Northeast Argentina) stand. “I brought braided crackling, homemade cheese pastries, and *alfajores* made with cassava starch

from Corrientes,” he recalls. For Saúl, it was an experience full of learning—not just in cooking, but in other intangible ways that leave a lasting impression. “I knew what I was going to do, but my colleagues helped me a lot with the presentation of the dishes. They were very generous with me,” he says gratefully.

The man from Corrientes didn’t go unnoticed in the vast hall of Hotel Panamericano. Amidst so many white aprons, his beret and field pants stood out. Participants would approach him and ask where he was from. “I’m from Corrientes,” he would proudly respond, with that sense of belonging that those born in this land always carry. Then, he would take the opportunity to talk about Corrientes, Iberá, and the work underway in the region.

“The experience was unique,” he asserts. Saúl contributed his products at that tourism fair, and his colleagues returned the favor. “I had brought a lot of things, and when I returned, there were many regional items left for me at the reception. I heard someone say: ‘This is for the man from Corrientes.’”

Another high-profile event was the Latin American International Tourism Fair held in Buenos Aires. Cooks of Iberá received an invitation and debuted their food truck, acquired with the support of Fiat Argentina, the National Ministry of Tourism, and the Ministry of Tourism of Corrientes. At the traveling

gastronomic fairs ‘Sabores con payé,’ alongside Cooks of Iberá, and other events around the country, the public flocked to the food truck to indulge in traditional dishes from the wetlands.

Another Network is Woven: Artisans of Iberá

Craftsmanship was also a local value to enhance in order to add tourist appeal to the wetlands. From the Iberá Committee, the ‘Artisans of Iberá’ (Artesanos del Iberá) program was activated. This socio-productive project aimed at highlighting traditional craftsmanship, folk art, and other artisanal expressions that represent the nature and culture of this region. Between 2020 and 2022, it provided training, advice, and support to dozens of locals who, based on ancestral traditions and teachings, shaped native flora into crafts. With the help of the program, skills and hobbies evolved into businesses. The program coordinator, Hada Irastorza, reflects on some of the work done:

We conducted know-how transfer training to encourage the emergence of new artisans, and some are now working based on this training. We provided technical assistance to improve what they were already doing, such as training on cellphone photography for social media sales. We also taught them how to open social media accounts and how to manage them. They were assisted with the



Josefina Cantero works with ysipo, a creeping root that can grow up to 15 meters long.
© Gabriel Mercedes

opening of simplified savings accounts at the Bank of Corrientes, so they could make virtual sales and people could pay via bank transfer.

In Loreto, Josefina Cantero creates traditional handicrafts using *ysipo* basketry. Inspired by memories of her grandmother, she weaves this fiber into breadbaskets, baskets, trivets, or plant holders. Encouraged by the growing tourism in the region, she turned her skill into a business. In 2015, she joined the Artisans of Iberá program. “Because of the great opportunity they provide us with to promote and recommend our products, as well as the training and guidance,” she explains. Today, her artisanal production supports her family’s economy. Being part of the Artisans of Iberá Network has also allowed her to participate in cultural events where she can sell her products and showcase their artistic value. She has taken part twice in *Feria ArteCo* in the city of Corrientes. The first time, she collaborated with another artist on a joint piece; in the second instance, during the 2024 edition, she exhibited the work *La flor de la pasión* together with Luisa Insaurralde from Paraje Boquerón. Josefina is also a skilled weaver who has gained recognition for her berets featuring motifs from Iberá: capybaras, strange-tailed tyrant, and the most requested design, the jaguar beret. In 2023, Fundación Rewilding Argentina launched Kristine Tompkins’ film *Wild Life* in

cinemas worldwide. To draw attention, they decided to wear distinctly Corrientes-style berets, emulating traditional attire, but with jaguar-patterned colors. These berets were worn by attendees at the premiere and photographed at prestigious cinemas in New York, London, Los Angeles, Buenos Aires, and other global cities.

Craftsmanship also became a professional and economic opportunity for Arturo Martín, from Carlos Pellegrini. Inspired by his paternal grandfather, who crafted figures from espinillo wood knots and shaped fence posts, Arturo began replicating his work at the age of 13. “We started as a hobby. I focused on improving the product because I noticed people really liked it, even in its rustic form as my grandfather made it. Eventually, I was able to master it.” Arturo acknowledges that during those early days, working as an artisan wasn’t lucrative. Sales were minimal, as tourism in Pellegrini was just beginning. Nevertheless, he continued creating and learning. Over time, he transitioned from making decorative items to crafting innovative and more functional products, such as doorstops shaped like capybaras or armadillos, and spoons resembling other animals native to the region. Like many artisans in the midst of production, the COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point. Social isolation devastated his income. The support provided by Artisans of Iberá’s Network allowed him to survive during

those difficult times. Arturo deeply values the assistance and skills he gained:

For me, it was a very good experience. During those times [of pandemic isolation], sales were stagnant, but people could buy from us online because they [the network] set up an Instagram account, shared our contact information, opened a bank account for us, and that’s how we were able to continue selling.

Together with other artisans in the network, Arturo took advantage of high tourism seasons to organize fairs. However, the lessons learned during the pandemic remained useful, and they still make online sales. They even receive orders from abroad, as Arturo shares: “I think even Pope Francis has some of my products. They were taken to him, and it was published that he owns some of my creations. I’ve also sent pieces to many other places, to countries like Germany and the United States.” For Arturo Martín, tourism has significantly improved his economic situation, but he hopes for increased local sales and recognition of the craft’s value.

Currently, over 240 artisans are officially registered and active across the ten portals. This number keeps growing as more locals join the initiative, drawn by the promise of economic sustainability and the shared goal of preserving the cultural heritage of Iberá.





Cooks of Iberá Network

Gisela Medina

Eulidia's borí borí (*Traditional
Cornmeal and Cheese Dumpling
Soup*)

© Comité Iberá

The creation of Cooks of Iberá arose from a pressing need in the region to revalue local customs, native products, and traditional gastronomy. Within the intimacy of households, the know-how of a region is preserved—its flavors, aromas, textures, and colors, all rooted in a tradition centered on food.

This initiative addresses a region and a segment of society that had been neglected for many years, where literacy rates were low, families often relied on informal jobs, and economic resources were extremely limited. Yet, these communities are brimming with potential, rich in the surrounding natural environment, and proud stewards of a culinary identity that few places still retain.

One of the most significant outcomes of the Cooks of Iberá experience has been the empowerment and sense of ownership fostered among locals regarding their homeland. This transformation was achieved through a process that included training, support, and job opportunities, as well as recognition within their communities. These efforts ensured that they felt included and not like outsiders in their own land.

Cooks of Iberá operates as a network, offering support, assistance, training, and ongoing daily guidance to its members. The program focuses on cost analysis, budgeting, and menu development, even for those who

Cooks of Iberá is the first institutionalized network of grassroots chefs in the country. The program's primary goals are the promotion and dissemination of Iberá's gastronomy and the empowerment of its residents. It seeks to curb the migration of younger generations by creating a support network, teaching them how to work effectively, and instilling an appreciation for their cuisine, local products, and environmental conservation.

cannot read or write. It helps to give visibility to their private ventures and promotes them at high-impact gastronomic events—opportunities that would otherwise be out of reach for this sector of society—allowing tourists and locals to experience their culinary offerings in their small hometowns.

Around 80 cooks from 10 portal towns of the Iberá Wetlands participate in the program. The initiative goes beyond gastronomy, fostering close, almost familial bonds among its members on a personal level. Today, our team consists of eight people, with a majority being women and a few men.

As the general coordinator of the network, I take part in various actions: representing the network in decision-making forums, serving as a teacher, trainer, mentor, and guide for the cooks. My role is always focused on ensuring the well-being of the members and achieving positive outcomes for the development of this large family.

I chose to dedicate myself to this cause because I firmly believe that our gastronomic, human, and cultural potential is our greatest wealth. Highlighting the traditional ways of producing our food and addressing the significant need for recognition of these cooks are the guiding principles of our work.

The impact of Cooks of Iberá has been overwhelmingly positive and truly remarkable. The public's acceptance of this initiative—which not only showcases our community's ancestral recipes but also explores other aspects of gastronomy and their influence on local cuisine—has revived the presence of identity-rich Corrientes cuisine at tables once thought unreachable.

The participation and recognition of our cuisine in prestigious hotels, national fairs, and events seen by thousands; the surge in sales and growing demand for our gastronomy at large-scale events; and the inclusion of Corrientes-inspired dishes on menus in restaurants in the city of Corrientes are all major achievements of the network.

Internationally renowned chefs like Germán Martitegui, Narda Lepes, Mariano Ramón, and Juan Gaffuri, along with establishments such as the Four Seasons chain and wineries like Casa Vigil and Zuccardi, have elevated the cuisine of Corrientes to an unforeseen level. Each has contributed in some way to promoting what is uniquely ours.

