Update on activities in Santa María, Boyacá, Colombia

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(translation and layout Nick Bayly)

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Overview

Between March and August 2026, the project continued to make strong progress in Santa María, strengthening environmental education, ecological restoration, and nature-based tourism. The youth group "Hojarasqueros del Piedemonte Llanero", consisting of 30 individuals, were involved in around 25 activities, while 20 students at the Jacinto Vega school participated in migratory bird workshops and restoration activities, and the local nature-guide group completed 30 training sessions. A key achievement was the agreement with AES Colombia to restore habitat adjoining the important La Almenara forest fragment, with 200 native trees already planted to expand habitat for Cerulean Warblers. At the same time, work continued to develop the region's ecotourism value chain, including the Wire-tailed Manakin attraction at Finca La Florida, local products and gastronomy, and initiatives to strengthen Santa María's identity as a destination for birdwatching and nature tourism, such as the painting of two murals.

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Environmental Education and building capacity in the next generation

The formation of the youth group "Hojarasqueros del Piedemonte Llanero" continued between March and August 2026, leading to a cumulative total of around **25 outings/sessions** since August 2025, involving **30 youngsters**. Activities included participation in the Global Big Day in May 2026, during which the group visited one of the ecotourism experiences "Birds and Cacao" being developed under the project, which includes the development of a Wire-tailed Manakin lek as an attraction.

In Diana Catherine's own words, "These spaces seek to strengthen core values in young people, such as respect, care, and responsibility. They recognize these values as essential pillars to build a conscious and responsible relationship with their environment. This

approach promotes their training as guardians of their territory. They become capable of recognizing, valuing, and protecting the natural heritage around them."





Native flora workshops linked to the tree nursery







Seed and sapling collecting sessions





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Educational Institute Jacinto Vega

Further education activities were carried out with the main school in Santa Maria, following the signing of an agreement to carry out a series of workshops on migratory birds. The agreement also included the donation of two pairs of binoculars by SELVA. Between March and August, two workshops focused on migratory birds were completed with the participation of 20 students and were accompanied by a morning spent birdwatching. In addition, a series of educational activities related to the native tree nursery established by SELVA in the school were undertaken. These included an introduction to ecological restoration and its importance for birds, and outings to collect seeds and saplings for the nursery.









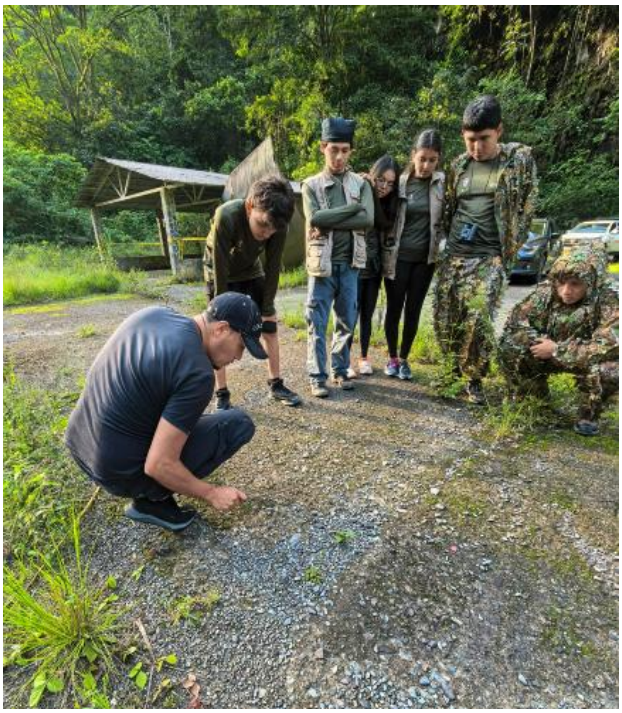
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Formation of guides for nature tourism

The formation of a group of **10 local guides** continued, with a cumulative total of **30 sessions** completed. Outings have focused on exploring the municipality of Santa María and developing excellent knowledge of the area´s trails and main ecotourism attractions, while simultaneously developing knowledge of the region´s biodiversity. The experience has strongly impacted the individuals taking part and has led at least three youngsters to seek opportunities to study biology or similar degrees.







