

Investing in Education, Making Peace with Nature

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Speech delivered by President Oscar Arias at the IDB

The legendary explorer and oceanographer Jacques Cousteau used to describe a dream of his, or I should say, a nightmare. After exploring the world's oceans throughout his life, and witnessing their increasing degradation through human activity, he would dream that thousands of eyes of unborn children would look at him in despair, and ask: "How could you have been so irresponsible?"

This nightmare led him to promote a reform of the French Constitution, and the constitutions of other nations, to introduce the rights of future generations as basic human rights. We should never lose sight of Cousteau's basic conviction: that we have not only inherited our planet from our ancestors, we have borrowed it from our children and grandchildren.

Today, I would like to speak about what I feel are the twin keys to a sustainable future: environmental protection and strong education.

My friends, I have spent my career working to stop the wars fueled by guns and ammunition, wars against humanity. But even as these scourges continue, another kind of war has raged. The sad truth is, we are at war with the very planet itself. We are blasting CO2 at the atmosphere at an unprecedented rate. We are dynamiting our oceans, we are attacking the forests that clean our air. We are not dealing with abstract phenomena. We can see the glaciers melting and the ocean levels rising, the species dying and the storms intensifying, the trees in our forests disappearing and the air in our cities thickening, oil demand skyrocketing and supply struggling to keep pace.

In light of this war on nature, I was very happy to hear about your conference last week on sustainable energy and climate change. I would like to thank President Luis Alberto Moreno for his leadership on the issue, and thank the IDB for its commitment to support regional renewable energy investments.

Today I want to let you know that the government of Costa Rica is also doing its part to address these pressing issues. Just as fifty-eight years ago Costa Rica declared peace on the world, abolishing our polluting military, today we are proud to declare "Peace with Nature." I would like to mention three broad areas in which we are promoting Peace with Nature: energy, forestry, and education.

There is no doubt that creating a sustainable nation means creating a nation that runs on sustainable energy. I am proud to say that 98% of Costa Rica's electricity comes from renewable sources, largely hydroelectric power. We hope to increase the role of wind and geothermal energy sources. But unfortunately we have a strong addiction to gasoline for

transportation. If we do not break our addiction to fossil fuels, vast carbon emissions will continue to poison our atmosphere and heat the earth below it. And especially considering the recent oil price spikes and fears of peak production, there is no doubt that the old adage is true: an ounce of prevention is worth a gallon of crude.

Costa Rica is also dealing with the flip side of the world's carbon problem: deforestation. In the second half of the twentieth century our country experienced a period of rapid forest loss that peaked in the 1970s, when we were losing about 1% of our land area per year. When I came into office for the first time in 1986, Costa Rica had only one third of its land area left under dense forests.

We knew that could not continue. Since then, our country has devoted considerable effort to protecting, managing, restoring and re-planting our forests. We instituted loans, tax credits and direct grants to small landowners. Our forest cover experienced a remarkable turnaround, and today it exceeds 45% of Costa Rica.

We didn't stop there. Today Costa Rica is the only developing country to have adopted a carbon tax, partially funding the only national system of payment for environmental services, and becoming the largest buyer of forest carbon in the world.

We dearly hope that others follow this example, for both industrialized and developing nations must act if we are to pull the world away from its present path to destruction. Costa Rica has taken the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson to heart: "Do not go where the path may lead, instead go where there is no path and leave a trail."

But perhaps the most important part of declaring Peace with Nature is education. It is now accepted wisdom that the educational catastrophe of today is the economic catastrophe of tomorrow. But the same relationship holds true between education and the environment. If we fail to educate our young people about energy, biodiversity and climate change, they will not find out how important these things are until it is too late. In Latin America, one out of every three children never attends secondary school. This is not a good sign for the future of our environment.

Costa Rica has made education one of its highest priorities throughout its history. I hope you enjoyed the wonderful video we just saw about the efforts of the Omar Dengo Foundation, which was founded during my first administration to teach young Costa Ricans computer literacy. The same year the program got underway, 1988, our administration eliminated import taxes on computers. Our efforts paid off. Today Intel employs highly-skilled Costa Ricans in its five-hundred million dollar plant, producing exports of two billion dollars per year. You might have heard that Intel has begun supplying chips for the new iMacs and MacBook laptops. So now I will get to call Costa Rica an "Apple Republic."

To meet the next series of economic and environmental challenges, we must redouble our educational efforts. One of my government's first acts was to extend scholarships of up to \$150 per month to students from our nation's poorest families so they could stay in high school and off the streets. Our total investment in education this year will be up more than

\$272 million from last year, an increase of more than 25%. Over the next four years, we will spare no effort to increase our budget for education from six percent to eight percent of GDP. And finally, twenty years later, we hope to work with the Omar Dengo Foundation once more, so that by the end of my administration, every single young Costa Rican student has his or her very own computer.

Investing in education makes economic sense, political sense, moral sense. And it is one of the best things we can do for our environment. As we consider what environmental policies will best protect our future, and protect our children's future, we must remember this: The tree that best defends the woods is the tree that dies to become a book.

My friends,

As we have our discussion here today, and then long after we leave, we must continually heed the warning of Jacques Cousteau's dream. Whatever the stormy oceans we must travel, whatever the problems that make for choppy sailing, we can never forget the glances of the thousands of eyes of unborn children, begging us to be responsible. For their sake, and for our own, we must keep exploring, keep innovating, keep educating, and keep protecting our natural treasures, so future generations can be healthy and happy. That is, in the end, the only way the human race can keep its head above water.