

Person in the news

**Marco Vinicio Cerezo
Blandón, Conservation Hero.
Proud Latin American &
cofounder of FUNDAECO.**

Marco, a Guatemalan economist, began his environmental advocacy journey at just twenty-three. Passionate about nature conservation and restoration, he co-founded FUNDAECO in 1990, aiming to foster both community development and biodiversity conservation in Guatemala and beyond. Throughout the last thirty-four years, Marco has faced challenges and political upheavals, even running for the Presidency for the Green Party in Guatemala in 2010.

Marco is a pioneer in implementing a gender approach within FUNDAECO through the Healthy and Empowered Women and Girls Programme, saving countless lives. His focus on justice and sustainable development benefits rural indigenous communities around national protected areas. Marco's multifaceted contributions highlight his leadership in environmental conservation, social justice, and sustainable development. Let's draw inspiration from his holistic approach as we strive for a more equitable and sustainable future.

FUNDAECO has expanded its operations to six regions across Guatemala, spanning from the Caribbean coast to the highest plateau in Central America. With fourteen field offices, the organization now works in diverse ecosystems, collaborating with indigenous, Garifuna afro-descendant, and peasant communities. From coastal reefs to high-altitude forests, FUNDAECO's expertise encompasses a wide range of natural habitats, making it a valuable resource for conservation efforts not only in Latin America but globally. Get inspired!



Healthy and Empowered Women and Girls Program

Through this program, FUNDAECO has integrated sexual and reproductive health into its conservation approach for the management of protected areas and sustainable community development. The design, establishment and operation of local health clinics has become a vehicle to promote the empowerment of women and girls, as well as to promote their participation in decision-making spaces regarding the management and protection of natural resources.



Not all heroes wear a cape, some prefer a sturdy pair of rubber boots like Marco: From economist to environmental champion, Marco's journey embodies dedication to Nature and People.

Marco Vinicio Cerezo Blandón, *A Latin American conservation hero.* An interview by Juan Carlos Gonzalez Aybar.

“The beauty of nature (...) is intrinsically related to our indigenous peoples, to the indigenous cultures, to the historical and ancestral richness.”

As a Guatemalan economist trained in France, Marco has witnessed the crucial role of acknowledging nature as an essential component of Latin American economies. For more than three decades, Marco and his partner, Karen Aguilar, have dedicated their lives to forest conservation and community development in Central America.

Juan Carlos Gonzalez Aybar (JCGA): Marco, what inspired you to dedicate your life to conservation?

Marco Vinicio Cerezo Blandón (MVCB): The beauty of nature is without a doubt an inspiration. And in our countries that is intrinsically related to our indigenous peoples, to the indigenous cultures, to the historical and ancestral richness. And, of course, that cultural wealth, that natural wealth, comes together in **Latin America** in a very special way, don't they?

And in Guatemala, as in Peru, many of the national parks, many of the areas on the agricultural frontiers also have archaeological wealth. The Incas in Peru and the Mayas in Guatemala. But then this possibility is created to conserve cultural and natural heritage simultaneously.

JCGA: Most entrepreneurs say they are addicted to adventure, to risk. There is a lot of criminality in our countries. How do you measure these risks? How do you take them? Is there a way to be adventurous and not take risks? What do you do?

MVCB: Well, somehow, we must admit that the destruction of the environment in Latin America and in the world, in Africa or Asia, the history of environmental destruction, is also the history of impunity, of ungovernability. Therefore, the destruction of nature in these isolated areas of the countries, far from the cities where this virgin nature is located, is also where illegal acts of occupation of the territory with impunity are occurring with illicit activities. So, in reality, the great challenge of conservation is the challenge of the economic opportunity cost. Twenty years ago, I would have wanted to be a biologist or a forester or an agronomist.

Today I am very happy to have studied economics because biologists document what is there. But the real solution to the problems of environmental destruction is a solution that must be formulated in economic terms.

We must find models of growth, development, generation of wealth resources and jobs that are compatible with the conservation of nature and that cover or compensate for the opportunity cost of these activities, many of which are illegal or unpunished. The saddest thing about environmental destruction in Latin America is that people are doing this out of desperation or poverty, they are destroying a nature that was sustaining them, and this is producing more poverty.

