

TRIUNFO RAVE REPORT, BY PATRICIO ROBLES GIL

“ I usually don't send e-mails, so sorry for the size of this one...”

I know that the decision for El Triunfo to be the first RAVE was not a consensus among the ILCP members. I will try to address all the different issues of this 12-day expedition, including the some of the early ideas of several years ago might help some of the ILCP members to implement or develop future RAVEs with other peers and institutions.

First of all, I would like to explain some factors that were decisive in the outline of the RAVE concept and that go back to the origins of Agrupacion Sierra Madre –the conservation organization that I founded in 1989. At that time, our work strategy was to support every year a different ecosystem of great biological and economical importance to Mexico through conservation campaigns. Stunning and powerful nature photography in Mexico was really scarce and the annual scheme of our campaigns forced us to have rushed rhythm. Being in charge of the organization, I wasn't able to spend in the field all the time that nature photography requires, so it came as a rather logical solution to send a team of photographers to cover a region during a few days, in order to obtain graphic material to develop the campaign.

“Why El Triunfo”

Some years ago, the cloud forest became the most threatened ecosystem in the planet. In America, these kinds of forests account some important endemic species and are well represented in two of the most diverse hotspot regions: the Mesoamerican –where El Triunfo is located—and the Tropical Andes, according to Conservation International (CI) strategy. El Triunfo in Mexico is one of the biggest remnants of this valuable ecosystem and its very charismatic flagship specie, the quetzal. I believe it was Roger Tory Peterson who once said that the resplendent quetzal is the most beautiful bird in America and the Maya and the Aztecs cultures worship it as a divinity and whoever killed one would have death penalty. Now the Mexican society barely knows that this bird exists. In some ways, this ignorance represents the big gap between human urbanized societies and nature. The society may not know that the cloud forest in El Triunfo is one of the main strongholds for this magnificent bird; and also that 40% of the hydroelectrical power in Mexico comes from a complex of four dams that are located at the foot of the Sierra Madre del Sur, where El Triunfo is located acting as a sponge and nourishing the rivers and streams that feed this dams, not to mention the agricultural lands that benefit from this ecosystems and the hundreds of millions of dollars of ecosystem services that are provided to the Mexicans by El Triunfo forests.

There are some environmental threats in El Triunfo that need to be taken into account. The first one is a road that is planned that will divide the reserve in two, with the ill-fated consequences that will follow. The second one is the risks of natural disasters that can be avoided if the forest is preserved. On the other hand, disasters like the one happened in 2005 after hurricane Stan –when the flood filled with sediments the hydroelectrical dams and washed away several roads and railways—can allow us to approach important agencies like the Electricity Federal Commission (CFE) or the Transportation and Communications Secretary of Mexico, that we can approach to demonstrate the importance of investing some money to preserve the forest and prevent this disasters instead of paying millions to restore the damages.

In 1985, Fulvio Eccardi –an Italian born photographer—did several photographic trips to El Triunfo, spending at one time five months in a row. His work as a conservation photographer pushed NGOs, governments and other agencies to declare El Triunfo as a biosphere reserve in 1990. In those trips, he got what for me is the most wonderful shot of a quetzal and inspired me in 1993 to launch one of our campaigns to support the conservation of this forest. Now I understand that it was in that moment when the first idea of the RAVE was born. The need of images of El Triunfo for that year's campaign was solved sending a team of four Mexican photographers. We spent ten days in El

Triunfo, but we were not very successful, as not a single good image of the quetzal or the horned guan—a very rare endemic of the area—was obtained. Therefore, through Agrupación Sierra Madre and Unidos para la Conservación we did booklets, exhibitions using Fulvio's pictures and inviting artist Robert Bateman to donate prints of a quetzal painting to support the Natural History Institute of Chiapas in his effort to protect these forests.