Today, Cooks of Iberá stands as one of the most renowned projects in the region. Its members travel to other towns across the province, serving as a model of local development. They give talks and presentations in various municipalities, encouraging entrepreneurs to unite and sharing their experiences firsthand. The network is a benchmark in gastronomic and community development. It has been featured in multiple international tourism fairs, provincial government presentations, and as a successful case study of culinary advancement in protected areas. This approach has even been replicated in El Impenetrable in Chaco, with local cooks adopting the model and learning from the Iberá experience. Without a doubt, this program has set a precedent for the gastronomy of Argentina's Litoral region. It has become a key indicator for implementing effective public policies in the culinary sector.

If Cooks of Iberá has achieved such remarkable milestones, it is largely due to collaborative efforts. Partnerships with institutions like INTA,

civil society organizations such as Fundación Rewilding Argentina, and the integration of gastronomy into provincial public policies through the Iberá Committee have all been pivotal. The development of the Iberá Master Plan served as a turning point, ensuring this project's inclusion as a provincial program. Within this conceptual and operational framework, we recognized that gastronomy is one of the central attractions for the region's tourism development.

On a personal level, this journey has shaped a path intrinsically connected to a world that has fascinated me since childhood. Growing up between Mburucuyá and Formosa, my early years were steeped in the presence of gastronomy, sparking my curiosity. Today, I am a Cook of Iberá, reflecting the essence of a network of individuals who empower me, and whom I, in turn, support. Much like any recipe, a single ingredient is never enough—it's the blend and harmony of all the elements that create something extraordinary.





Objects with the Memory and DNA of the Landscape

Hada Irastorza

Silver Craftsmanship.
© Irma Gamarra

The unique characteristics of the Iberá ecosystem, combined with the relative isolation of its populations, have preserved traditional craftsmanship as a living cultural asset. This craftsmanship is deeply tied to the surrounding landscape, bearing witness to a way of being and living that endures to this day.

Materials drawn from the landscape—such as *esparto grass*, caranday palm, espinillo wood, reeds, and clay—alongside wool and leather derived from human activity, form the foundation of this cultural production. Traditional techniques native to the region, including basketry with the aforementioned plant fibers, wood, bone, horn, or stone carving, *soguería criolla* (gaucho leatherwork)—taking advantage of the abundance of leather—spinning, and weaving with wool or cotton, are employed to create countless utilitarian and symbolic objects, all marked by an unmatched, understated beauty.

In the new paradigm of producing nature and complete ecosystems, the well-being of local populations is not only tied to their ability to generate economic resources through nature-based tourism or other activities compatible with a protected area but also to the opportunity to revitalize pride in their heritage, value ancestral practices and knowledge, and even recover those nearly forgotten.

With this vision in mind, the Corrientes Institute of Culture launched the Artisans of Iberá program in 2020, as outlined in the Iberá Park Master Plan. Building on in-depth knowledge of the territory, insights from the design sector, and experience gained through the Cooks of Iberá program, worked alongside Belén “Bely” Guevara and an ad hoc team to highlight the value of the artisan sector. This initiative is designed to generate resources with minimal impact on the ecosystem while fostering a sense of belonging among younger generations in rural areas and small towns.

The first task was conducting a census of artisans across this vast territory to understand their needs, analyze the challenges they faced, and determine which techniques and materials were still in use, as well as those that had been lost or abandoned. Armed with the census data and the constraints imposed by the pandemic, we had to pivot and adapt to meet the pressing need for sales in a year devoid of tourism, public festivals, or fairs. Using only an Instagram account and the willingness to teach artisans how to use a savings account, manage postal shipments, and leverage other resources, we succeeded in mobilizing much of the sector. This effort also capitalized on the surge in home decoration investments made by people confined to their homes.

In collaboration with Banco de Corrientes, simplified savings accounts were opened for those without them. Professional photos were taken to build a network of potential buyers, reaching out to home décor stores and new entrepreneurs who initially created online shops, many of which eventually became physical retail spaces.

As movement and gathering restrictions eased, in-person workshops began. Some aimed to train new artisans in techniques that had fallen into disuse or were in higher demand, while others focused on providing technical assistance to improve finishing touches, develop new designs, or enhance sales skills.

From the outset, efforts to empower artisans were guided by the principle of direct sales, avoiding intermediary roles and stepping in only when necessary to facilitate communication, rather than manage commercial transactions.

New challenges arose as initial goals were achieved, such as improving the artisans’ ability to take quality photographs to boost remote sales. To address this, training sessions on mobile photography were organized. In many cases, the results were remarkable, with noticeable improvements in the images, which directly impacted sales potential.

Although difficult to measure precisely due to the fact that 90% of this sector operates within the informal economy, the results have been outstanding. Many artisans reported record sales, with some products even generating waiting lists. Prices became fairer, there was less haggling, and new contributors joined these family-run productive units. Sons and daughters became involved in production or helped manage social media, men took on material collection, and other indirect impacts emerged.

The visibility of these actions also attracted interest from the private sector, leading to collaboration through knowledge-sharing and promotional efforts. Renowned designers expressed interest in developing projects with Artisans of Iberá. Meanwhile, tourism operators and guides began incorporating the artisan sector into their offerings, including workshop visits, fairs, specialized stores, and demonstration classes as part of the tourist experiences provided.

The integration of an existing cultural value with the territorial brand of the Great Iberá Park, combined with a deliberate effort to empower artisans and provide them with tools to ensure the sustainability of their personal, family, or cooperative projects, has borne significant fruit. For some, these projects represent their primary source of income, while for others, they serve as a vital supplement.



Testimonials highlighting the impact of three years of work (2020–2023) by the artisans of Iberá

“They call me from different provinces, and when I ask where they got my number from, they say from Artisans of Iberá.” (Catalina Parra, weaver, from Mercedes).

“I didn’t know my works had made it to Switzerland... I was aware of Russia, Italy, and Colombia... just those, and I think one knife in England” (Rodolfo Altamirano, gaucho knives, from Chavarría).

“We are expanding the workshop, thank you so much for the opportunity you gave us! We almost doubled the space we had” (Marcelo Pérez, Damascus steel forging, from Mburucuyá).

“We continue with sales, thanks to the social media that posted our products” (Diana Meza and Daniel González, wood carving, from Colonia Carlos Pellegrini).

“Yes, yes, we are very happy too, especially now that summer is coming and there’s almost no tourism. The orders really help us” (Evelyn and Tino Martín, wood carving, from Colonia Carlos Pellegrini).

I come from afar, my friends, you see,
Here's my sign, let me tell you, it's me,
I come from afar, I'm from Corrientes,
A wanderer from Iberá, so free...

Born in hardship, I felt the strain,
Nothing in life can scare me again,
Like the capybara, I play in the stream,
A wanderer from Iberá, that's my theme.

Like the bull, I stand firm on the ground,
When they try to push me around,
And when in dreams I rise so high,
My flight is gentle, like the *chajá* in the sky.
[...]

To all, I count as my friends,
To all, I'll offer respect again,
Say countrymen, shout with me,
“Long live the homeland, our legacy!”
And to you, my sweet brunette, I say,
Eyó Cohapé ché consolá,
I have no thorns, I'm good as green,
A wanderer from Iberá, serene.

Forastero del Iberá – Emeterio Fernández / Diego Perkins

The Iberá Project Takes a Major Leap

Beyond its environmental, productive, and developmental value, the idea of a tourism-focused Iberá also carried electoral appeal. In 2009, when Carlos Mauricio “Camau” Espínola was the mayor of the provincial capital and the local Kirchnerist candidate for national senator—amid an electoral campaign—he received the support of the National Minister of Tourism, Enrique Meyer. This official arrived in Corrientes with a program to strengthen emerging tourist towns and the idea of creating the Iberá National Park. The province responded firmly, making it clear that Iberá belonged to the people of Corrientes and that they would not allow sovereignty to be compromised by handing it over to the national government.

Meanwhile, with the support of mayors from towns neighboring Iberá, CLT advanced with the Scenic Route project, always working

toward Tompkins' ultimate goal: the creation of Iberá National Park.

In the following years, Iberá remained a central topic in political discourse. By 2015, the provincial government decided to publicly present its project on one of the world's largest wetlands and Argentina's most biodiverse habitat, showcasing to the people of Corrientes all the efforts being made in the wetlands. A book titled *Parque Provincial Iberá. Producción de naturaleza y desarrollo local* ([2015] 2020) was the selected communication strategy. Signed by Governor Ricardo Colombi, it was unveiled at the Yellow Room of the Government House. "That was the birth; we gave life to these ideas," expressed Sergio Flinta, the driving force behind the provincial administration's emerging Iberá Plan.

With the gates that once guarded secret meetings, mistrust, negotiations, and agreements now open, the union of two previously opposing and seemingly irreconcilable worlds was made official. The image of Governor Colombi holding this first copy encapsulated the process, marking both the destination reached and the starting point left behind. This journey succeeded in uniting the conservationist paradigm—until then represented by Tompkins and his foundation—with a vision of productivity, development, and opportunities for the Iberá region, its inhabitants, and other related

Corrientes communities. The book showcased the work done, the progress made, and the achievements attained.

