

# Edmonton family saving part of Amazon rainforest

## Colombian reforestation project attracts investors

BY DAVE COOPER, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM JANUARY 31, 2011 7:36 AM



Dexter Dombro with an injured capybara.

**Photograph by:** Supplied, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON — When former Edmonton lawyer Dexter Dombro purchased 2,891 hectares of wasteland on the Eastern edge of Colombia in the Amazon region, he was confident it wouldn't be fallow for long.

Three years later, he has planted hundreds of thousands of fast-growing acacia and eucalyptus trees on the vast property, with the potential to plant more than seven million over the next few years.

And along the waterfront, he has created a natural reserve to protect rare trees and wildlife.

"This area was all tropical forest years ago, but slash-and-burn agriculture by natives and then corn farming and cattle ranching have left the land with nothing," Dombro said in an interview from Colombia. "The only grass that grows here is like cardboard, and is useless for anything."

Tropical forests are largely on poor soil, and the trees get much of their nutrition from rain, sunlight and plants. When the trees are cut down, the bare land can support little.

With the support of about 500 contributors — largely from Edmonton — who have poured in individual amounts of \$10 to \$100,000, Dombro is creating [a sustainable enterprise](#) that will actually pay a handsome return while restoring desolate land to productive forest and providing wildlife habitat.

A \$100 contribution is enough to plant and maintain 10 trees for 10 years, at which time they are selectively logged and should earn \$340 for the contributor.

“It’s a good return on the investment, and the hardwood market is very solid. Plus it means the wood isn’t coming from the tropical rainforest, and the fast-growing trees sequester carbon dioxide much faster than trees in Canada,” said Dilmun Dombro , Dexter’s son and a University of Alberta student who serves as the project’s operations director.

Kochurani Dombro , Dexter’s wife and a dentist who is the project’s marketing director, said the farm is 57 kilometres from the small Orinoco River port city of Puerto Carreno, on the border with Venezuela.

The Rio el Bitá river, a tributary of the Orinoco which is as large as the North Saskatchewan, runs through the property and is where the Dombros have established the 10-square kilometre Reserva Natural Le Pedregoza, home to rare turtles, three forests which flood each year for six months, and a gallery forest along the river bank.

The reserve is a treasure trove of flora and fauna, and U of A students plan to do research on the site.

“We have an arrangement with the U of A, and there is so little known about species in this region that it is a wonderful area for study,” said Kochurani, who plans to join her husband in Colombia soon.

One graduate student figures there are unknown species of spiders just in the reserve.

Dexter Dombro is full of praise for Colombia, a safe country but with a history of violence.

“That’s the 1980s, with the drug lords. It’s not like that anymore. In Bogota, a modern city of eight million, there are about 250 killings a year, so per capita it is safer than Edmonton,” he said.

“And the country is a marvellous place, so rich in nature. About eight per cent of Earth’s diversity is found within its borders. And most migratory birds touch down here,” he added.

In addition to the U of A partnership, the Amazonia Reforestation enterprise, which plants, grows and harvests tropical hardwood trees, as well as the Omacha Foundation are partners in the reserve.

Omacha’s director Fernando Trujillo said La Pedregoza adds to the protected corridor for endangered wildlife travelling to and from the El Tuparro National Park.

What really excites the Dombro family is that they are part of a global effort to protect and restore the “lungs of the planet, the tropical forests,” and doing it in a business-like manner offering investors a financial return.

It also provides local jobs and shows residents that protecting flora and fauna will fuel ecotourism. Supporters can spend a week in the region, exploring the reserve and “hugging their trees.”

“For us this is the start,” Dilmun said. “More valuable trees like mahogany will be planted once the soil improves and there is plenty of shade, so this farm is sustainable.

“And while we have 2,891 hectares, there is probably another 200,000 hectares in this region that could follow, because the landowners can’t do anything else with that land.”

Head to [www.myreforestation.com](http://www.myreforestation.com) for more information.

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Reserva Natural La Pedregoza during flood season.

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