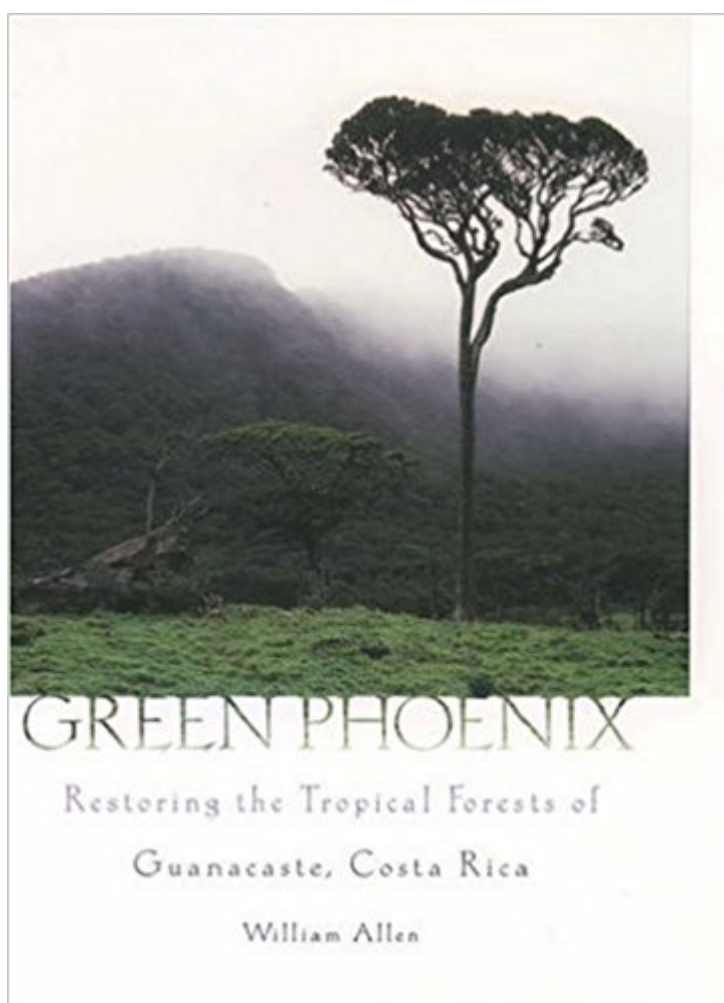


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Green Phoenix : Restoring The Tropical Forests Of Guanacaste, Costa Rica



Synopsis

Can we prevent the destruction of the world's tropical forests? In the fire-scarred hills of Costa Rica, award-winning science writer William Allen found a remarkable answer: we can not only prevent their destruction--we can bring them back to their former glory. In *Green Phoenix*, Allen tells the gripping story of a large group of Costa Rican and American scientists and volunteers who set out to save the tropical forests in the northwestern section of the country. It was an area badly damaged by the fires of ranchers and small farmers; in many places a few strands of forest strung across a charred landscape. Despite the widely held belief that tropical forests, once lost, are lost forever, the team led by the dynamic Daniel Janzen from the University of Pennsylvania moved relentlessly ahead, taking a broad array of political, ecological, and social steps necessary for restoration. They began with 39 square miles and, by 2000, they had stitched together and revived some 463 square miles of land and another 290 of marine area. Today this region is known as the Guanacaste Conservation Area, a fabulously rich landscape of dry forest, cloud forest, and rain forest that gives life to some 235,000 species of plants and animals. It may be the greatest environmental success of our time, a prime example of how extensive devastation can be halted and reversed. This is an inspiring story, and in recounting it, Allen writes with vivid power. He creates lasting images of pristine beaches and dense forest and captures the heroics and skill of the scientific teams, especially the larger-than-life personality of the maverick ecologist Daniel Janzen. It is a book everyone concerned about the environment will want to own.