A week later, at the Juan de Vera Official Theater, Douglas Tompkins presented his photographic art book, *Esteros del Iberá, el Gran Humedal de Corrientes* (2015, CLT). Senator Flinta and provincial ministers attended the presentation, marking another sign of rapprochement between the parties. The following day, this collaboration was solidified with a trip to San Alonso to accompany Tobuna, the first jaguar to arrive in Iberá. Flinta, Fraga, Presman, and other provincial officials joined the Tompkins couple, Heinonen, Marisi López, and the CLT teams in celebrating this milestone: the beginning of the recovery of a species returning to its natural habitat.

A CLOSER RELATIONSHIP WITH THE NATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

The 2015 elections brought a political change to the national government. The PRO candidate, Mauricio Macri, defeated the ruling Frente para la Victoria (FPV) candidate, Daniel Scioli.

In forming his cabinet, Macri appointed Gustavo Santos as Minister of Tourism. Santos had previously held the same position in Córdoba, his home province, where Senator



Flinta had also lived for many years. "And he was a fan of Talleres like me, and his son had studied at the same school I attended in Córdoba," the Corrientes senator recalls, listing what seemed like signs of destiny. Flinta found a way to introduce Santos to the Iberá project and the collaborative model developed alongside CLT and other organizations. The meeting in Buenos Aires took place on December 8, 2015, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary—a date deeply significant to the religious identity of the people of Corrientes.

Together with the Secretary of Planning, Sebastián Slobayen, and the recently published book, Sergio Flinta traveled to Buenos Aires to present the Iberá project, which was well-received by the national official. That same day,

Great Iberá Park book presentation.
© Dirección de Información Pública de Corrientes

after their meeting, they received the tragic news of Douglas Tompkins' death in Chile. At the age of 72, Tompkins passed away due to severe hypothermia after his kayak capsized in Lago General Carrera—a body of water known as Lago Buenos Aires on the Argentine side.

From that moment on, Kristine Tompkins took the helm and continued steering the project in the same direction. She sought closer ties with the national administration, and Flinta acted as the intermediary. On December 21 of that same year, Kristine met with the Minister of Tourism in Buenos Aires, who had been in office for only ten days. Senator Sergio Flinta, Sofía Heinonen (Executive Director of Fundación Rewilding Argentina), and Marisi López (Coordinator of the Iberá Project at Fundación Rewilding Argentina and member of the Iberá Committee) also attended the meeting. During the discussion, Kristine committed to donating 150,000 hectares that she and Douglas Tompkins had acquired for the creation of Iberá National Park. Mere minutes after the meeting, they received a call: President Mauricio Macri wanted to meet her.

The meeting was held the following day at Casa Rosada. Governor Ricardo Colombi was invited to attend, but a severe storm in Corrientes prevented him from traveling, so he entrusted the mission to Sergio Flinta. This new meeting, held in the presidential office,

included President Mauricio Macri; Minister Santos; Chief of the Cabinet of Ministers, Marcos Peña; Vice President of the National Parks Administration, Emiliano Ezcurra; and Minister of Environment, Sergio Bergman. Accompanying Kristine Tompkins were Sergio Flinta, Sofía Heinonen, and Marisi López.

The senator from Corrientes emphasized that the meeting was significant. It also served as an opportunity to give the president the Iberá Committee's book, which summarized all the collaborative work being done in the region and related efforts surrounding the Provincial Park. "This is the Argentina I want, with collaborative people working together," Macri responded, instructing those present to support the project fully.

"Displaying unity between the foundation and the government with a shared project was the foundation for much of what followed in the years to come," stated Marisi López. Following this meeting, the national government joined the collaborative efforts, and Iberá began gaining prominence nationwide. President Macri subsequently made several visits to the wetlands, one of Argentina's natural wonders, which he showcased to the world during his international missions.

Sebastián Slobayen summarized the significance of national support as follows:

The national government viewed the Iberá Project as a symbol of the Argentina we aspired to build. This is a tremendous source of pride. Having Iberá positioned at the national level as a development objective—where the environment, tourism, productive sectors, and public sectors converge, all methodically aligned to create opportunities for the people of Corrientes in the province's most underserved area—is a powerful message.

Kristine Tompkins fulfilled her husband's wish and the commitment he had made, but for the national government to establish the park, the province of Corrientes needed to transfer jurisdiction over the donated lands. This required a provincial law. Flinta introduced the bill in the provincial Senate, and it quickly moved to the other chamber. In the House of Representatives, José Fernández Affur presented the initiative, but it encountered opposition. Many legislators opposed the proposal, prompting the Iberá Committee to explain its purpose. Several assemblies were held, including one at the Sociedad Rural de Mercedes, where they faced significant criticism.

Most of the opposing representatives belonged to a different political party. However, some legislators from the Peronist Party (the main opposition to the ruling Radical Party) understood and supported the project. One

notable example was provincial representative Ernesto "Tito" Meixner, who, during the session of August 31, 2016, defended the idea of a national park in Corrientes.

"From the very beginning, I insisted that Iberá needed to have a great national park. Why was I always so interested in the national park? Because I am a Peronist," he declared while holding up the books *Visión de Argentina* (which addressed topics like tourism, economy, climate, and population, published in 1950 by the Ministry of Public Works and Services) and *La Nación Argentina, Justa, Libre y Soberana* (representing various social, economic, and political aspects of the first Peronist government, published in 1949 by the Subsecretariat of Information). "And what does this have to do with Iberá?" he asked. "It is precisely the vision that General Perón and the first Peronism had regarding national parks, national integration, and nationalism in Argentina," he explained. Then he added, according to the transcript of the 19th ordinary session:

Perón [...] turned the national parks policy into a state policy, a national policy—not from the perspective of tourism supply, but from that of tourism demand, because that is where Peronism comes in. [...] No one in pre-Peronist Argentina had access to the country's natural riches; it was a privilege reserved for a few, while the poor only

saw them in paintings hanging in their employers' homes. [...] That is why national parks are a symbol of Peronism. [...] Iberá, the Iberá National Park, was one of the projects included [in General Perón's Five-Year Plan, 1947-1951] in volume 2, where the annexes are listed.

“Iberá is as Argentine as Islas Malvinas; Iberá must belong to all Argentinians,” he declared in a packed legislative chamber filled with environmental organization representatives in the stands, raising their voices against the project under debate. Citing pages from the book he repeatedly held up (despite audible expressions of discontent), he emphasized that the nation's natural wonders should be accessible to its people. “How many people from Corrientes know Iberá?” he asked—a question that had also been raised by the ruling Radical party and the Tompkins Foundation as they moved forward with plans to open more access portals, bringing the wetlands closer to the majority of the province's residents.

Ernesto Meixner spoke about democratization through the creation of national parks. He even stated:

[Tompkins] wasn't hated for being a gringo or for being wealthy; he was hated because he came to expose what we Corrientes residents had been doing for years—polluting, depleting, pillaging,

and inefficiently exploiting our own land, the land we claim to love and for which we so readily beat our chests [...] This is the sad truth, and we are all responsible, especially those of us in positions of authority today [...] It's time for us in Corrientes, if we truly care about Corrientes and if we truly care about Iberá, to be honest with ourselves and start producing in accordance with all the regulations we already have in the province, with the National Constitution, and with the international treaties we are a part of, which even hold greater authority than our own rules [...] We are overdue, and this honorable Legislature is overdue, and of course, the Executive Branch is overdue. So, let's put on our big-boy pants and use what we are approving today as an opportunity to make a public commitment to start following the rules, especially the Provincial Constitution.

Meixner concluded: “A national park will protect Iberá better than how we Corrientes residents are defending it today.”

Thus, with official support and the backing of some opposition legislators, the historic session approved the project, and the province transferred jurisdiction to the national government, enabling it to take ownership of the lands donated by the Tompkins Foundation and create Iberá National Park.

The national senator for Corrientes, Pedro Braillard Pocard, introduced the initiative

to create Iberá National Park in the National Congress. Although it was swiftly approved by the Senate, it stalled once again in the House of Representatives. For two years, the project made no progress, frozen due to partisan political issues. Both Flinta and López were frequently summoned to the National Congress to present their case before deputies or their advisors, addressing the various positions on the matter. These sessions were highly tense, but this time, the government and the Foundation were on the same side. Support letters poured in from Corrientes, signed by the province's archbishop, mayors of Iberá towns, National Parks officials, and other local stakeholders. Finally, on December 5, 2018, the project was approved.

Preserving Corrientes' Identity

In Corrientes, there was lingering concern that making the park a national entity could lead to Iberá losing its unique identity, idiosyncrasies, and sense of sovereignty. Fundación Rewilding addressed these fears with the national government, presenting several key conditions: “To manage this park, it was essential that the locals—those who know it better than anyone—be in charge.” They proposed that the park superintendent should be from Corrientes, leading to the appointment of Pascual Pérez as the first to hold this position.