I have known Conservation International and Russ and Cristina Mittermeier since 1990, when Agrupación Sierra Madre and CI-Mexico shared offices in Mexico City. In 1991, we launched together a campaign to protect the Lacandon rainforest. Later, we worked together in some of the titles of the CEMEX collection. It was there where I learned about RAP team (Rapid Assessment Program) of CI. They would send a group of four or five scientists—a specialist in birds, reptiles, plants, etc—to remote ecosystems and in two weeks they would assess how important the area was in terms of biodiversity. That is how CI would define their strategies and steps to follow.

Something told me to promote the idea in CI of sending several photographers—a landscape, a macro and a wildlife specialist—with the team of scientists. There were not such great camera traps at that time. Then I met Jack Dykinga and talked about traveling together and document important places. At the same time, Cristina Mittermeier and I discussed of how to finance a group of photographers that would go in a team to document an area.

Jack and I put this idea into practice along USA and Mexico border with three books. The first was Gulf of California: A world apart which was not a very well orchestrated expedition. The second was The Great Tamaulipan Natural Province a very interesting PAF including five photographers but not a rapid experience, as we visited the region several times during a long period. However, the book and the images obtained in this trip were decisive in the establishment of the Sierra de Tamaulipas Biosphere Reserve. Finally, we did the El Carmen-Big Bend story which produced an article in National Geographic and the book The Call of the Mountains, but more important helped to launch the El Carmen-Big Bend Conservation Corridor Initiative and were a key factor in the first wilderness designation in Latin America in El Carmen, Mexico.

About a year ago I decided to go back to El Triunfo, because I missed the experience and a good photo of the quetzal. I called Jack because I remembered he wanted to go there. Then Fulvio Eccardi joined us, now as vicepresident of El Triunfo Conservation Fund, an organization that manages a trust fund partly financed by the Packard Foundation that implements and develops field conservation projects and works with the coffee communities in the area. Later, Tom Mangelsen invited me to Jackson Hole and when I talked him about this trip he also joined. In Germany, after some beers during the Lindau Conservation Photography Symposium, Florian Schulz told me that he wanted to do in Mexico—country of origin of his couple Emil Herrera—something like what he did for the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative so he could go back to Germany and give talks to raise funds. I invited him also, not only with the idea of a group of photographers going to a region, but thinking on the important things that they could do after the expedition to support the conservation of El Triunfo. At this time, all the photographers had accepted to work for free, while Agrupacion Sierra Madre and Unidos para la Conservacion—the other conservation NGO that I work for—would pay the remaining costs.

Cristina and I talked about this being the first ILCP expedition and discussed about how we should call the project. PAF or Photographic Assistance Programs for its abbreviation in Spanish was the first name I used in Mexico to describe this kind of expedition leaded by several photographers following CI's idea. Being in Spanish it would not work for the international public then she came out with the wonderful idea of RAVE (Rapid Assessment Visual Expedition). I looked for the word rave in a dictionary and besides the well known meaning of "wild party" it also means "to write or speak with wild enthusiasm". Later on, in the ILCP meeting in Palm Springs, Kevin Schafer—after having met with a CI's RAP team in one of his trips—did a great presentation with the same idea of following CI's RAP with a group of specialized photographers and that is how RAVE was conceptualized.

Cristina was very active on the promotion of this first RAVE and we both went together to the National Geographic Research and Expeditions Council and Conservation International communication department to find a financial sponsor for this expedition. NG was very excited and the following two weeks were a succession of e-mails and phone calls that went on until the day before the depart to Chiapas, on April 1st.

In Mexico, Reforestamos Mexico –a local but very influential NGO—was the first one to commit with \$5,000 USD and Maria José Cruz –a member of this organization—was invited to form part of the team as a writer.

However, more money was needed to cover the expenses of food, video cameras, flight tickets, etc... and Unidos para la Conservacion communication fund was putting all that money. The last day before we left, Fulvio managed to commit Chiapas State Government with the costs of the guides, mules, hotels and a three-hour flight over the reserve after the expedition to get some aerial photos. NG and CI got into the pool with USD \$17,000 and USD \$5,000 respectively, confirmed just before we left.