So, in many of these regions we are trapped in a vicious circle of impoverishment, destruction of nature, which generates more poverty, which in turn generates more destruction of nature. So, the solution is economic and that is where we come, I would say, the eco-entrepreneurs or green entrepreneurs who are trying to find solutions.

I am sorry to have to mention it, but in over thirty-four years we have lost five workers and at least three community leaders who collaborated with FUNDAECO and who were also murdered in their communities because they were seen as suspicious of supporting nature conservation. So, we have learned to be very careful. We have learned conflict resolution techniques. FUNDAECO has become an expert in risk analysis, in risk mapping in order not to enter dangerous sites, to displace our workers, and to resolve conflicts before they occur. Because the fact is that in these regions where we are trying to do conservation, we are taking risks.



FUNDAECO projects in Latin America encompass 8 areas of focus, organized in a manner similar to Johan Rockström's concept of Planetary Boundaries. These areas include:

- Arcs of Life
- Living Oceans
- Eco Villages
- Healthy Women and Girls
- Ecotourism
- Sustainable Cities
- Youth
- Environmental Justice

"In a context of high vulnerability to climate change and socio-environmental conflict, we seek to protect natural ecosystems and their environmental services and promote sustainable livelihoods for poor and vulnerable communities in regions of high biodiversity."

JCGA: Some argue, following the lead of figures like Bill Gates, that our main concern is the excessive accumulation of CO₂ in the atmosphere. They advocate for investing in technology, geological capture, such as Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS). On the other hand, some contend that our challenges extend beyond climate issues to encompass biodiversity, rural development, poverty, crime, and impunity. These perspectives often clash, putting technology against nature and people. What are your thoughts on this matter?

MVCB: Well, I believe, Juan Carlos, that, first of all, in order to solve the problem of climate change and environmental destruction, which is so great, **we cannot approach it with a Manichean, simplistic or dichotomous mentality.** It seems to me that in this fight against climate change **we are probably going to need all actions and options.**

And it seems to me that the new carbon removal technologies that are still at a very, very early stage, have not yet proven to be the great panacea that some people say it's going to be. They're probably part of the solution, but the other part of the solution is going to be more education and affluence for the poorest, so that they have more access to education and health, and a more orderly demographic transition. But without a doubt, nature-based solutions are an essential part of the solution equation.

JCGA: In the debate over incorporating nature into global climate agreements and CO₂ removal strategies, there are two camps: removals vs avoidance. Marco, where do you stand on this issue?

MVCB: Well, in reality, this debate is distorted by economic interests. **There is more money to be made on removals** because a eucalyptus plantation will produce more money, [it's simple].

And, then, I believe that, once again, **we must avoid Manichean or simplistic or reductionist approaches.**

It seems to me that there is room for both tasks and, in fact, let's remember the great biologist Edward Wilson, who invented the word biodiversity. He came out with a book called *Half-Earth, Our Planet's Fight for Life*. That is, [the concept of] giving half the planet to nature, but in reality, that half for nature is going to have to be constituted in both ways.

On the planet, there are more or less 30% thirty percent of natural ecosystems conserved. That part should be conserved forever. We have already destroyed seventy percent of the virgin nature, so [it is mandatory to put] thirty percent of the planet in conservation, which is what the Montreal protocol establishes.