“Afterward, we thought about how to preserve that unique identity of Corrientes—the gaucho, the *mencho* (rural workers in northern Argentina), the hat,” said Marisi López, referring to what led to the unprecedented agreement with the National Parks Administration. This agreement, the first and only of its kind, allowed the park ranger uniform to be adapted to reflect the traditional attire of the Corrientes gaucho: field trousers (*bombachas de campo*), espadrilles (*alpargatas*), a neckerchief (*pañuelo*), and a wide-brimmed hat (*sombrero de ala ancha*).

Thus, with specific and symbolic decisions, it was guaranteed—according to Marisi López—that “Corrientes would not lose anything, but would instead gain a national park with its own identity, reflecting Corrientes' tradition and culture, and combining the best of national parks with the best of the province.” In this way, the Iberá brand continued to be strengthened.

In Corrientes, Governor Ricardo Colombi understood the operational importance of working in partnership with Fundación Rewilding Argentina, the national government, and various social actors in the conservation of Iberá and in its development as a tourist destination that would foster the growth of nearby communities and the province as a whole through nature-based production. Convinced, after many years of discussions and analyses, Colombi would even publicly defend

the official stance. He did so, for example, in a context that was both difficult and significant: the 94th Rural Exhibition of Curuzú Cuatiá. During the event, held on September 4, 2016, he defended the Iberá National Park project and compared it to that of Mburucuyá. In front of dozens of leaders from the Corrientes cattle sector, who still opposed the project, he remarked:

Why are there so many doubts, so much hesitation, and even resistance? Let's look at Mburucuyá, which has had its national park for nearly two decades, and tell me, what has changed, what has been altered, and how has the province been harmed? Has production not continued, and has transit not remained uninterrupted? On the contrary, wildlife, flora, and natural resources have been preserved, and tourism has been growing. And this is what will happen with Iberá; the national park means investments, infrastructure, and a better quality of life for the inhabitants of the 20 towns surrounding the wetlands.

In addition to publicly defending the project, Colombi participated in the ceremony where the National Parks Administration (APN) took official possession of Portal Cambyretá, the first of the Iberá National Park. On November 6, 2016—coinciding with National

Parks Day— Sofía Heinonen, president of Fundación Rewilding Argentina, presented a plaque symbolizing the transfer of lands from Conservation Land Trust (CLT) to the national protected areas system. It was a celebration featuring music by national artists and it was attended by around 900 local residents. During the event, Pascual Pérez and 10 local guides, dressed in the unique gaucho-style national parks uniform, received the park that they were going to manage.

Thus began the historic process of transferring the operational units located in the Iberá Wetlands that CLT donated to the national government. Over the next three years, the transfer of the San Nicolás core area, near San Miguel and Laguna Iberá, as well as Carlos Pellegrini area, was formalized. Portal Carambola, accessible from Concepción del Yaguareté Corá, would be the last to be handed over according to the plan developed by the involved parties. This completed the 160,000 hectares that make up the National Park.

IBERÁ COMMITTEE, A STRATEGIC TOOL

After two years of informal work, in 2016 the Iberá Committee was officially established, approved by Provincial Executive Decree N° 3600. A mixed and interdisciplinary executive



unit was created under the Ministry of Tourism of the province. From that moment on, the Iberá Committee became responsible for carrying out public policies related to the development of the Great Iberá Park and its surrounding areas. Each year since 2016, the Committee has developed the Iberá Master Development Plan, designed as a strategy to promote local development, positioning the wetlands as a new ecotourism destination for Argentina and the world.

Made up of actors from the provincial and national government, as well as foundations working collaboratively, this initiative includes a permanent staff that develops projects tailored to local needs. It drives the agenda, coordinates actions with the municipalities in the Iberá region

APN adapted the Iberá park rangers' uniforms to the traditional attire of the Corrientes gaucho.
© Matías Rebak

and other actors, and also seeks funding at the provincial, national, and even international levels for implementing the projects. This development plan includes infrastructure projects such as interpretation centers, museums, cultural hubs, roads, sanitation works, access routes, signage along the scenic route, soft skills training and education policies, associations of guides and tourism service entrepreneurs, equipment, and a destination positioning plan, among others.

The towns benefiting from these investments fall within what the Master Plan defines as the area of influence, a vast zone comprising more than 20 municipalities with a combined population of over 200,000 inhabitants, many of whom face “concerning socioeconomic indicators,” requiring public policies aimed at reversing this situation. The priorities outlined are as follows:

1. *Ecotourism municipalities:* The communities surrounding the Iberá Natural Reserve, where nature tourism is projected to be the main economic activity: San Miguel, Concepción, Loreto, Mburucuyá, Chavarría, and Felipe Yofre.
2. *First ring of receiving municipalities:* Communities that, due to their productive characteristics, do not have ecotourism as their primary economic activity, but can function as key support and connectors for the development of Iberá tourism:

Mercedes, Ituzaingó, Virasoro, Villa Olivari, and Santo Tomé.

3. *Second ring of receiving municipalities:* Those that support the value chain and are indirect beneficiaries of ecotourism: Saladas, Santa Rosa, Tabay, Tatacuá, Itá Ibaté, La Cruz, Palmar Grande, Lomas de Vallejos, Pago de los Deseos, and Caá Catí.

The Iberá Committee is also responsible for numerous publications and studies, as well as many presentations, whether for schools, other parks in the region, or localities seeking to follow this model.

Over these years, the Iberá Committee has gained recognition and developed essential relationships critical for executing the outlined plans: “Relationships with the federal government, with other provinces, relationships with UNNE, with the Yacyretá Binational Entity, with the Inter-American Development Bank...” This is how Sergio Flinta mentions the entities that made it possible to build the strong critical mass that gave further momentum to all the initiatives.





Tobuna. The Path that Turned Her into a Legend

Marisi López

The recovery of the jaguar began
with Tobuna.
© Fundación Rewilding Argentina

And she returned,
like the sun, she returned.
And she gazed,
and she loved what she embraced.

And she felt,
the forest's fragrance dwelt,
wings that flew, the flowers' scent,
floating greens, the warmth it lent.

[...]

The Chamamé nation,
with hearts of adoration,
the nostalgic Yvera
awaits you now,

Tobuna.
Juan Carlos Jensen

Things don't happen by chance; Tobuna's arrival to leave her mark in Corrientes was meant to be. I don't know if it was written in the stars, her destiny, or her fortune. What I do know is that she came to a province that understands its role in history perfectly. With an unquestionable identity and patriotism, Corrientes makes it clear that it is no ordinary province. Corrientes is Corrientes—it's the "Republic of Corrientes." And we, the people of Corrientes, proud and sometimes even a bit boastful, have good reason to be. There's no need to even mention San Martín, Cabral—the heroic soldier—the *Granaderos a Caballo* (Horse-mounted Grenadiers), the heroes of Malvinas, and countless other illustrious figures born on these lands.

Perhaps that's why Tobuna wanted to be from Corrientes—to be part of the greater story, to leave behind a lifelong legacy. We know her origins well. Born and raised in captivity, she was later transferred to Iberá, and knowing that her age would prevent her from reproducing, she still found a way to make history. She paved the way for her daughter Tania who—like a character straight out of an '80s soap opera, limping and destined for confinement—rose to the occasion and proved that near-freedom suited her well. Even better, mating proved to be her forte as she managed to give birth to and raise the first jaguars born in Corrientes.

A REMARKABLE FEAT

Thus, the queen mother became a grandmother, observing from atop her pedestal in the heart of the Iberá Wetlands, with little more to do — like any queen.

Tania, steadfast in her role as Corrientes' new heroine, aimed even higher. She crossed the waters to the neighboring province of Chaco, enhancing her legacy as a savior of her species by mating with the great wild Chaco male, the until-then untamable Qaramta. As a result, Tania and her cubs established their lineage in El Impenetrable, Chaco, returning their kind to the land of their ancestors—the vast Gran Chaco, which had witnessed the birth of Tobuna's grandparents and where generations of captivity had begun. It was Tobuna who broke this unfortunate family tradition of zoos and captivity, choosing Corrientes to rewrite history.

She spent her early years on the enchanting island of San Alonso, where she arrived amidst celebration and fanfare, as befits a queen. She was admired by locals, journalists, photographers, curious onlookers, environmentalists, and officials alike—no one could resist her *payé*. Songs and poems were dedicated to her, tourist ventures and hotels were named in her honor, and countless murals and paintings bore her image.

She retired to the comforts of the Aguará Conservation Center, where she continued to inspire and create stories until she became immortalized in the two most iconic expressions of Corrientes' identity: carnival and *chamamé*.

The headlines of newspapers and news portals across the country broke the news: on February 13, 2023, Tobuna officially became part of history. People felt the need to bid her farewell, to express their grief, because Tobuna was more than a jaguar—she was a symbol of hope and the continuity of life. Her legacy lives on in Iberá, where her grandchildren and great-grandchildren roam free, and where freedom—something she was denied—is the gift she bequeaths to her descendants.