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Book launch “Mountains and Rivers that fly”

In an event led by AES Colombia, the hydroelectric company based in Santa Maria, approximately 150 children participated in a book launch featuring the book’s authors and the musical group Jacana Jacana. The Hojarasqueros group supported the event, leading a series of educational activities.









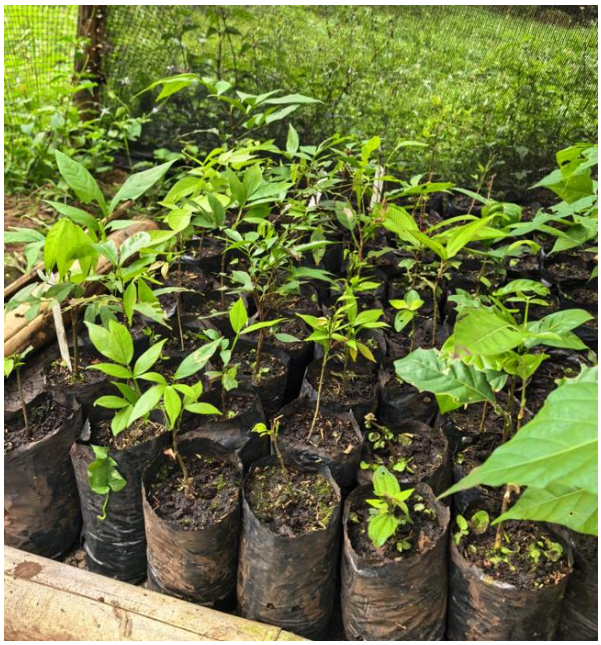


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Ecological Restoration

Work continued in the native tree nursery established in the Jacinto Vega school and while 800 plants were successfully propagated, an attack by leaf-cutter ants decimated the saplings and only around 250 saplings were subsequently available for planting. Discussions with AES Colombia, led to an agreement being signed to restore part of one of the properties, recently purchased by the company as part of their compensation program. This area adjoins the most important forest fragment in the municipality for Cerulean Warblers, La Almenara, and is ideal for expanding habitat for the species. The restoration plot is within

an old cattle pasture and during July 2026 the plot was prepared and 200 trees were planted. This work will continue throughout the rest of 2026 and into 2027.




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Development of the ecotourism value chain

Work to promote and support startups and local products continued, especially through participation in local fairs. Activities also focused on strengthening the gastronomy of the region and developing a Wire-tailed Manakin lek at Finca La Florida as a tourist attraction.











Finca La Florida – As part of the process to develop a Wire-tailed Manakin lek as a tourist attraction, alongside the cocoa produced on the Florida farm, a logo was developed representing the two attractions. To further promote the farm and the experiences, Catherine and the farm took part in an event called Vuelos Valletenzos aimed at strengthening birdwatching in the wider region. This event, organized by regional institutions and attended by birdwatchers and the local police was a great chance to promote this developing initiative.

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Developing the image of Santa María as a nature tourism destination

To promote Santa Maria as a destination for ecotourism and change perceptions in the local community, two murals were designed and painted in the village. The first of these looks to promote the relationship between trees, farming practices and local and migratory birds. The second is focused more on ecotourism and the linking of the local youth to the natural environment that surrounds them.



Impact of the project in Santa Maria

In the words of Diana Catherine, *"through this environmental education process, our children and youth have deepened their knowledge of, appreciation for, and sense of belonging to the territory where they live. They have had the opportunity to discover the natural, cultural, and environmental richness of their municipality, gaining a particular understanding of its importance as habitat and corridor for various bird species. This process has also made it possible to identify and nurture young people with the potential to become future local guides, fostering their skills, passion, and leadership. Similarly, the growing interest among other children and young people in joining the group shows that a genuine transformation is taking place in the way new generations relate to their environment. Some participants are already beginning to envision their professional futures in fields such as biology and conservation, demonstrating that environmental education can serve as a catalyst for personal and professional development. Thus, rather than simply imparting knowledge, we are shaping young people who are socially conscious, proud of their region, and committed to its conservation—young people capable of becoming agents of change and key players in building a municipality that recognizes, protects, and celebrates its natural and cultural heritage."*

