

Interview with Sara Inés Lara of Women for Conservation

Sara Inés Lara has been Executive Director of Fundación ProAves since 2003, and has led the establishment and management of 17 nature reserves in Colombia. In 2004, Sara started the initiative Women for Conservation (<https://womenforconservation.org/>), which aims to empower women in rural communities. It provides conservation education, environmentally sustainable economic opportunities and access to health clinics and family planning. Sara was featured in the book *100 Grandes Mujeres Latinoamericanas* (100 Great Latin American Women) which was released as part of the centenary celebrations of the world's longest running children's magazine – Billiken.

The questions were posed by Editor-in-Chief, Patrick Curry, on behalf of the journal's editorial team.

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Q — Can you please briefly describe the work of Women for Conservation? What are its chief activities? And what primary values is it based on or does it grow out of?

A — Women for Conservation promotes holistic solutions to socio-economic environmental issues by empowering women in environmentally sustainable ways. By providing access to family planning education, conservation training and sustainable livelihoods, we support conservation efforts in rural communities on the buffer zones of nature reserves.

All of our initiatives are organized in partnership with the communities where we work, and focus on positively benefiting the community while promoting conservation. Our family planning program provides women with educational workshops, reproductive health sessions and voluntary access to contraception materials; all of which promote community health while also reducing stress on natural resources. Our conservation training provides opportunities for women to pursue environmental careers, ecotourism income and engage school children in environmental education. Our sustainable livelihoods initiative supports and trains women to open environmentally-friendly microbusinesses, so they have pathways to financial independence while invested in nature conservation.

Women for Conservation grew out of the recognition of the inherent value of biodiversity, and is committed to ensuring its survival by empowering women

worldwide. We recognize that respecting and supporting women is essential to conservation work. We support an inclusive approach that embraces women of all races and backgrounds, including rural, indigenous, LGBTQ+, marginalized and minority communities.

Q — How do the different aspects of that work, such as wildlife conservation and women’s welfare, relate to each other? What is the connection, as you see it, between the well-being of the Earth and the well-being of women in particular? And do you think that women have a particular affinity with the earth?

A — Women’s welfare and environmental conservation are inseparable issues in the rural communities where we work. In rural communities, women are in charge of providing the basic needs of their families, including collecting firewood, gathering/growing food and fetching water – all of which are increasingly difficult in places where human populations put strain on the natural environment. The UN reports that women are disproportionately harmed by environmental catastrophes, and that the overwhelming majority of climate refugees are women and girls. While rural women especially face the worst impacts of environmental degradation, their empowerment can result in positive environmental outcomes.

Especially when it comes to indigenous women and people, there are centuries of examples of how their well-being and survival is directly related to how the Earth is treated. For both indigenous people and rural women, survival can depend on getting resources from the natural environment, which is why they have a unique connection to protecting the Earth. As mothers, women are particularly invested in ensuring the long-term wellbeing of their children. In order to leave drinkable water, breathable air and an Earth that is inhabitable for future generations, we must all invest in a future focused on living harmoniously with nature, rather than a future which consumes and destroys it.

It is because women especially want to leave a livable planet for their children that they are the largest untapped resource for sustainable futures. When women are empowered to have control over their bodies, they often choose to have less children who are then better nourished, better educated, have more opportunities and also put less strain on the natural environment. When women are offered environmental careers such as forest guards, bird guides, artisans and ecotourism hosts, they are passionate about doing work that will economically benefit their children, families and communities while also protecting the invaluable natural resources that can sustainably provide for their descendants to come. Women in particular have a direct role in the education of future generations, which amplifies the impact of providing them with environmental education and training.

Q — There is a lot of talk about the supposed ‘tension’ between nature conservation and human well-being. It doesn’t seem that Women for Conservation agrees with that framing (and nor do we at *The Ecological*

Citizen). If that's right, can you explain how you see these two issues – as being related, or independent, or linked in some way?

A – Women for Conservation understands that complex, socio-economic environmental issues require multi-faceted solutions. That is why we focus on a holistic approach, focusing on interconnected ways human populations and the Earth can mutually benefit.

We have learned from decades of experience that buying up wilderness and establishing protected reserves is only the first step when it comes to biodiversity conservation. Land protection does not succeed if the communities around don't have economic opportunities other than natural resource extraction. By partnering with women's groups in rural communities, we are able to provide them with the resources they tell us they need most, ensuring maximum impact. By providing education and resources related to family planning, environmental career training and conservation education, we are able to promote sustainable practices and an environmentally dependent economy.

Q – Women for Conservation is based in Colombia. Have you found that what you are doing is relevant elsewhere, or are there cultural differences which get in the way so to speak?

A – Globally, women and girls are the largest untapped resource for environmental change. Women's empowerment benefits humanity in so many ways, bettering outcomes for sustainability, nutrition, education and the alleviation of poverty. Women are capable of making incredibly valuable contributions, but as long as they cannot access basic human rights such as education and family planning resources, their potential will be stifled.

We dream of a world where women are given power over their reproductive futures, and where communities see their holistic wellbeing as dependent on the protection of biodiverse ecosystems. To spread this message on a global level, we have recently begun branching out internationally, partnering with Birds Nepal on our first international project. In rural Nepal, we have launched a three-pronged conservation initiative that includes family planning education, environmental programming in schools and a low-impact ecotourism homestay program. We strive to provide empowering resources to as many women as possible, as well as promote women's empowerment as essential to conservation work.

One cultural taboo which is still especially problematic worldwide is the stigmatization around family planning and birth control. When we began our family planning initiative 15 years ago, the topic was so stigmatized that women would sometimes suffer violence just for wanting to learn about their reproductive health options. Preventing women from accessing family planning and birth control results in unwanted pregnancy, negative health outcomes, higher infant mortality rates, increased poverty and unnecessary stresses on natural resources. We have seen teenagers and girls as young as 12 who become pregnant and must drop out of school, disrupting their education and the future education of their children. Women are suffering so much

because of this stigma, and this hardship will continue until we can recognize the universal societal benefits reproductive education can provide. That is why we are dedicated to destigmatizing family planning through our work in the field, as well as using our platforms to educate the public on the harms of this taboo.