Tobuna's memory will remain etched forever in the imagination and hearts of the people of Corrientes. She will continue to populate the wetlands and forests through the bloodline she left behind. Today, the “queen and sovereign,” as Juan Carlos Jensen called her, is already a legend.

THE FOOTPRINTS OF TOBUNA

Tobuna's presence can be seen both far and near her territory—in the signage of public spaces, in the name of a street in the capital that, on the initiative of the City of Corrientes, will soon bear her name, or on the sign of a hotel in Iberá. It lives in artistic expressions, in murals throughout the city, and in the work of visual artist Anísima (Ana Fariña Núñez), who, inspired by Tobuna, adopts the jaguar as a local icon, taking her works to galleries and art fairs across the country. Or it lives in the lyrics of a beautiful *chamamé*, “Huellas,” written in her honor by renowned singer-songwriter Juan Carlos Jensen, who welcomed Tobuna at San Alonso by reciting his verses. Thus, the jaguar in the wetlands became a symbol of footprints and longing, and the arrival of Tobuna inspired the poem:

[...]
So many kind hands,
so much heart,
to bring her back to this place,
to give her a corner, her space.

[...]
to stay forevermore,
in the homeland she adored.

The *chamamé* nation
that longed for her in devotion,
The nostalgic *Yvera*
has awaited you forever.

[...]

Another of the countless legacies is the remarkable children's book *Tobuna: The Queen of Iberá*, written by Juan Martín Resoagli and illustrated by Carolina Beatriz Ramírez, produced by the General Directorate for the Promotion of Animal Rights and Welfare of the Municipality of the City of Corrientes. The book contributes to raising awareness about the responsible care of domestic animals, wildlife, and the environment.



And the people felt the need
to express their grief.
© Caro Moro

Yes, my friends, I am a *Correntino*,
offspring of Cabral's tiger-hearted line;
it may not seem polite, but I do believe,
there's no harm in remembering what's mine.

I was born in a land of skies so blue,
lagoons, marshes, rivers, and fields of dew,
raised on horseback, riding tall and free,
my steed treads the path of liberty.

[...]

It's not the same to be born just anywhere,
nor to know nothing, when there's much to share.
To be what I am, I've journeyed this way,
from a far-off time, from the time of *imaguaré*.

Memoria de la sangre – Julián Zini / Julio Cáceres

Translator's Note:

Correntino: a man from Corrientes
Imaguaré: old, ancient.

Present and Future of the Iberá Project

Local development through nature tourism in the Great Iberá Park has been recognized as a State policy, meaning it is the result of a consensus ensuring its continuity. In 2017, Corrientes elected a governor once again, and the candidate from the ruling *Encuentro por Corrientes* party, Gustavo Valdés, secured victory. The decision regarding Iberá was not only to reaffirm what had been accomplished and the work of the Iberá Committee but also to embrace these initiatives as a symbol of governance, the province's aspirations, and what Corrientes can offer to the country and the world.

Gustavo Valdés was deeply familiar with Iberá and the work being done there. His ties went beyond his role in government or his years living in Ituzaingó—near the Cambyretá portal. He was also the son of Manolo Valdés, a former mayor of this city and one of the first (alongside Juan de la Cruz Fraga from

Pellegrini) to welcome Tompkins and champion the idea of creating open portals, fostering local development through nature tourism. These experiences became foundational to the project, as reflected in the governor's own words:

From the State, we have the obligation and determination to continue on this path of development, growth, and collaboration, fostering a healthy and productive environment with a clear strategic vision. We know we have the opportunity to achieve sustainable development, preserve pride in what is ours, protect our resources for future generations, and leave behind the greatest legacy: love for our land.

The beginning of Valdés era brought continuity and peace. Confidence prevailed within the newly formed Committee, and the team had very clear objectives, though it was still facing many challenges. The Great Iberá Park was now showcased for the world to see. Each year, the number of visitors grew, demanding an increase and improvement in services. The Committee drafted annual plans to address the needs of the park, the surrounding towns, and the management of the corresponding funds. This list included everything from construction projects to training programs and promotional plans. Flinta reviewed the list, and Governor Valdés allocated funds or worked to secure

national and even international funding to bring these plans to fruition. As a result, major Interpretation Centers were established, such as those in Pellegrini and at San Antonio portal, as well as the Cultural Center in Pellegrini, funded by the Inter-American Development Bank, along with many others supported by state funds, including connectivity, museums, and especially signage along the scenic route (see “Come in, see, and enjoy”) throughout Iberá and at the entrance portals.

With the new national government in 2019, the authorities of the National Parks Administration and the Administration and the Supervisor of Iberá National Park changed. New agreements and working methods became necessary. The composition of the Committee's members shifted slightly, but the core structure remained strong. The provincial government solidified its decision to establish Iberá as a nature tourism destination. Major advances in wildlife recovery, achieved in collaboration with Fundación Rewilding Argentina, led to the appearance of the “new inhabitants” of the wetlands (anteaters, peccaries, deer, and green-winged macaws). Thanks to successful habitat restoration efforts, these animals began to appear in the park's portals, becoming stars alongside traditional species such as deer, capybaras, herons, and *yacarés*, which were steadily increasing in number. Iberá began to

establish itself as a leading tourist destination both locally and internationally. More people from Corrientes discovered and chose Iberá for family trips or outings with friends, while international tourism experienced a resurgence after the 2020 pandemic. This rise in visitors and immediate visibility—amplified by social media, which rapidly spread information—demanded excellence in service offerings. Professional training and development became essential. Collaboration with the Ministry of Education was established to bring technical training programs (in tourism, gastronomy, and hospitality) to the towns surrounding Iberá. From that point onward, young people could study in the place where they lived, stay in their homes, and secure work immediately upon completing their courses.

Led by Eng. Alejandra Eliciri at the Ministry of Tourism, training plans were developed for park rangers, guides, and the general community. The number of provincial park rangers increased, security and presence at the portals were reinforced, and Iberá was promoted nationally and internationally.

The Iberá Wetlands have hosted prestigious international events, such as the International Bird Fair and the 2nd International Giant Otter Workshop. The Iberá Committee and the Ministry of Tourism organized the 1st Ecotourism Congress of the Litoral in 2022

and the 2nd one in 2024, establishing the Iberá Wetlands as a center for learning and experience.

CORRIENTES IS ONCE AGAIN THE LAND OF THE JAGUAR

During Valdés' term, significant progress was made with the jaguar reintroduction project. In June 2018, the first jaguar cubs were born in Iberá, and the first release occurred in January 2021. From that moment, Iberá entered the era of free jaguars. Marisi López relives the moment:

I remember being at Rincón del Socorro, attending a training course, when we learned that Tania had given birth to two cubs—the first jaguars born in Corrientes! The cameras placed in front of the den gave us an image of a mother with her two little ones, a scene that touched hearts around the world. The team's joy turned into hugs, tears, and smiles. I immediately shared the news with Flinta and the governor, both key figures in the project. That same day, we were on Isla San Alonso, learning more and celebrating the news with the technical team leading the project.

Thanks to this clear vision and firm State policies, Corrientes has established itself as the province with the largest population

of wild jaguars. Since the initial release in January 2021, the number of free jaguars has grown to at least 25 by 2024, with many born in the Iberá Wetlands. The pride of the people of Corrientes in the return of one of the most iconic representatives of their fauna and culture is evident in city murals, large signs at town entrances, carnival floats and costumes, and its image appearing in businesses and merchandise. This pride also inspired *Vecinos del Yaguareté*, a 12-episode TV and radio series in which Iberá locals share their experiences. The series aired on local and satellite channels during Earth Month in June 2024, reaching audiences across Latin America. It is now available on digital platforms, along with *Epopeya del Iberá*, the first animated series entirely produced in Corrientes. This series tells the story of animals fighting to protect their territory, led by a jaguar accompanied by anteaters, macaws, deer, and caimans. On *Corrientes Play*, the provincial government's educational platform, *Corrientes tierra de yaguaretés* (Corrientes: Land of Jaguars) features in campaigns showcased on posters, stickers, yerba mate tins, and calendars distributed throughout Iberá's towns and cities.

This initiative, which successfully reversed the extinction of the great feline across the province, has earned Corrientes international recognition. Its achievements have been highlighted in documentaries by renowned

publications and platforms, including BBC, NatGeo, Netflix, and other global media outlets.

ACTION LINES

Sustainable Local Development. The positive outcomes achieved through the implementation of the master plan led to the creation of a new planning phase with a more ambitious objective: the Strategic Plan for the Development of Iberá. This plan centers on sustainable local development, supported by four interconnected pillars, which are socioeconomic growth, tourism advancement, territorial planning, and institutional strengthening. This model not only fosters biodiversity but also enhances the quality of life for residents in the twenty municipalities surrounding the wetlands, with benefits extending across the province. To achieve this, efforts continue with communities as vital and active participants in the process, aiming to create greater opportunities, generate more jobs, and increase economic income within the framework of expanded training and skill development opportunities.