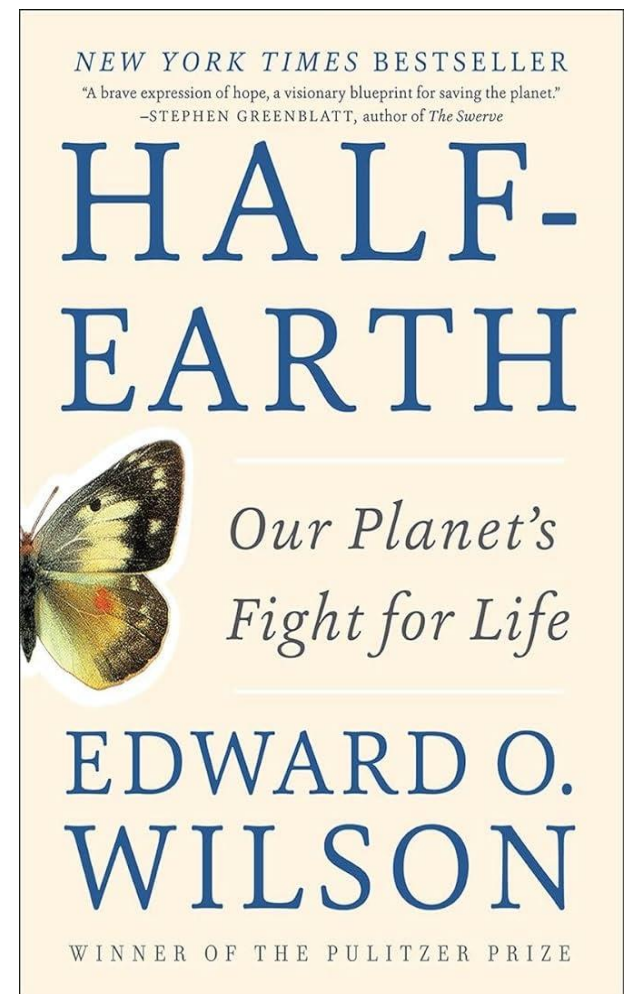
Then we need green cities. We need 30% of the cities to have forests, to be wooded, and to have urban ecological parks. That would add one 1.5% to nature. Then 30% of all degraded land, which is 65% of the planet, must be restored. It must be managed under agroforestry systems or plantations. 30% of 65% is 19% or so. So, with 30% of nature, 1.5% of green spaces in the cities and 30% of degraded areas recovering and under agroforestry systems, we would be more or less at c.51% of the planet for nature. So, Half Nature, right?

"The idea of this is that we don't have to see nature as separate from us. We must bring nature as part of our living systems, our production systems."

Yes, we must keep that thirty percent and it seems to me that this is non-negotiable because it is what we are giving to future generations. That is the mother's house that we are going to take care of and that we are not going to sell, right? That is the inheritance for future generations. And it also seems to me that at least thirty per cent of these degraded lands have to be recovered, and restored, and in that thirty per cent of restoration, there is indeed a place for large forest plantations, ideally native, but there is also a place for exotic species, fast-growing, species that will satisfy market demands, to reduce the pressure on natural ecosystems.

"So, again, let's not get into a false debate. We should do both."

I think the answer to this dichotomy is in this vision of sustainable landscapes. You can turn any region of the planet into a sustainable landscape.



Half-Earth, Edward Wilson, 2016: In order to stave off the mass extinction of species, including our own, we must move swiftly to preserve the biodiversity of our planet, says Edward O. Wilson in his most impassioned book to date. *Half-Earth* argues that the situation facing us is too large to be solved piecemeal and proposes a solution commensurate with the magnitude of the problem: dedicate fully half the surface of the Earth to nature.

Economics of Climate Change

"We must find models of growth (...) that are compatible with the conservation of nature"

Marco Vinicio Cerezo Blandòn

The Quote

"When the Last Tree Is Cut Down, the Last Fish Eaten, and the Last Stream Poisoned, You Will Realize That You Cannot Eat Money"

Cree Indian Tribe

Technology & Nature

"We have to think in systemic terms and understand that nature-based solutions is an essential component of the fight against climate change."

Marco Vinico Cerezo Blandòn

JCGA: In the midst of ongoing debates, Marco, we're confronted with complex dilemmas, including the clash between national and international interests. This dichotomy between national and international solutions is seeping into discussions on climate and biodiversity action. What are your thoughts on this tension between national interests and global cooperation?

MVCB: Well, here we are going to move away from environmental issues to think more philosophically and geopolitically. But here I am going to try to paraphrase Yuval Noah Harari, who says that the drama we are living is that we are facing global planetary challenges: climate change, environmental destruction, migrations, geopolitical conflicts, which are global problems that concern us all.

But we are trying to confront them by taking refuge in visions that separate us, nationalism, religion, ethno-nationalism, the geopolitical plan of borders that divide us and the geopolitical vision of power blocs. What they do is divide us, and the drama that we have at this moment in humanity (and again I paraphrase Harari), is that to solve the great problems of humanity we must act together in true international solidarity.

