

Profiles in Sustainable Agriculture: *Kachalu Coffee Farmers Conserve the Forest and Wildlife on Colombia's Highlands*

IN THE LATE 15TH CENTURY, THE Poymas indigenous people lived in an area of what is now northeastern Colombia known as Kachalu. When the Spanish conquistadors arrived, the Poymas gathered all of their cultural icons and hid them in a cave. While their treasures survived, the Poymas did not. But their legacy continues some six centuries later. In 1999, 14 coffee growers established an association to produce more environmentally friendly coffee, protect wildlife habitat and prevent the contamination of local water. They call themselves Kachalu, a word they interpret to mean “hope.” The enterprising Kachalu farmers tend their plants with the greatest care and pride, as they conserve the forest and its wildlife, ever hopeful that they will succeed in the face of a worldwide coffee crisis that has forced some neighboring farmers to abandon their properties or convert to other crops.

It is believed that coffee farming in Colombia was born in the Santander region, where the Kachalu farm is located. During the Spanish conquest, Santander's forests were virtually razed and tobacco farms were planted in their stead. With the arrival of coffee, farmers began to reforest the hillsides in order to protect their coffee plants.

Colombian Coffee Conservation

The Rainforest Alliance works with coffee growers to cultivate their beans sustainably, as well as to protect the people and the wildlife that depend on the land. Rainforest Alliance certification conserves waterways, soils and forests. The rigorous standards, which were developed in collaboration with scientists, NGOs, coffee growers and community members, also mean decent pay



Kachalu farmer Marcos Penalosa has posted signs around his property that emphasize the importance of environmental protection.

and better social conditions such as housing, education and healthcare for farmers and their families.

Today, Colombia is one of the world's leading producers of high quality coffee. Thanks to a collaborative effort among the Rainforest Alliance, the Colombian Coffee Federation and the Rainforest Alliance's Bogota-based partner, Fundación Natura, Grupo Kachalu became Colombia's first producer group to achieve certification. Today 77 small farms, which on average are about 25 acres (10 hectares) each, are association members; 67 of them have been certified by the Rainforest Alliance for meeting a rigorous host of standards that protect the environment and the rights and welfare of workers and their families.

Protecting the Wealth of Forestlands

The Kachalu farms surround a forest preserve that is managed by Fundación Natura and is a last redoubt of an endangered species of Andean oak. Eager to be good neighbors to the park, the farmers entered their

lands into the Rainforest Alliance certification program. The farms themselves provide habitat for a rich diversity of birds and wildlife. Studies conducted by the National Coffee Research Center in 2004 found 96 bird species in the Kachalu farm region, a population that the center attributes to the wide variety of native trees that shade the coffee including ingas, eritrynas, cedars, ficus, albizzias and tubebuias, among others.

According to Gilberto Manrique Diaz, a member of the group, “The Rainforest Alliance certification gave us breathing space and energy to continue fighting to conserve the wealth of our forests. It gave us awareness.”

Kachalu farmer Marcos Penalosa was moved to post signs around his property declaring the importance of environmental protection. Another farmer, Mauricio Ardila Parra, acknowledges, “I used to harvest the bananas on my coffee farm and sell them in town in the local market, just to put a few more pennies in my pocket. I don’t do that anymore, because it’s just so gratifying to watch the parrots enjoying the bananas on my farm.”



Kachalu farmers are committed to conserving the forest and its wildlife while growing high quality coffee.