Ecosystem Preservation. From the beginning of Gustavo Valdés' first term and throughout his second, the preservation of this green lung for the world has been a guiding principle. Scientific studies support this model: "They prove that the



Gustavo Valdés, Sergio Flinta, and Maite Ríos Noya. The cubs can only be observed in the monitoring room through cameras. Human contact is avoided because the cubs will be released.
© Rafael Abuín, Fundación Rewilding Argentina

ecosystem is becoming healthier, showing greater resilience, resistance, and elasticity to climate change, and that species will no longer go extinct because the strengthened interconnections between components make them more robust," says Sofía Heinonen, Executive Director of Fundación Rewilding Argentina.

Wildlife Recovery. Regarding the recovery of wildlife, most of the animal species targeted at the start of the project have been successfully reintroduced over the past three decades. Today, these endangered or extinct species are part of a restored system, regaining its original biodiversity. This serves as a key attraction for national and global ecotourism and stands as an example of species restoration, particularly for the jaguar.



Rescuing Wildlife: Aguará Conservation Center

Using Iberá as a model, the Government of Corrientes adopted concrete measures to safeguard local wildlife. Among these initiatives was the closure of the zoo—previously located on the waterfront of the capital city— and the creation of the Aguará Conservation Center (Provincial Law N° 5887, passed in 2009). Since August 2013, the center has operated under the Ministry of Tourism of the province, allowing the relocation of animals that had spent years in captivity as zoo exhibits.

Located in Paso de la Patria, the Aguará Conservation Center is where injured or at-risk native wildlife find refuge. These animals arrive due to anti-wildlife trafficking operations, poaching, exotic pet trade, and animal abuse. The center focuses on the rehabilitation, release, and reintroduction of these animals into their natural habitat. It also serves as a quarantine site for many animals, some of which are later released in the Iberá Wetlands. In addition, the center is the world's first quarantine site for birds.

The center also hosts a permanent collection of animals that, having spent their lives in captivity, cannot return to the wild. These animals play an essential role in educating and raising awareness among visitors, who learn their stories, characteristics, and how the center ensures their respect, well-being, and health.

The Aguará Conservation Center provides an experience for the public, educators, and tourists alike, emphasizing the care and protection of regional wildlife. Environmental education serves as a fundamental tool for conserving the biodiversity of Corrientes' natural heritage. Its creation reflects the official decision to value wildlife for human well-being, ecosystem development and balance, and to definitively end the notion of keeping wild animals in captivity solely for entertainment purposes.

Expansion of the model. On the other hand, the achievements of rewilding in Iberá have made it possible to donate recovered native species to help other national parks, like El Impenetrable (Chaco), undertake similar rewilding processes.

Environmental and tourism legislation. Plans were drawn up and public actions implemented to guarantee the expansion and development of tourism in a sustainable manner: the Provincial Tourism Law N° 6309, the 2021 Strategic Tourism Plan, and programs coordinated with municipalities. The legal framework of recent years has supported state policy decisions, with the necessary laws for conservation, the declaration of natural monuments, and the management of pest species. This is especially evident with two crucial laws: one from 2021, which expands the Provincial Park, ratifies previous decrees, and establishes new boundaries; and the 2024 law that consolidates all the work done, declaring the recovery of species and ecosystems in the province of Corrientes a matter of public interest. A groundbreaking law of its kind, introduced by Senator Flinta.

Dissemination and education. In schools, knowledge of Iberá as both natural and cultural heritage is now part of the curriculum. Education was shaped by the vision of the Iberá Committee and the provincial government's decision to give Iberá the status of state

policy. Public spaces became an ideal setting for educating people and raising awareness about love and respect for nature, history, and the culture of Corrientes, aiming to foster pride in local heritage and achieve sustainable development.

IBERÁ, A MODEL OF GOVERNANCE

In the presentation of the book *Gran Parque Iberá. Producción de naturaleza y desarrollo local* (2020, p. 8), Gustavo Valdés highlights the achievements of the management model and the transformation of a park that is now a source of pride for the people of Corrientes:

The Great Iberá Park stands as an example of governance, with provincial and national territories sharing a common vision and commitment. It also serves as a model for rewilding, striving to restore Iberá to its fullest, with all its key components [...] Today, we can say that the Great Iberá Park produces nature and that many people in Corrientes now choose to shape their livelihoods around conservation and tourism. From new lodgings and restaurants to trained guides, local canoe or horseback tours showcasing unique skills, and a network of directly and indirectly related services and products, Iberá not only revives cultural

traditions but has become an economic driver for at least 20 communities and over 200,000 people.

This Great Iberá Park benefits from the rapprochement and agreements reached by the members of the Iberá Committee after 15 years of tensions and differences. A committee that, guided by respect, dialogue, and consensus, works toward a common vision, advancing by creating policies and carrying out tasks to strengthen the area and the project. An example of this progress is the creation and operation, since 2017, of the Iberá Committee Executive Unit within the Provincial Ministry of Tourism.

The provincial government is interested in replicating this experience in municipalities and territories, exploring ways to institutionalize the concepts, processes, and methodologies to be applied. It is anticipated that, in the short term, it will be necessary to create an institute dedicated to developing territories known for their biodiversity and cultural richness. The goal is to position these areas as ecotourism destinations within the province, fostering new economic activities, creating jobs, and improving the quality of life for local communities.

The spirit of governance achieved is a source of pride for the Iberá Committee and the government. This is an exceptional case of management in the country, where diverse jurisdictions collaborate: the provincial

government manages the Provincial Park, the national government oversees the National Park, Fundación Rewilding Argentina plays a key role, and private providers and productive sectors contribute within the reserve area. This model is an inspiration to other provincial and even international administrations. The Iberá experience is being shared with authorities and stakeholders involved in similar initiatives, including those in Chaco, Chubut, Santa Cruz, other provinces of Argentina, and neighboring countries such as Paraguay, Brazil, and Uruguay.

“They want to see how it can be replicated, they want to understand how we approached it. Because this story didn't emerge from prosperity but from conflict. And we managed to resolve it,” reflects Senator Sergio Flinta, recalling the beginnings of this model that today brings political prestige. Born in a region as magical as it is privileged, this model is now spreading across the rest of the provincial map. Iberá, once hidden in the lyrics of *chamamé* songs, is now a topic of political speeches and negotiation tables. It has appeared on national television programs, in international magazines, and even in graphic designs that have made the Iberá brand visible on personal items—thermoses, notebooks, keychains, pads, and more.

As the hum of a boat engine echoes across the wetlands, the Iberá Committee presses forward with a clearer vision, a collaborative

spirit, and the prestige earned through years of biodiversity restoration, public works investments, and human development.

The Iberá Wetlands is now a global tourist destination. Between 2015 and 2023, the number of visitors increased from approximately 27,083 to 59,584, despite challenges such as severe fires and droughts in Corrientes. Tourist demand continues to grow, even under unfavorable climatic conditions like those experienced during this period. According to a report by the Iberá Committee, based on data from the Provincial Parks Directorate and the Public Use Area of the Iberá National Park Administration, there was only a decline in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Its growth continues largely thanks to those who “dared to believe, dream, and build this Iberá, filled with opportunities, progress, and development,” as a student expressed in their graduation thesis for the Technical Degree in Environmental Management at the Faculty of Engineering of the Northeast National University.

The Iberá Wetlands stand as a symbol of pride for the people of Corrientes and all Argentines. After years of obscurity, the beauty of its waters, landscapes, wildlife, towns, and traditions is finally being recognized. Now, it is everyone’s responsibility to ensure this light continues to shine and inspire the world.

A Window to Iberá on the Waterfront of Corrientes Capital City

Recognizing the charm of the waterfront, the Camba Cuá Park, and the interest sparked by the new location of the Dr. Amado Bonpland Museum of Natural Sciences, the historic *Casa Ferro* has been restored and transformed into the Iberá House and the Iberá Interpretation Center. This new recreational and educational space invites locals, visitors, and schools from all levels and across the province to immerse themselves in the scenic wonders of this vast wetland, marvel at its life-sized animals, absorb information shared by its guides, and engage with environmental education activities.

The house and the center provide reliable guidance and encourage future visits to the wetlands, offering just a glimpse of the experience that awaits there.

The Store. Casa Iberá includes a space that highlights Corrientes’ cultural heritage, showcasing and selling the works of artisans from the towns and villages surrounding the Great Park.



Epilogue

What's next? This is an inevitable question after delving into the story of how Iberá has become one of Argentina's largest and best-preserved parks—a learning hub about a unique region of the country, about territorial management, governance enriched by diverse sectors, a source of pride for the people of Corrientes, and a testament to the commitment to regenerative economics.