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Customer Reviews

Allen, a science writer at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, began traveling to Costa Rica in the mid-1980s, when a pair of visionary field biologists--the brilliant, tireless, and audacious scientist Daniel Janzen and the equally gifted but far more low-key Winnie Hallwachs--launched a revolution in tropical conservation by proposing methods of forest restoration. Transforming themselves into activists, they worked diligently with Costa Rican colleagues to acquire land for a national reserve where they could test their theories. The concept sounds simple, but, just as interference with one species in the wild sets up a dominion effect, the attempt to reach this goal generated a daunting matrix of financial, political, social, and scientific conflicts. As Janzen struggled against the media's insistence on deifying him, negotiated with landowners, faced adversity related to covert Iran-Contra activities, and conducted a gutsy fund-raising effort that involved "the biggest single commercial debt-for-nature exchange ever," the Guanacaste conservation area grew to embrace hundreds of square miles of now newly reforested land. Allen's brisk yet dramatic and informative account celebrates this hard-won triumph, a beacon in the storm of seemingly unsolvable environmental conundrums. Donna Seaman

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"The book is a paradigm of how one man can make such a difference through dedication and perseverance ..."--Biologist
"This is a remarkable story of a valuable ecosystem rising from its own ashes-a hopeful story for our time."--Wildlife Activist

I have the greatest respect and admiration for Dan Janzen and have supported the Rincon Rainforest project before seeing this book. This book is a good explanation for why the Guanacaste Conservation Area (GCA) in Costa Rica may be the key to all successful tropical forest conservation projects. The author relates the detail of conservation work to restore overgrazed, eroded land and land filled with difficult to eradicate foreign weeds back to the point of reforestation with all the original species from microbes, insects, up to birds and mammals. It is encouraging to see that despite the difficulty of this work that they are achieving success and that model of success may help other tropical conservation projects. The book also describes the life work of one of the most important conservation biologist of all time and all of those who have been pushed, coerced, reluctantly persuaded and inspired to do this most significant project. If you are discouraged in any way about the fate of the diverse tropical forests you should read this book. It truly is an inspiration.

There's hope for the earth when we have people like Pres. arias and ecologists like Jensen. We read this in advance of a trip to Costa Rica. The country that could teach us a lot about life without a

military.

A well documented and well written book, about the makings of a park in northern Costa Rica. One gets to know the importance of the biologists work, and at the same time the personalities of the men and women who made their dream come true. I recommend it to all who travel to Guanacaste, Costa Rica!

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Without duplicating the book description, I'll just explain why I would recommend this book to anyone interested in conservation. Although the creation of Guanacaste Conservation Area -- which combines pre-existing national parks and added land between and around them, along with a marine sector -- is unique in representing the world's only large-scale tropical forest restoration project, the story illustrates elements common to nature conservation projects in general. These include the importance of understanding the local ecology (in this case, especially forest succession and the necessity of controlling fires); political aspects, both local and national (Costa Rican president, parks service, etc.); how money is raised and land purchased or otherwise secured; and ways of involving people from the local area in conservation and the importance of that. I have just returned from Guanacaste and was impressed by the program that trains local people as "parataxonomists" to help with the huge task of identifying and cataloguing the area's many species. Another program gives instruction on natural history to children in local schools. The result has been an important cultural shift toward appreciating nature and the many benefits it provides. The writing is sometimes long-winded and ponderous, but the careful recounting of details was worthwhile, and the integration of interesting snippets of tropical biology and anecdotes of the people involved made it an enjoyable read. Of particular interest as well was the recounting of the reaction to the revolutionary suggestion that tropical forest can indeed be restored on land taken out of agriculture, an assertion that initially met with skepticism and alarm from conservation organizations, as it conflicted with the conservation message that a tropical forest, once cut down, can "never" regenerate. In this end, this is a great and stirring conservation success story. The book illustrates how much hard work that entailed on the part of many dedicated people.

How often have you've heard the tales of gloom and doom regarding the deforestation of the tropics? Undoubtedly, the numbers are grim and the outlook for many forests is not good. This is

why this story, wonderfully told by William Allen, a science writer at the ST. LOUIS DISPATCH, is particularly refreshing and guardedly optimistic. Allen craftily weaves anecdote with history, real people with events to present a story that tells how a relatively small park in NW Costa Rica (Guanacaste National Park) developed into the Guanacaste Conservation Area, some 10 times larger than its original size. But the story is not limited to the success in creating a larger park. Rather, the author depicts the efforts of a determined group of Costa Rican and foreign scientists (led by Daniel Janzen) as they attempt to reverse the effects of deforestation and actually bring a substantial area back to some semblance of its original state. The story delves quite a bit into Janzen's personality and raises the issue of a foreigner's role in a project such as this. Would it succeed without him? Just what would it take to restore non-virgin forest? Is this an idea that might work elsewhere? Just a few of the intriguing questions dealt with in this book. I particularly enjoyed the beginning of each chapter, where the author introduces an anecdote upon which the rest of chapter usually builds. The anecdotal information is highly entertaining of itself, and when used as metaphor, it is easier to remember the larger points made. If you're into eco-whatever, this is great stuff...paul e.

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