But actually, the fear, the fear of these big threats like climate change, is causing all these elements of division to be exacerbated, right? So, whether it's religion, ethnicity, nationality, or the borders of my country, people are locking themselves out of fear into increasingly, I would say, isolationist visions. However, this is again a hoax. A comedian used to say that illegal migration is the ebb and flow of colonialism. It is impossible to isolate oneself and I love it.

Some archaeologists did research on Hadrian's Wall, in the north of England, the wall that the Romans built to defend themselves from the barbarians. And there are cemeteries along Hadrian's Wall, where the workers who died in its construction are dead and the DNA of the workers who built Hadrian's Wall is the DNA of the poor of the Roman Empire, Persians, Arabs, Africans, people who traveled from Africa or from Persia because they heard they were building a wall in England, on the border at the edge of the Roman Empire and they went to work there. In other words, migrations are impossible to stop and the only way to avoid these large violent or illegal movements of people is to work with a mentality of international solidarity. And here again, nature-based solutions are fundamental. Because those people who live in the far reaches of Africa or Latin America or Asia, if nature disappears, they are going to have to migrate. If their livelihoods, which are based on nature, disappear, they are going to have to migrate.

Therefore, one of the main reasons to ensure sustainable livelihoods based on nature for these people is precisely to avoid these large illegal migrations. So, I believe that we must think globally, as we have been saying since the beginning of the environmental movement, think globally, but act locally, building local solutions, but articulated with major environmental proposals and agreements.

I believe we can do it. It seems to me that the recovery of the ozone layer is an example of international cooperation. It seems to me that the Paris Agreement itself, with all its shortcomings, is a demonstration of international achievements, but also the treaties to prevent nuclear proliferation are an example of the work of humanity.

Thinking globally, then, I obviously think that we must work in solidarity on a planetary scale. But of course, solutions must be implemented on the ground and here what we need is a lot of awareness, not only among citizens but also among politicians, because international solidarity is built on the ground and this definitely involves mechanisms, I would say efficient ones, for transferring resources for these vital investments in developing countries. And those resources will necessarily have to come from developed countries.

“I remember from my early days as a conservation activist, three percent of the world's military budget would fund all the conservation needs in the countries of the tropics.... So, really, it is a false dilemma in which we are being put, once again, by the actors interested in keeping things as they are.”



Field trip with Marco (on the left here) and his team at FUNDAECO

JCGA: Marco, there's another dilemma. Some argue that climate action should be funded solely by governments, while others believe the private sector should also play a role. Certain foreign governments push for state financing of forest conservation agendas in our countries, while others advocate for multi-stakeholder involvement, including private sector investment. Which approach do you think is more effective?

MVCB: In response to your question, I believe these debates around funding for climate action often oversimplify the issue. The most effective approach, in my opinion, lies in what's known as "blended finance." Blended finance entails combining private investment, public funding, and philanthropy to achieve conservation goals.

FUNDAECO's experience exemplifies this approach. Initially reliant on philanthropic grants, we gradually diversified our funding sources to include commercial bank loans, concessional loans from institutions like the IDB, and impact investments from international funds.

As we scaled up our efforts, we recognized the need for a systemic perspective, requiring both public policy support and private sector involvement. Rather than displacing one another, different types of financing should complement each other, ensuring sustainable and inclusive conservation initiatives. During periods of low carbon prices, FUNDAECO turned to loans and donations to fill funding gaps. Conversely, when carbon revenues were sufficient, they supported philanthropic activities such as scholarships and healthcare services.

Our organization operates with a focus on efficiency and sustainability, reinvesting all surpluses generated into conservation and social services. Unlike for-profit companies, we do not distribute dividends, instead, we prioritize reinvestment in our mission.

Ultimately, we need to transcend the traditional dichotomy between for-profit and not-for-profit mentalities. By adopting a new entrepreneurial mindset, we can ensure that wealth generated contributes to furthering conservation efforts and social welfare, rather than solely benefiting individual interests.

JCGA: How do you address critics who argue that private investment into nature is the financialization of nature?

MVCB: It seems to me that nature is already immersed in a planet that lives, that is governed by markets and it seems to me that at this moment it is the opposite, that if we do not attribute a value to nature, it will always be destroyed, if not ask grandma if you give something to someone, they will not appreciate it, right? That's what grandmas say. If you want to help someone, don't give it to them. Because if you give them something, they will not appreciate it and will neglect it.

