

Connecting: the Aspiring Imbabura Geopark, Ecuador

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The Provincial Government of Imbabura together with other State bodies is backing the bid for a Geopark in the region of Imbabura, Ecuador. Ecuador covers an area roughly equivalent to the State of Arizona and is the smallest of the Earth's mega-diverse countries, occupying only 0.19% of the world's surface area. The region is named after the Imbabura volcano, an inactive stratovolcano in North Ecuador that is not considered extinct, although it has not erupted in 14,000 years. Taita Imbabura (Father Imbabura) is considered to be the sacred protector of the region which is rich in geological features such as the Mojando volcano and inter-caldera, (according to myth, Imbabura's rival for the favours of the nearby Cotacachi volcano, the only female volcano in the region according to the Andean cosmovision), the thermal springs at Yanayacu, Nangulvi and Chachimbiro, the Valle del Chota (home to Ecuadorian football prodigies and part of the Afro-descendent population) and the Lakes and Lagoons of Yaguarcocha, San Pablo, Cuicocha and the waterfalls at Peguche. Imbabura as a region is home to the Otavalo, Natabuela, Zuleta, Cayambe, Caranqui and Awa people, together with the significant Afro-descendent population in the Valle del Chota, with the language of Quichua the only survivor of the original existing native languages. It is an area of cloud forests and outstanding orchid families, plus significant flora and fauna reserves, including the ecological park of Cotacachi/Cayapas. The area has received attention under the PPD projects of the UNDP. The reason for positing the proposal of a Geopark at this given time is that the Government has been investing heavily in the area and tourism will soon take off on an unprecedented scale, due to the fact that Yachay, the City of Knowledge is to be located in the region at Urucuquí, the former textile factory of Imbabura is to be reopened as a cultural centre housing four museums, an auditorium and capacity for 1,500 people in conference installations (imminent, in March 2014) at Atuntaqui, and the railway line between Otavalo and Ibarra will be re-opened in May 2014. The Geopark is, thus, an attempt to ensure that quality of life will be enriched for the native populations through Responsible Tourism (turismo consciente under the overarching framework of Buen Vivir, Good Living, as defined by the Ecuadorian government) within the Nature Tourism positioning of the Ministry of Tourism for Ecuador. The Imbabura Government and the Town Councils have been working hard to bolster community tourism ventures that would receive added credibility if accepted into the GGN. The Geopark is original in that it places the restored Industrial Heritage, the textile factory, run on hydroelectricity, and the railway line (originally serving the factory with the raw goods) at the heart of the management plan for the preservation of socio-cultural and natural identity. It is hoped that other partners in the RECINATUR network, Colombia (trans-national Carchi/Pasto), Chile (Corral on the coastline and the Lake region around Valdivia) and Mexico (The Huasteca Potosina region) will accompany us with parallel or later bids, allowing us to bring an already existing network hopefully into the GGN and to be more effective/efficient in our financial resource and management plan development.

Presented in Theme 4