



Chucantí Salamander. Photo: Abel Batista.

## Land Purchase in Panama Helps Protect a “Sky Island” of Cloud Forest for Threatened Amphibians

By Guido Berguido, Lauren Colegrove, Carlos R. Garcia & James P. Lewis

**C**erro Chucantí Nature Reserve in Panama has been expanded by 260 acres and safeguards critical habitats for newly discovered species, thanks to Asociación Adopta el Bosque Panamá (ADOPTA), Rainforest Trust (an Amphibian Survival Alliance Partner) and the International Conservation Fund of Canada (ICFC) and other supporters.

Rainforest Trust’s and ICFC’s local partner ADOPTA has secured 260 acres to expand Cerro Chucantí Nature Reserve in eastern Panama. Three land properties were purchased to establish an important buffer zone that will act as a barrier to prevent squatters from moving into extensive public wilderness areas and to discourage poachers from hunting in the vicinity.

“This initiative that first started with the purchase of 100 acres of rainforest has grown to almost 1,500 acres of rainforest that we’re protecting now,” said Guido Berguido, Executive Director of ADOPTA. “With the help of Rainforest Trust and the International Conservation Fund of Canada, we have increased its conservation value.”

Cerro Chucantí, an isolated massif or “sky island” in eastern Panama, rises from sea level to 4,721 feet in elevation and sustains a diverse cloud forest and other adjacent tropical forest ecosystems. The closest peaks with similar elevation and vegetation are found at least 90 miles away. The geographic isolation of the Cerro Chucantí mountaintop has allowed its flora and fauna to differentiate considerably, such that it contains a number of locally endemic rainforest species found nowhere else on Earth.

Cerro Chucantí is home to many species new to science, and there is a high potential for many more to be discovered. In 2008, the dark brown Chucantí Salamander (*Bolitoglossa chucantiensis*) was discovered in this area. In addition, a new frog species called Maje Dink Frog (*Diasporus majeensis* sp. nov.) and a new snake species called the Chucantí Centipede Snake (*Tantilla berguidoi* sp. nov.), were also found there and formally described in 2016. The Maje Dink Frog,

a chestnut-colored frog with red markings, received its name from the genus’ characteristic ‘dink’ call, though this specific species’ sound is more reminiscent of a whistle. The Chucantí Centipede Snake received its scientific name in honour of ADOPTA’s Executive Director, Guido Berguido.

“This site of Cerro Chucantí has turned out to be far more exceptional than we ever dreamed,” said Berguido. “More than 20 new species of plants and animals have been found at this location that are found nowhere else on Earth.”

There are still two species of snakes, at least three frogs, one salamander and over a dozen species of ants awaiting formal description. Cerro Chucantí is also home to a number of species recognized as being at high-risk for extinction, including the Great Green Macaw, Baird’s Tapir, Giant Anteater and the Critically Endangered Black-headed Spider Monkey.

Despite their incredible biodiversity, the rainforests in Cerro Chucantí are under significant threat from slash-and-burn activities, logging and cattle ranching. During this year’s long dry season, forest destruction and conversion to pasture land continued near Cerro Chucantí Nature Reserve. The new strategic expansion of the reserve secures a new section of the forest and prevents further clearing, especially as colonists are encroaching on thousands of acres of unclaimed land. As a gateway to over 60,000 acres of public lands, Cerro Chucantí Nature Reserve is laying the foundation for the designation of government protected areas, an effort ADOPTA is working hard to achieve with the support of Rainforest Trust and ICFC.

This project joins a growing number of amphibian focused conservation efforts supported by Rainforest Trust. For almost 30 years, Rainforest Trust has been working with local conservation organizations to help protect the most important sites for threatened species. With this focus, they have made significant progress on establishing key sites for the protection of amphibians – the network of





Cerro Chucantí Nature Reserve. Photo: Anand Varma.

protected areas Rainforest Trust has helped create is home to some 1,600 species of amphibians, including over 360 that are listed as threatened on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species<sup>TM</sup>.

Amphibians are also a prime focus of several of the International Conservation Fund of Canada's projects (see *FrogLog*, 114: 32-34). As does Rainforest Trust, ICFC partners with capable in-country conservation organizations, who best understand the sociopolitical and biological environment. ICFC and Rainforest Trust have partnered with Fundación para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservación (FUNDAECO) in Guatemala to acquire lands to create the 1,900-hectare Sierra Caral Amphibian Conservation Reserve and a 845-hectare property in the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes Mountain range in northwestern Guatemala, to protect Threatened amphibians (e.g., the Finca Chiblac Salamander, Long-limbed Salamander, Jackson's Climbing Salamander, and the Critically Endangered Morelet's Black-eyed Treefrog). Amphibians also benefit from ICFC's work in protecting landscape-scale reserves such as the Kayapo Indigenous Territories in Brazil (which span 11 million hectares), and Peru's Los Amigos Conservation Concession, which spans 146,000 hectares of old growth Amazonian forest.

"Both the 2005 and 2016 versions of the Global Amphibian Conservation Action Plan have identified habitat protection as one of the most important priorities – if not the most important – for

the amphibian conservation community," explained James Lewis, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Officer for Rainforest Trust. "Now we have a major opportunity to turn those priority actions into real, long-term, conservation solutions on the ground."

Last year, Rainforest Trust launched the SAVES Challenge, a commitment to raise \$50 million as a challenge match that will direct a total of \$100 million to establish new protected areas to save the world's most threatened species.

"Amphibians are a key component of this effort, and we want to see a significant increase in the number of protected areas created to safeguard threatened amphibians in the wild," said Lewis. "It is up to us as a community to come together, identify these key sites and implement effective conservation strategies. Rainforest Trust is ready to help."

To learn more about ADOPTA and their conservation work to save the sky islands of Panama, please visit <http://adoptapanama-rainforest.org/>. To find out how to join Rainforest Trust and ICFC in their efforts to protect the most important sites for amphibians around the world, see <https://www.rainforesttrust.org/saves-conservation/>, and <http://icfcanda.org/>.



Maje Dink Frog. Photo: Abel Batista.