

**REGION**



Pic. 1: The National Park Henri Pittier

**FACTS**

<b>Surface:</b>	107 800 hectar
<b>Life Expectancy:</b>	women: 77, men: 71
<b>Language:</b>	spanish
<b>Religion:</b>	catholic

**INTRODUCTION**

During our research we noticed that the region of the National Park Henri Pittier has been a relatively isolated and undeveloped area because of the rough mountains. Even today there are only some settlements and the park is mostly an attraction for eco-tourists and bird specialists – apart from beaches like Puerto Colombia.

The rich fauna is well examined in the park, but there are less information about the history and population. So our sources are based on our own experience, contact to people knowing the area as the organisation of the *Caracas Urban Think Tank* or hompages of organisations working in the park like *Tierra Viva* and *Hombre y Cacao*.

**HISTORY**

In 1937 the National Park „Rancho Grande“ was founded in an area of 107 800 hectares at the coastal cordillera thanks to the initiative of Henri Pittier. The park is located in the Central Part of the Coastal Range, between the States of Aragua and Carabobo. After death of the Swiss scientist in 1950 the park was renamed to “National Park Henri Pittier”. It is the oldest national park in Venezuela which motivated the government to create others in order to protect important catchments areas, preserve autochthonous fauna and flora and create locations for education, research and recreation.

Due to the steep mountain range the access to some regions in the park is limited or impossible, so settlements developed mostly near the coast – the important ones until today are Chuao and Choroni.

There are conjectures that the two villages have been populated by indigenous groups before the colonial era in the 17th century. They are known to be one of the oldest villages in Venezuela.

A document by Alonso de Ojeda claims that Chuao was founded in the 16th century. In 1568 Indians probably discovered the cacao in this region - only accessible from the sea.

Choroni was established by the Spanish conquerors in the year of 1616. But it is supposed that indigenous groups have lived here before, too. The Spanish, attracted by the cacao, took over the cultivation, set up large plantations in the inner parts, constructed haciendas as their residential buildings and imported labour force from Africa.

The cacao from Choroni and Chuao became one of the best in the world – still today.

In 1813 the villages - one of the most oppressed regions in Venezuela - were liberated by the Bolivar troops. Intimidated by the colonial power some inhabitants sought refuge in Haiti. Slavery was abolished in 1853.

Nowadays the park is famous for its observation station for birds in Rancho Grande. Especially eco-tourists are attracted who spend the rest of their holidays on the beaches like Puerto Colombia, the coastal community of Choroni or make a boat trip to Chuao.

The real mountainous district is still marked by several scattered haciendas, some with plantations and illegal housings for worker families.

**TOPOGRAPHY**

The park covers an area of the Cordillera de la Costa, the coastal mountain range – considered as the northern continuation



Pic. 2: A typical hacienda

Pic. 3: On the way to the plantations

of the great Andean system.

The topography is marked by extreme differences. In some areas the cordillera exceeds 2000m, then plunges down to the Caribbean coast in the north. The main part is situated above 1000m. With 2436m the highest peak is the Pico El Cenizo in the east of the park.

The northern part of the park is limited by the Caribbean coast, the southern end is marked by the city Maracay, the park’s gate where the two main roads to Choroni / Puerto Colombia and Cuyagua / Turiamo cross each other. In north-south direction there are several rivers like the Rio Choroni or Rio del Medio which flow into the sea.

**CLIMATE**

The national park lies in the tropical zone of South America, north of the equator. Dry seasons in winter and a constant high average temperature are characteristics of the tropical savannah climate.

Nevertheless the extreme relief generates contrasting weather conditions: The temperature is around 6 °C at the high altitudes and 30 °C on the beaches.

The rainfall varies from 692mm at the coast, to 1880mm at the western mountain pass El Portachuelo and to 4000mm in the highest zones. The rainy season is from April to November.

**VEGETATION**

The park consists of one of the richest biodiversities in Venezuela.

This mountainous region has a staircase of different zones: In the coastal low regions the vegetation is composed of mangroves, coconut palms and thorny bushes, then savannas cover the slopes from 300 – 700 meters – as a result of human occupation. Over 600 meters a dense, seasonal, dry forest begins which transforms in a permanent green forest over 800 meters. The cloud forest appears between 1300 and 2200 meters with trees of 30 – 40 meters height, green carpets of arums, ferns

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and *Gunnera pittierana*, an endemic grass.

The park contains of 14 major types of eco-systems including large tracts of tropical, deciduous forests, freshwater and salt-water marches, mangrove forests and other marine habitats, each supporting their own suite of nearly 600 habitat species. Lots of them are still intact.

According to geological investigations some rocks and stones are between 60 and 80 million years old. During the glacial periods some species vanished in other parts of Venezuela but due to the special climate and the permanent humidity they could survive in the mountains.

On the park boundary the towns of La Victoria, Maracay, El Limón and Valencia develop to fast growing industrial and agricultural regions.

Each year lots of areas of tropical deciduous forests are burned by fires intentionally and accidentally. The result is an increase of grassland slowly encroaching on the park and the decrease of rain forest – the destruction of these intact ecosystems provokes erosions and disturbances of the water balance.

## FAUNA

The park is especially famous for its various birds. More than 580 species have been identified – that represents 43% of the bird species found in Venezuela and 7% of all the birds known in the world.



Pic. 4: Cacao

Pic. 5: One of the 580 bird species

The largest mammal living in the forest is the tapir. There are also panthers, ocelots as well as several monkeys and numerous reptiles like the venomous snake, the tiger mariposa, the coral snake and the rattlesnake and several non-venomous ones like the boa constrictor.

### Images:

Pic.-Nr.01: Wikipedia, [www2.demis.nl/mapserver/mapper.asp](http://www2.demis.nl/mapserver/mapper.asp);

Pic.-Nr.02-05: Caracas Urban Think Tank

## ETHNICAL GROUPS

You cannot find much information about the park's historical population. There are just conjectures that a few indigenous groups have lived in this rough area with limited access from the land before the colonial era.

Probably the name Choroni was transferred from an indigenous group called "Churoni".

Chuafo was already mentioned in the context of cacao before the colonisation.

The Spanish conquerors were accompanied by the Africans:

The owners of the extensive plantations imported workers from Africa. Slaves had no rights to possess land so they were forced to settle illegally in the near distance of their places of work. Until today lots of worker families live illegally near the plantations and the vast majority of haciendas has mostly stayed in possession of European families.

Nowadays a mix of the original indigenous groups, Africans and Europeans lives in the villages. They work on tourism, cacao cultivation and fishing. Especially in the last five years the population of the region around Choroni has grown very fast. Just Chuafo is still called the "black enclave" since the sea is still the only way to enter the village.

African traditions like the dance Diablos Danzantes remind about the horror of slavery. Due to the isolated site such customs and other celebrations could be kept. In March 2002 the Unesco included the hacienda of Chuafo in their list of cultural world heritage.

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