

The Orchid Conservation Alliance
564 Arden Drive
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December 10, 2013

Dear Member -

Imagine this: In November's newsletter you heard about protecting orchid habitat at Reserva Serra Bonita in Brazil's Atlantic Rainforest. In this newsletter, a whole new orchid reserve, Reserva Yumartán, in Colombia !

I have never seen a place richer in orchids than the new Yumartán reserve. And better yet, it is in the middle of lots of equally good forest, forest which is just waiting to be added to the reserve. Well, we hope it is waiting...

The OCA part of the Yumartán story begins back in February, 2012, when OCA director Rosario Braga was at an orchid show in Medellin. At the Fundacion BYAE booth Rosario picked up a CD which detailed some small reserves in a place called the Sibundoy valley. Fundacion BYAE is short for Fundacion Buenoy Yumartán Aldea Ecologica, aka the Buenoy Yumartán Ecological Community Foundation. None of us had heard of the Sibundoy valley or Fundacion BYAE, but the information on the CD was intriguing. Fundacion BYAE is a coalition of people in the Sibundoy valley, which is in south-central Colombia near the Ecuadoran border. These folks have 6 small reserves, reserves derived from farm plots that the foundation members want to preserve rather than farm. In addition they are very active rescuing orchids from a road construction project in the mountains nearby. Their reserves are in the hills north-west of the Sibundoy valley and there is not much more good forest available nearby for expansion. To investigate further Rosario arranged to visit the area in November of 2012 and to meet Camilo Barrera, the president of Fundacion BYAE. During her visit Rosario was quite impressed with the work that the foundation had done and with the reserves that she was able to visit. Early this year some land to the southeast of the Sibundoy valley, in the mountains above the Putumayo river, Camilo found some land that was available to purchase and that was excellent forest. He applied to the OCA for \$22,000 to purchase 40 hectares, or 99 acres. The land itself is \$18,000 with \$4000 for various fees and expenses for preparation of a land management plan. 80% of the area is primary forest, 15% is regenerating former pasture, and the rest is open pasture. From Rosario's visit this seemed generally like a promising area although she had not visited the proposed reserve site itself. Consequently, Steve Beckendorf and I resolved to visit Camilo Barrera, visit the proposed site, and evaluate whether the OCA should fund its purchase. To help us with translation, photography, and simply



Camilo Barrera carrying plants rescued from fallen trees.

another pair of eyes, we invited Sebastian Vieira, a Colombian orchidist who lives near Medellin to accompany us.

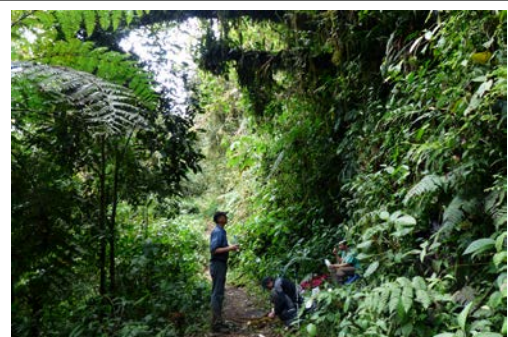
The proposed reserve was a long way into the forest. Email messages from Camilo first said that it was 13 km or 7.8 miles. The second said that it was 16 km or 9.6 miles, that there were significant elevation changes on a muddy trail that started at 6000 feet altitude, and that we would camp three nights at the reserve, although that was later changed to just two nights. So I trained for this hike. I doubt that I have walked 9.6 miles at any one time since before I was 40, or 29 years ago. During training I regularly walked 10 miles on as much hilly terrain as I could find near San Diego, which isn't much. And then I added a pack with 30 pounds of sand in it, since we might have to carry our camping gear. Happily, I also lost 25 pounds while training. I figured that if I was going to have to carry something, I would rather it be camping gear than flab. Who knew that orchids could be so good for my health ?

Steve and I met Sebastian at the airport in Bogota, we flew to Pasto where we met Camilo, and we took a two hour bus ride to Colon, the town in the Sibundoy valley where Camilo lives. Colon and the Sibundoy valley are well isolated, off the beaten track, a measure of which is that there are no American franchises such as McDonald's or Starbuck's to be seen. Yes, I know, hard to believe that there is a town anywhere without them, but it's true. In the '60's the Sibundoy valley was a destination for hippies looking to experience the hallucinations induced by datura, which shamans in the area had been using for centuries, but their visits have dropped off, as have the '60's. The first two days we spent on day hikes to one of Fundacion BYAE's reserves and to an area inside the Sibundoy valley, both of which had lots



Looking back to the Sibundoy valley from the trail to Yumartán.