We did a press release before the expedition and the RAVE got a lot of coverage. Amy Gulick talked before the expedition with Nature's Best magazine to do an article. We also find out that Dan Rather show was interested once the NG is done with the materials. Even the NG magazine had a great interest on the RAVE. I really hope our material meets their standards. We were all very excited.

What happened in thirteen days at El Triunfo?

1- The selection of the time of the year to visit the reserve was decided on base to the nesting season of the quetzal and other birds. In this area it rains more 250 days of the year and sometimes up to 190 mm in only 30 minutes. There are some months that you cannot go up the mountains so we had to go in dry season. This means less cloud and fog, almost no blooming of orchids and bromeliads and very few opportunities to photograph insects and amphibians.

2- We where very lucky to find three active quetzal nests, two of them being very tame. We also found lots of horned guans, which is very surprising if we consider that twenty years ago Fulvio just got one picture. This fact was really good news, because it meant that the conservation measures taken when declaring El Triunfo as a biosphere reserve had worked. We also got several endemic birds and reptiles.

3- There are several interesting elements that make this first RAVE very attractive. The quetzal is one of them, of course. Also, there are quite a few charismatic endemics –like the horned guan— but it was the forest by itself that was special. Everybody was amazed by the size of the trees –the tallest in Mexico with some species being up to 70 meters—and the concert of sounds of birds which made you feel very at home. El Triunfo has also great biological and economical importance for its ecosystem services. The social relevance lies on the communities that live on the slopes and hillsides of the mountain and make a living of the shade grown coffee, working with Starbucks and Conservation International to protect habitat for migrating birds. El Triunfo is also a reflection of the global warming effects. In 2005 the region was hit by hurricane Stan that left not only big scars in the mountain that where documented by aerial photography, but the flood washed out some towns downstream.

4- The logistics were something to talk about. To carry up all the food and equipment for thirteen days we needed 16 mules that followed the 6 hours up-hill trail to get to the campground, 700 meters above the departure point. We did a fast evaluation and the equipment –including tripods and cameras—was worth USD \$500,000! We also brought laptop computers and a power plant along with three video cameras –that recorded a total of 30 hours of video—and cameramen Fabricio Feduchy and Jaime Rojo. The group consisted of a total of 15 people from five countries (Italy, Germany, United States, Spain and Mexico), including photographers, cameramen, computer

experts, writer, technicians and a doctor. As an anecdotic fact we missed Robert Bateman by a week, who was on a birdwatching trip with Victor Emanuel Tours

5- There was a general concern about such different individuals working together, each one having to deal with many different ego's and the pressure of the young generations. And actually, the selection of the photographers and their crew was done not only by each one skill but also by their nature.

There were some goals to be achieved and no plan by itself. As a leader, I followed the rhythm of the weather, the wildlife and of course, of each photographer's interest as some make very clear what they wanted. There was even a small expedition to the Pacific slope to a place located 800 m down to photograph some rare endemics like the Cabanis' tanager.

I was looking at everyday results in the computers to see if every good image was covering the idea of diversity.

- A wide number of subjects were covered, such as biodiversity, water, fog, ecosystem services, macro, environmental threats, forest mood, fires, land slides, the coffee plantations, people, panoramic landscapes, birdwatchers, etc...
- Jack Dykinga shoot about 200 images of big format landscape and ended with 35 good images
- Tom Mangelsen –who confess me that he loves blinds—concentrated on the quetzal spending 8-10 days in a blind set on one of the nests. He also brought a panoramic camera and photographed the wilderness of the area.
- Fulvio Eccardi spent some time in the quetzal blind to remember an old friend, but also got coverage of other birdlife and was assigned to flight over the reserve on a beautiful cloud cover day in which only the highest hills were visible above the fog.
- Florian Schulz went to the Pacific slope to photograph the Cabanis' Tanager. He also got great shots of the ferdelance snake and the horned guan, maybe the best ever. He spent two days with the quetzal, too and worked intensively with the camera traps.
- We set three cameras with a total of 500 hours. Florian's camera got a wonderful shot of a group of white collared javelinas. Tom's camera also got the javelinas and the tepezcuintle, a large neotropical mammal.
- We photographed a good sample of El Triunfo's diversity. A total of 52 species of birds – almost 18% of total—was covered, including 10 endemics from the cloud forest and 4 charismatic species. Five mammals' species were covered, mostly by the camera traps. Seven reptile species, one amphibian and some insects were also included.