JCGA: Don't give him fish; teach him how to fish.

MVCB: Exactly. But then, if nature has no value, if nature has no replacement cost, if biodiversity is not recognized for those services that are serving us for the economy, then the decision to destroy it has no opportunity cost either.

It is free to destroy it, and in fact, extensive cattle ranching in Latin America is possible because the land is worth very little.

They don't have to pay for the water, they don't have to pay for the carbon they release, they don't have to pay taxes on the land, and they don't have to pay formal contracts for their workers. In reality, these extensive and very unproductive activities are possible because we are not really giving value to human labor, to labor rights, to nature, and so on...

So, it seems to me that recognizing the value of nature is not to sell it to the highest bidder. To recognize the value of nature is to value it so that its destruction has an opportunity cost. And that opportunity cost is what we have to capture in the market to invest in nature conservation. I'm going to go one step further, and I'm hypothesizing here, reflecting. I think the challenge is for nature conservation to capture the wealth that is being generated in economic activities and reinvest it in circularity to create more nature, to create more nature conservation.

JCGA: Some argue that that companies should contribute to conservation efforts, but only certain ones, considered "cleaner," are expected to participate, while others, deemed "dirtier," are not, under the argumentation that the companies that are responsible of the problem should not be part of the solution. This sparks a new debate. Do you think companies in industries like hydrocarbons and mining, whose core operations rely on fossil fuels or destruction of natural spaces, should also finance conservation efforts?

MVCB: Well look, the truth is that it seems to me that we must put our feet where we are, and we are in a moment of enormous climate crisis and enormous environmental crisis.

The hot model, as we called it, back in 1980, when I visited NASA, they told us, well, the hot model, six to eight degrees of temperature increase, that is two or three hundred years away. They told us that, right? Now that hot model is thirty or fifty years away. Talking about four to six degrees of increase in a fifty-year horizon is no longer impossible. So, we are in a moment of planetary urgency, and we have to mobilize all our energies and it seems to me that in this urgency we no longer have time to fight with anyone.

“I spent the first fifteen years of my environmentalist life fighting, but now there is no time to fight because we are not fighting ego battles nor are we fighting ideological battles. We are fighting the battle for survival and for that we need all allies.”

And the bigger those allies are, the better because we will be able to go faster. In this sense, it seems to me that it is vital to invite these companies, oil, mining, or African palm companies, to sit at the table and define mechanisms in which they will contribute in a systemic and transformational way to this transition to a circular economy.

Small is Beautiful, yes, but we don't have time. I did small projects in the past, but we don't have time any more for pilot projects. We are no longer for the backyard garden, in which we demonstrated all the chemically pure agroforestry techniques. We need to move up the ladder to go faster, and for that, we need all those allies, of course, with clear commitments. We work with some oil companies, but we have also done due diligence to those oil companies, and we see what the strategy of that oil company is to move, for example, to transform itself, avoiding greenwashing.

And, of course, when a company tells us to do beach cleanup, and that they will give us T-shirts, that is greenwashing. But if a company tells us to carry out a five-million-dollar project to conserve coastal areas, that is a serious investment, and it seems to me that this is where the difference lies. We have had very large companies invite us to do greenwashing. They told us, "Look, we want to use your logo, and we want to do ten workshops for rural teachers". That is greenwashing. But some companies come to us and say: "we want to invest for thirty years, so many millions of dollars, in a transformational project that will achieve this and this and this in terms of environmental, carbon and community impacts". That's a partner. That's a strategic partner that we can work with, right?

If the mining company commits to rehabilitating and conserving a forest ten times larger than its quarry and supports community development for future employment opportunities, it could be a valuable partner. However, engaging in disputes delays solutions. Criticism of mechanisms like REDD+ has led to reduced funding for conservation NGOs, impacting frontline efforts and risking doing more harm than good.



The Conservation Coast: it is a flagship landscape conservation and restoration programme by FUNDAECO, created with the financing of Althelia Climate Fund for implementing REDD+. It also received financing from Livelihoods Fund for doing agroforestry, and received European oil & gas contributions to get consolidated, in addition to philanthropy. It's a flagship for all the carbon world profession. The author proudly participated in the co-designing and financing of different phases of this wonderful initiative.