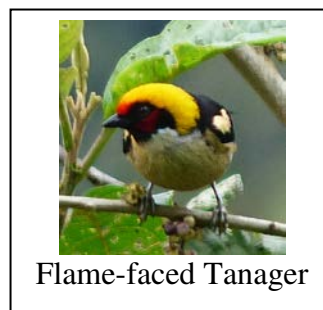
of orchids and seemed to augur well. On the third day we headed for the proposed reserve, starting our hike about 7:30 AM. Fortunately we had been able to hire a horse to carry our camping gear because the first mile and a half was all uphill in a trail that was deep clay mud much of the way. After that it was easier. The trail wound along the hillside above the Putumayo river with some upping and downing, but nothing too severe. In the end the trail was actually about 18.5 km, or about 11 miles. What with stopping to look at all the orchids along the way, to eat lunch, and just to take breathers, we did not arrive at the reserve site until just before dark, some 11 hours later. Steve and I were pretty much done in, while Camilo, who is only 33 years old and has been hiking in these hills since he could walk, was pretty much still just warming up. But, what a forest we passed through! Perpendicular to the trail, the hillsides are



On the trail to Yumartán.

very steep, so steep that there is very little agriculture along most of the trail. And, so steep that there were lots of waterfalls and landslides. In fact, between our outbound hike and the return hike, a new landslide crossing the trail had occurred after the night's rain. Camilo said that the area receives between 10 and 20 feet of rain a year. Rain makes orchids grow, and they were everywhere in abundance. Little ones such as *Lepanthes* and *Neoreophilus*, big ones such as *Maxillaria sanderiana*, *Cyrtorchilums* and *Odontoglossums*, and in between size ones such as *Oncidiums*, *Draculas*, and *Epidendrums*. We saw so many that it seems that no one has ever seriously collected plants there, even along the trail.

When we got to the potential reserve site I was glad to see that there was an old hut to sleep in, because there was essentially no flat space and the only cleared space was very swampy with the occasional cow pie. The hut had a roof, flat places to sleep, and a fireplace to cook meals. During the day we spent at the site, Camilo, Steve, and Sebastian hiked part of the perimeter of the reserve while I stayed behind. I bird watched, explored around the clearing and recovered from the previous day's hiking. I also considered what I had seen and whether the OCA should purchase the land. The issue, it seemed to me, was not whether the proposed site had a wonderful orchid diversity, which it certainly did, but that this 99 acre parcel was in the midst of thousands of more acres of essentially virgin rain forest. What difference would it make if this tiny plot was purchased and protected? Well, if you are going to preserve forest, you have to start somewhere. This parcel was as good as any, much better than many, and the price was right. The parcel was very isolated, which would protect it, and except for the fact that there was some agriculture in the area, it wasn't occurring at the reserve site. According to Camilo, many of the campesinos in the Putumayo valley are looking to move to the Sibundoy valley. Farming is just too arduous along the Putumayo. Although there is talk of a road from the Sibundoy valley east to Mocoa and the Amazon basin, the route for that road is a couple of valleys to the north. Finally, the clincher for me was Camilo himself. During the time we spent with him it became obvious that he cared very deeply about the environmental health of his surroundings. He is steeped in the local historic folklore, which includes many stories about the spirits of the forest and their protective role for the people. He and his friends in Fundacion BYAE believe very deeply that the physical, mental, and spiritual health of themselves and their communities resides in the health of their environment. One of the principal factors that we have noticed in whether a reserve is successful or not is the degree of commitment of the reserve's local management to its success. When Steve and I conferred at the end of the day we agreed that Camilo's commitment was nothing if not sincere. At 33, Camilo has a long time to work for environmental preservation and so Steve and I agreed that we personally, as well as the OCA, should support him. Thus, in late October, after unanimous consent of OCA's directors, I wired \$22,000 to Fundacion BYAE and the land is now in the process of being purchased. Some of the flowers and a bird we saw are below.



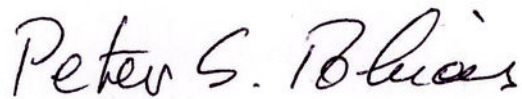
I'm hopeful that we will be able to do more for Fundacion BYAE over the years, but I am equally hopeful that Fundacion BYAE will outgrow our ability to support them. My impression is that there is the land and biodiversity that will enable Fundacion BYAE to recruit support from the bigger

players in conservation, the Conservation Internationals, the World Wildlife Funds, and the Rainforest Trusts. Camilo and Fundacion BYAE will have to advertise themselves through visitors, research, published papers, and conservation meetings. They certainly have the environmental richness to be successful in this endeavor. I foresee a further role for OCA in enabling some of the research and possibly underwriting some meetings to enable them to get the publicity they need. And, of course, ecotourism. Any member of the OCA could go to the Sibundoy valley, visit Camilo, and see for themselves what the area has to offer. Whether a hike to Reserva Yumartán is within your ability, only you can know. My advice is to start getting in shape now! Yumartán is a long walk down the trail, but it's a great walk. An OCA Orchids in the Wild trip will certainly be organized to visit, with an optional hike to Reserva Yumartán.

We have just posted lots of information about Reserva Yumartán on the new OCA website at www.orchidconservationalliance.org. This includes links to Fundacion BYAE's reserve development proposal, the report from Steve Beckendorf and myself on our visit, Sebastian Vieira's report on the orchids, and to Sebastian Vieira's Flickr page of photos from our trip. Be sure to see the photos, they are wonderful.

On another topic: I am a little late sending out membership renewal notices for 2014, but they will be coming out soon. If you would prefer not to receive one, send in your membership now! See the website for details of membership levels. \$200 buys an acre of land.

Best regards and Best Wishes for the Holiday Season,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter S. Tobias". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P' and a long, sweeping underline.

Peter S. Tobias
OCA President