But this story doesn't end with the creation of a great park, a restored ecosystem, and a thriving economy. In the process of developing this model, technical knowledge, administrative procedures, and innovative products have been generated, all of which can now be shared or exported to other regions in Argentina and Latin America. There is significant potential for applying this model across the Paraná River basin, spanning from Corrientes to its headwaters in southeastern Brazil, including the basins of the three major rivers that feed into the Paraná: the Iguazú—from its source in southeastern Brazil, the Paraguay—from its source in the Pantanal, and the Bermejo—from its source in southern Bolivia. The impacted ecoregions include Pantanal, Atlantic Forest, Humid Chaco, Dry Chaco, and Yungas.

In this way, other provincial or national governments can adopt this model to develop regional economies and promote the well-being of

their populations. Simultaneously, they will also have the opportunity to restore degraded natural ecosystems—key elements in addressing the environmental crises that plague our planet, especially climate change, biodiversity loss, and the emergence of pandemics.

Regarding wildlife, over the past two decades, Iberá has transitioned from a defaunated ecosystem that required the translocation of individuals to reintroduce extinct species to one brimming with wildlife. Iberá is already prepared to serve as a donor region for areas where these species have become extinct or are critically scarce. Pampas deer have begun to repopulate the Corriente River basin downstream of Iberá and cattle ranches east of the wetlands. Collared peccaries have been spotted in urban areas of Colonia Pellegrini. Groups of green-winged macaws are now settled in the regions of Loreto and Villa Olivari. Marsh deer are increasingly common in various parts of Corrientes. Remarkably, the giant anteater has expanded from Iberá into Brazil's state of Rio Grande do Sul, where it had been extinct for 130 years.

The Great Iberá Park is now capable of donating collared peccaries or giant anteaters to other conservation units in Corrientes, whether public, such as the Mburucuyá National Park, or private. It is also in a position to donate marsh deer to national parks like El Impenetrable in Chaco or Pilcomayo in Formosa, and pampas deer to El Impenetrable. In the near future, Iberá will likely be able to provide populations of bare-faced curassow, green-winged macaws, and even jaguars. Regarding jaguars, this could help reestablish extinct populations in places such as El Impenetrable, Pilcomayo, Copo in Santiago del Estero, or El Rey in Salta—or to supplement populations in need of genetic rescue, like those in Iguazú National Park. Corrientes will no longer just be the province that hosts one of the most ambitious examples of wildlife restoration worldwide in Iberá but could also become a leader in the recovery of natural environments on a regional scale.

This approach could enable the restoration of other existing parks to help them regain complete and functional ecosystems through the nature production model. Along the rivers of the impacted basin, more parks like Iberá could be restored, transforming from isolated islands to stepping stones that enhance—mostly lost—connectivity and facilitate the exchange of individuals among large carnivores, herbivores, and frugivores. Among these restored parks, a matrix of other types of land use would exist, working toward landscapes of coexistence with wildlife to allow the movement and flow of species.

The work of environmental restoration and economic development carried out by Corrientes in the Iberá basin through the nature production model is already an internationally recognized success story. Now, Corrientes and Iberá can inspire and drive similar stories in other provinces and countries.

In this way, Iberá becomes a source of knowledge. The collaboration with the Northeast National University has made it possible to share this knowledge through degree programs, courses, and workshops for people across the country, training professionals committed to a future of production and conservation. The joint work with the Fundación Rewilding Argentina has resulted in pioneering wildlife management procedures for the country and concrete actions in local communities that can be replicated anywhere. The Iberá Committee team has led initiatives both within the park and in its surrounding communities, setting a lasting direction visible in everyday activities—whether it's choosing Iberá and its wildlife as the theme for a preschool exhibit, a carnival parade, or artistic expressions. Gone are the days when children learned to count with elephants and giraffes; now textbooks throughout the province feature capybaras, jaguars, and deer. And it's not just children—teachers, police officers, tour guides, and entrepreneurs from all sectors of the province receive training on natural and cultural resources, fostering pride in what is local and motivating its protection. This effort

has led to the opening of technical programs in Biology, Tourism, and Gastronomy, among others, in towns near the park. Additionally, the Capital City of Corrientes has hosted the 1st Ecotourism Congress of the Litoral region with leaders and participants from around the world, the 2nd International Workshop on Giant Otters, and is preparing to host the 13th South American Bird Fair, among many other significant international events.

In terms of rewilding, the province stands as a pioneer in species recovery and habitat restoration, as well as in the protection and reevaluation of its natural resources. It has also enacted the necessary legislation to declare species of great value to the province as natural monuments and it is a trailblazer in having a law specifically focused on species and ecosystem recovery. Regarding tourism, the province has made significant strides with the Provincial Tourism Law, and in destination promotion, it has achieved remarkable recognition. In 2024, the Great Iberá Park was named one of the most stunning destinations to visit by *National Geographic* and ranked sixth on *Time* magazine's prestigious list of 52 recommended places to visit worldwide.

When we talk about Iberá, we think of conservation, rewilding, and habitat restoration. However, these concepts have already been surpassed. Iberá is no longer just about conservation—it has established a new economy, a new production model. Similarly, the idea of “protection” has expanded beyond its borders, spreading to the rest of the province. New protected areas have been created, such as San Cayetano Provincial Park, the Isoró Reserve, and Laguna Brava Reserve. Additional hectares have been incorporated into the province's protected territories, turning this model into an example for neighboring provinces.

The governance and production model of the Great Iberá Park showcases a vibrant Iberá that has regained its wildlife and natural beauty. Its communities now protect these resources, see them as their source of income, and return to a life in harmony with nature.

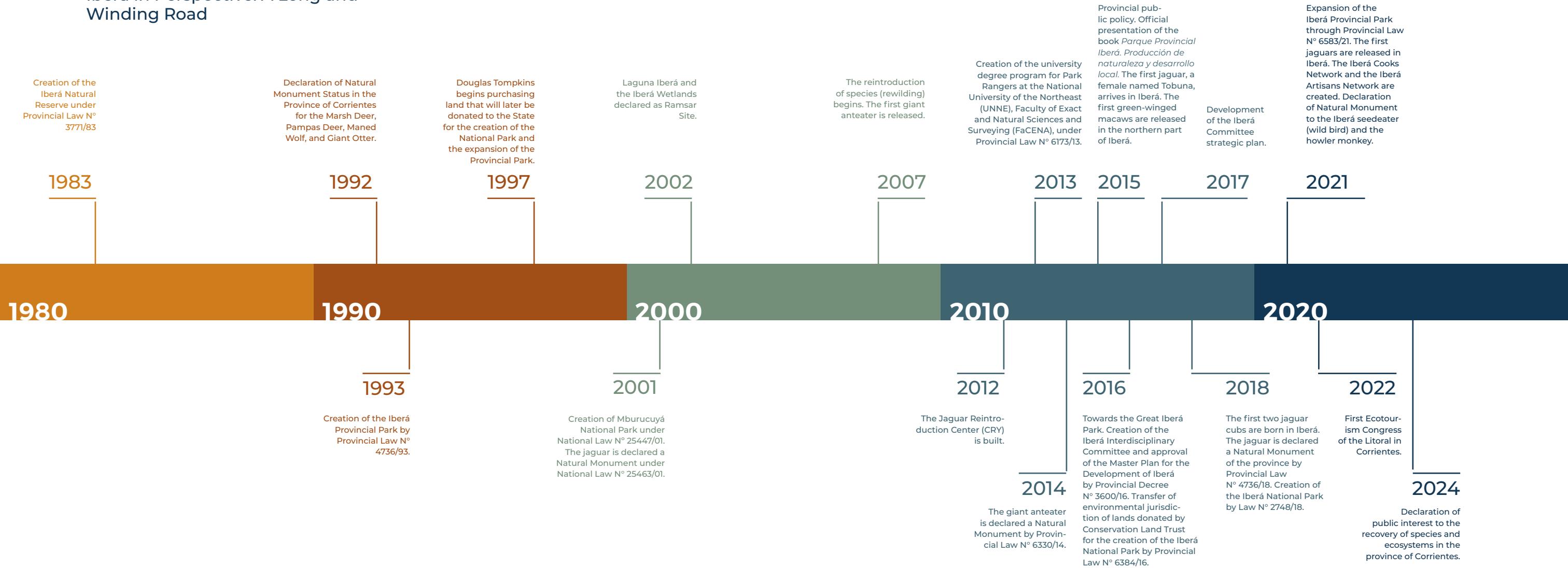
And what now? A question we repeatedly ask ourselves when contemplating a future filled with new challenges, threats to our achievements, and problems stemming from growth. It's a question that demands reflection but one for which we have a resolute answer. This moment finds us united, strong, empowered, proud of what we have accomplished, and confident in our ability to confront new battles against climate change, human greed, and the erosion of values spreading across the world. Corrientes awaits this future with steady confidence, standing on solid foundations of governance, conservation, and love for our land. These are battles the province not only knows how to face but also ones where it will continue to pave the way for provinces willing to follow its lead.