Take for example the article from The Guardian who criticized REDD+. I met the journalist and I said to him "look, you may be right in a perfect world, in a vacuum world. But the fact is that what you're doing, the only consequence, is to starve of funding hundreds of conservation NGOs on the planet. And that's exactly what has happened. What The Guardian article achieved was to reduce funding for nature conservation in the tropics and, of course, they can feel very proud because they fought an ideological battle. But in practice, the results of this criticism of a mechanism that may not be perfect, but that is working, was to reduce funding to conservation NGOs.

“At this time, we need strong and transformational alliances, and we need to multiply resources a hundredfold to go faster, and we can only do that with the big players, of course, with the states and with the companies.”

JCGA: I bet you that the only ones who are winning are many consulting firms, to make many papers on offsetting rules. Paper pushers...

MVCB: The reality is that what you're saying is true, and it's something I may regret admitting. Unfortunately, the big multilateral environmental funds, which we once had high hopes for, bear a lot of responsibility. I've been involved in these forums and summits, and I've seen how these funds can become counterproductive. Negotiating projects worth millions involves getting national government approval... which often impedes progress, especially if the government is not aligned with environmental goals...

These processes can take years, with endless paperwork and consultations that delay actual implementation. Meanwhile, funds are often spent on workshops and consultants rather than reaching the grassroots level where they're needed most. The result is what I call "Trickle Down Conservation," where a small fraction of funds actually makes it to local people for on-the-ground work.

We need to rethink this approach and involve the private sector to accelerate and scale up conservation efforts and the deployment of conservation finance. The current system of multilateral funds often falls short of delivering a meaningful impact in the field.

We must challenge the status quo and explore alternative funding models that can drive faster and more effective conservation outcomes. Of course, I realize this may seem contradictory, as we also rely on these funds. However, it's crucial to have this conversation and find ways to better leverage public, philanthropic, and private funds to achieve our conservation goals more efficiently. There are bright people everywhere, you have information technology today that allows for exchange without travelling too much. You still need in person discussions and interactions, but I can tell you that expertise is right now on the ground, being Europe, being Peru or being Africa. You have immensely talented people that can act [to get] to the next stage.

JCGA: Marco, before we finish, could you share some words of wisdom for the young viewers, the future generation? And secondly, regarding Central America—how do you see its future, and what message do you have for your fellow Central Americans?

MVCB: Central America serves as a vital bridge between the Americas, fostering rich biodiversity with species from both the north and south converging here. This isthmus hosts diverse flora and fauna, including migratory birds, marine life, and human migrants. To fully realize its potential, Central America could benefit from greater attention and support from the bigger neighboring countries like Mexico, Colombia, Peru. Despite its smaller size compared to South American nations, Central America holds crucial ecological importance as a biodiversity bridge.

And Central America also has the potential to serve as a commercial gateway. With challenges like those faced by the Panama Canal due to factors like droughts, I foresee the emergence of additional inter-oceanic bridges in our region. Central America can establish a development model that prioritizes sustainability over environmental destruction. Instead of relying on exploitative practices, we can focus on productivity, technology, service provision, and becoming a hub for international logistics and tourism.

To finish, I want to share this: it seems to me that we have to call on all Central Americans and all human beings to expand our time horizons. I should know the history since my grandfather was born, because it is the history that defines me today and I should be concerned about the future until my grandson is going to die. I became a grandfather during the pandemic, and my grandson is one of my main sources of inspiration.

But my grandson, God, if he lives a healthy life, he's going to live eighty more years. In other words, he's going to die in two thousand one hundred. That is my planning horizon. Everything I do should be oriented towards my grandchild living on a beautiful planet, on a healthy planet, on a planet where he will be able to have all the ecological goods, all the environmental services that I had as a child. And that is why we all have to expand our horizons, to stop being so selfish and short-sighted and to think fundamentally about future generations, it's not abstract. It is that grandchild, my grandchild, who will be living, drinking water, breathing on a planet that we leave well preserved or that we can leave very destroyed for them.

So that's my call to everyone.

-End of the interview-

This interview was done online by Juan Carlos Gonzalez Aybar on March 3rd 2024, between Lima, Peru and Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala.

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