I was concerned about the little things that were being missed in the day by day photography. Everybody wanted to be in one of the two quetzal nests, including myself. At the beginning I was worried not to keep going to the blinds if we had already covered well the quetzal, but something amazing happened and changed my vision. The bird captured our minds an imagination. Its presence was something unreal and we all agreed that this story was as much about the biodiversity, the forest and the coffee as it was about the quetzal. Then I knew that every single hour spent in those blinds was worthy.

Almost all the team got badly sick of the stomach at least one day. The disease didn't affect all of us at the same time, but after the first members of the group got the symptoms a general concern grew amongst the team. Only Fulvio and Patricia –the doctor of the expedition—were not affected.

The last day we went down to one of the communities which produce coffee. We had a meeting for three hours with fifteen heads of the families that depend on the coffee for their living. We talked and listened to their concerns. They are protecting the forest with a sustainable operation of coffee growing, but they don't make enough money to live from the land and the conservation easements

are very low. With such low incentives they were considering to cut down the forest to sell the wood and to plant more coffee, which is a great threat to El Triunfo.

We ended the expedition with a presentation of the RAVE and the photographers in Tuxtla Gutierrez zoological garden –headquarters of the Natural History Institute of Chiapas—in front of many nature lovers and the press, and surrounded by the dusk calls of wild chachalacas and howler monkeys that made their own statement.

Everybody agreed that the place and the experience had exceeded their expectations. El Triunfo has never had that kind of eyes on it, and now that kind of images that we hope will speak hundreds of thousands of words.

As a conclusion, we can say that it was a successful trip. The total expenses of the expedition were USD \$35,000 if we consider that neither the photographers nor the rest of the team received any payment for their work. This expedition was financed by different sources including the photographers, Agrupacion Sierra Madre, Unidos para la Conservación, Reforestamos México, National Geographic, Conservation International, and Chiapas State Government. Technical and logistic support came from organizations such as the National Commission for Protected Areas of Mexico, El Triunfo Conservation Fund, The Cougar Fund and Images of Nature. And of course, the ILCP and the WILD Foundation, that have not supported economically but in every other sense. All of them should be given credit when quoting El Triunfo RAVE.

However, we cannot forget that this is only the first step. Doing a trip and obtaining good images is what nature photographers do. But we have to go further and set the difference of what can we do with the images. National Geographic has the first choice to review all the material. Afterwards, we will launch together a press release. I chose this team not only because their diversity of skills but for their future commitment. I spoke with each one of them, including the support team and they will all commit in different ways on the fund raising tasks, on coming back and keeping the story alive. Some of the expected outputs of this trip include a short video, a book, a calendar and publication in several international magazines. Also four presentations are already being prepared in Mexico to raise funds for El Triunfo. Altogether these kinds of actions are for me what difference the conservation photographers.

I hope we can really make the difference and I hope that one day the dictionary will describe the word rave as “to speak, write and **photograph** with wild enthusiasm”. If the RAVE endures as an independent tool directed by the ILCP, the opportunities and flexibility of this initiative can grow with the time to a common tool among conservationist around the world. For that reason and for these experiences, I propose that the ILCP should keep the concept of future RAVEs open to any individual or organization that brings a proposal and a sponsor, and that requires our images, services and what is most important –our commitment—to achieve its conservation goals”