

PROJECT RAFA – Rivers and Forests Alliance

PACUARE RIVER CONSERVATION INITIATIVE

March 2021

We present a conservation initiative by Rafael E. Gallo, a leading conservationist and environmental activist in Costa Rica. Project RAFA – Rivers and Forests Alliance – proposes to protect the Pacuare River corridor from its source to the sea and to combine privately protected land with indigenous reserves, biological preserves, and national parks to restore forest habitat, watersheds, and biological corridors for biodiversity regeneration.

The Pacuare is one of Costa Rica's most iconic rivers. It flows from high in the Talamanca Mountains through indigenous Cabecar territory and pristine rainforest to the Caribbean Sea, where endangered sea turtles come to nest along the black volcanic sandy beach. Along the way, the Pacuare River delivers life-giving water to abundant flora and fauna. It allows wilderness lovers and whitewater enthusiasts to enjoy the exceptional natural beauty and thrilling rapids.

For over 35 years, Rafael ("Rafa") Gallo, his family, staff, and partners of his renowned rafting and adventure travel company Rios Tropicales, have dedicated their lives to protecting the Pacuare River region from hydroelectric dams and exploitation by loggers, hunters, ranchers, and other developers. Rafael's vision has been to share the magnificent rivers and rainforests of Costa Rica with all people in a way that protects and sustains the environment and local communities. Through Rios Tropicales, they have inspired tens of thousands of people worldwide with their passion for nature and ethics of stewardship and sustainability. Rios Tropicales has received dozens of environmental awards and is a shining example of a true ecotourism company.

In addition to his activism, Rafael has purchased 2,470 acres of land in the Pacuare River Valley with family and friends, making it the largest private reserve in the Pacuare region. He has reforested the land with over 30,960 native hardwood trees, thus regenerating the forest and restoring habitats for endangered species like ocelots, jaguars, and Great Green Macaws.

Despite these efforts and its reputation as a wilderness wonderland, the Pacuare River region is still under threat from hydroelectric power expansion, population growth, pollution, and deforestation and habitat degradation from farming and ranching. On the coast, programs to protect endangered sea turtles face challenges from poachers, pollution, and other human impacts. It is a region of precious resources that must be protected.

In March 2021, the driving force and namesake of Project RAFA, Rafael Gallo, passed away after a 14-month struggle with cancer. In addition, his company Rios Tropicales permanently closed in February 2021, due to the economic crisis caused by the global coronavirus pandemic. Rafael's family, friends, and associates have united to continue to honor his lifelong work with the creation of Project RAFA.

Project RAFA Pacuare River Conservation Initiative

Project RAFA's Pacuare Conservation Initiative will begin focusing on concentric circles spreading outward from Rafael's private reserve and moving up and down the Pacuare River corridor.

Our first action step will be to partner with local communities to preserve and regenerate the land around the Pacuare River. We will work with these communities to set aside land for preservation, encourage reforestation pastures, share regenerative farming ideas/techniques, and stop illegal hunting. Project RAFA plans to purchase land for conservation in the future.

Additionally, there is a need for mapping and research to show the Pacuare River region's importance in Costa Rica for biodiversity and conservation. We plan to map privately protected areas and national reserves to determine their numbers and size and compare them with earlier maps to show how much deforestation has been reversed (or expanded). We also plan to study the social impact on indigenous and local communities, farmers, and ranchers. With modern data about the Pacuare River corridor's current status, we can better form conservation and regeneration plans. Research can happen simultaneously while main initiatives move forward.

Project RAFA's goals include:

- Conservation: Protect the entire Pacuare River watershed, its tributaries, the surrounding rainforest, and the coastal river mouth.
- Reforestation: Plant native tree species, focusing on species that will restore wildlife habitats (e.g., Great Green Macaw) and endangered tree species for regeneration.
- Biodiversity Protection: Preserve and regenerate regional biodiversity; expand and link biological corridors across protected lands, national parks, and indigenous reserves in the greater Pacuare/Talamanca region; stop illegal hunting/poaching through environmental education and alternative economic incentives.
- Environmental education: Collaborate with local communities to protect the rainforest and wildlife, stop illegal hunting, and improve their health/well-being through organic farming, better ranching practices, and reduce/re-use/recycle campaigns. The goal is to show how conservation can bring people increased wealth and improved well-being when they protect the environment and biodiversity.
- Scientific research: Bring researchers from scientific organizations and universities to do investigative projects in the Pacuare region, studying such elements as: animal life, plant life, biodiversity restoration, and forest regeneration.
- Regenerative farming: Work with local farmers to share regenerative/ecological practices that work in harmony with nature (i.e., planting more trees on ranch land for shade and watershed protection, organic farming, alternatives to pesticides/herbicides, not burning as a means to clear land or dispose of debris).
- Regenerative Tourism: Promote travel that supports protecting biodiversity, nature, and local communities. Inspire new ecotourism businesses in the region: birdwatching, rural tourism, homestay programs, hiking tours, wildlife photography tours, horseback riding, and cultural interactions with the indigenous Cabecar community.

For additional information, please email projectrafacostarica@gmail.com.