References for Full-page Photographs

- p. 10 Sunset in Iberá © Edwin Harvey
- p. 15 Caranday palm trees © Rafael Abuín
- p. 19 Iberá Natural Reserve © Edwin Harvey
Keneke Zalazar, park ranger and Guaraní translator; Mingo Ávalos, Guaraní speaker
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- The jaguar returns to the wetlands
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Appendix

Iberá in Perspective: A Long and Winding Road



Environmental and Tourism Legislation

1983	Provincial Law N° 3771/83 - Creation of the Iberá Natural Reserve.
1984	Provincial Law N° 4788/84 - Creation of the Apipé Grande Natural Reserve. Provincial Law N° 4789/84 - Creation of the Santa María Natural Reserve.
1992	Provincial Law N° 1555/92 - Declaration of the Natural Monuments of the Province of Corrientes: Pantanal Deer, Pampas Deer, Aguará Guazú, and River Otter.
1993	Provincial Law N° 4736/93 - Creation of the Iberá Provincial Park and establishment of the protected areas system in the province of Corrientes.
2000	Provincial Decree-Law N° 18/00 - Establishment of the new boundaries of the Iberá Natural Reserve.

Provincial Decree-Law N° 212/01 - Grants the ICAA powers to act in the following areas:

Environmental: Implementation of Provincial Law N° 5067 and regulatory framework (Decree N° 2858/12, Decree-Law N° 212/01, Law N° 5517/03), related to Environmental Impact Studies, as well as enforcement of all environmental legislation provided by the General Environmental Law N° 25675. It also covers compliance with environmental information access, Law N° 5533/03, and the requirement for public hearings, Decree N° 876/05.

Soils: Pertaining to soil conservation regulations, Laws N° 4361 and 4134.

Water Resources: Regulatory authority on water resources, Decree-Law N° 191/01, Water Code of the Province of Corrientes, Public Water Use, Public Water Concessions, and the Guarani Aquifer, and Law N° 5461.

Riverfront: Powers granted by Law N° 5588 regarding the determination and demarcation of the riverfront line on the Paraná and Uruguay rivers and other bodies of water in the province of Corrientes. This includes defining risk zones from the riverfront line and conditions for land use in these areas in accordance with article 2611 of the Civil Code.

Public Lands: Functions related to facilitating land access, eliminating smallholdings, and optimizing productive activities.

Mining: Decree-Law N° 212/01 grants ICAA the regulatory powers over mining matters in the province of Corrientes, as provided by Provincial Law N° 3805/83.

2001

2002

National Law N° 25675/02 - General Environmental Law.

2003

National Law N° 25688/03 - Environmental Management of Water.

2004 Provincial Law N° 5590/04 - Prevention, control, and management of fire and its Regulatory Decree N° 316/06.
National Law N° 25831/04 - Minimum Budget for Public Environmental Information.

2005 Provincial Resolution N° 075/05 from ICAA: Reminds landowners of the obligation to request authorization from ICAA for the construction of hydraulic works, including the storage of public waters in reservoirs and the construction of channels in water systems, as established by the Water Code and Law N° 5067.

2007 National Law N° 26331/07 - Minimum Budget for the Protection of Native Forests.
Provincial Decree N° 1966/09 - Establishes the requirements to be met by Environmental Impact Studies for works carried out in the area of the Iberá Natural Reserve.
Provincial Decree N° 1440/09 - Regulates Laws N° 3771/83 and 4736/93 and Decree Law N° 1555/92. It also establishes the objectives of the Iberá Provincial Park and Reserve, defines the limits of the Iberá Provincial Park, and establishes measures for the protection of wildlife, flora, and genetic resources. Additionally, it implements the regulatory framework for activities within the park and industrial, commercial, and community activities, as well as guidelines for agricultural and forestry activities carried out in the Iberá Reserve.
Provincial Law N° 5887/09 - Creation of the Corrientes Ecological Complex Directorate, which oversees the Aguará Wild Fauna Conservation Center.
National Law N° 26562/09 - Minimum Budget for Control of Burning Activities.

2009 Provincial Resolution N° 114/09 of ICAA - Establishes that all public and private projects to be carried out within the Iberá Provincial Reserve must have an Environmental Impact Declaration (DIA).
Provincial Decree N° 09/10 - Establishes the prohibition of extractive fishing within the Iberá Natural Reserve, allowing only sport fishing with catch and release.
Provincial Law N° 5974/10 - Territorial Planning of Native Forests.
Provision N° 867/10 - Authorizes the hunting of wild boars (*Sus scrofa*) indefinitely throughout the province of Corrientes, amended partially by Provision N° 69/11.

2010 Provincial Decree N° 02/11 - Establishes penalties and sanctions for non-compliance with Provincial Decree N° 09/10.

2011 Provision N° 05/11 - Prohibits the hunting of any species in Provincial Parks and Reserves.

2012 Provincial Law N° 6173/12 - Creation of the University Park Ranger Career.

2013 Provincial Decree N° 38/13 - Creation of the Ministry of Tourism of the Province of Corrientes, Directorate of Parks and Reserves, Directorate of Natural Resources, and Directorate of the Corrientes Ecological Complex (Aguará Center).
Provincial Law N° 6269/14 - Commemoration of the Corrientes Park Ranger Day on May 11th.
Provincial Law N° 6309/14 - Regulation of tourism activity in the Province of Corrientes.
Provincial Law N° 6321/14 - Definition and determination of the requirements to be a tourist guide.

2014	Provincial Law N° 6330/14 - Declaration of the Giant Anteater as a Natural Monument of the Province of Corrientes.
2015	Provincial Law N° 6360/15 - Creation of the San Cayetano Provincial Park.
	Provincial Law N° 6384/16 - Transfer of Environmental Jurisdiction of lands donated by CLT for the creation of the Iberá National Park.
	Provincial Decree N° 3350/16 - Expansion of the Iberá Provincial Park.
	Provincial Decree N° 3600/16 - Approval of the Master Plan for the Development of Iberá and creation of the Iberá Committee.
2016	Provincial Decree N° 3602/16 - Establishment of the members of the Iberá Committee.
2017	Provincial Decree N° 2817/17 - Designation of the Iberá Committee as the executive unit.
	National Law N° 2748/18 - Creation of the Iberá National Park.
	Provincial Law N° 6491/18 - Declaration of the Jaguar as a Natural Monument of the Province of Corrientes.
	Provincial Decree N° 2997/18 - Approval of the Management Plan for the Iberá Provincial Park.
	Resolution HD N° 202/18 - Approval of the Management Plan for the Iberá National Park.
2018	National Law N° 2748/18 - Creation of the Iberá National Park.
2019	Provincial Law N° 6522/2019 - Declaration of the saffron-cowled blackbird as a Natural Monument.

	Provincial Law N° 4736/2020 - Declaration of the Collar Yetapá as a Natural Monument.
	Provincial Law N° 6538/2020 - Declaration of the Iberá seedeater as a Natural Monument.
2020	Provincial Law N° 6543/2020 - Establishment of the wild boar and its descendants as an invasive species pest.
	Provincial Law N° 6557/2021 - Declaration of the Green-Winged Macaw as a Natural Monument.
	Provincial Law N° 6568/2021 - Creation of the Apipé Grande Provincial Park.
	Provincial Law N° 6583/2021 - Expansion of the Iberá Provincial Park.
	Provincial Law N° 6590/2021 - Declaration of the Howler Monkey as a Natural Monument.
2021	Provincial Law N° 6569/2021 - Regulation of the legal regime applicable to Private Nature Reserves.
2022	Provincial Law N° 6600/2022 - Declaration of Public Interest to Ecotourism.
	Provincial Law N° 6657/2023 - Declaration of the Axis Deer as a pest.
2023	Provincial Law N° 6555/2023 - Creation of the Ysoró Stream Natural Reserve.
2024	Provincial Law N° 6697/2024 - Declaration of Public Interest to the restoration of natural ecosystems with their flora and fauna species, and the recovery and reintroduction of their species in the Province of Corrientes.

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GREAT IBERÁ PARK
A Common Horizon
EUDENE
April 2025.
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Located in the heart of Corrientes, the Iberá Wetlands—one of the most important wetlands on the planet and home to extraordinary biodiversity—is now a vast protected area: the Iberá Great Park. What decisions made this possible? Who were the driving forces behind it? What public policies ensure its continuity?

Through a plurality of voices, this book reconstructs forty years of a transformative and visionary project. Its foundation rests on three pillars that have long been brought together by the Iberá Committee: the Northeast National University, with decades of research that have generated scientific knowledge and understanding of the Iberá macrosystem—its functioning, flora, and fauna; the government of Corrientes, working in coordination with municipalities to develop legislation, public policies, and investments; and the Rewilding Argentina Foundation, a key player in the reintroduction of native species to restore a healthy, complete ecosystem.

If you have already experienced the raw beauty of the Iberá wetlands, this book may still surprise you with the richness of its content and images. And for those who have yet to visit, it may well become the spark that ignites your desire to discover the shimmering waters of Iberá.



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