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THE WORLD

INDEPENDENCE FOR SCOTLAND?: Heading to Scotland for talks on an independence referendum, British Prime Minister David Cameron said today he would fight "head, heart and soul" to prevent the breakup of the United Kingdom.

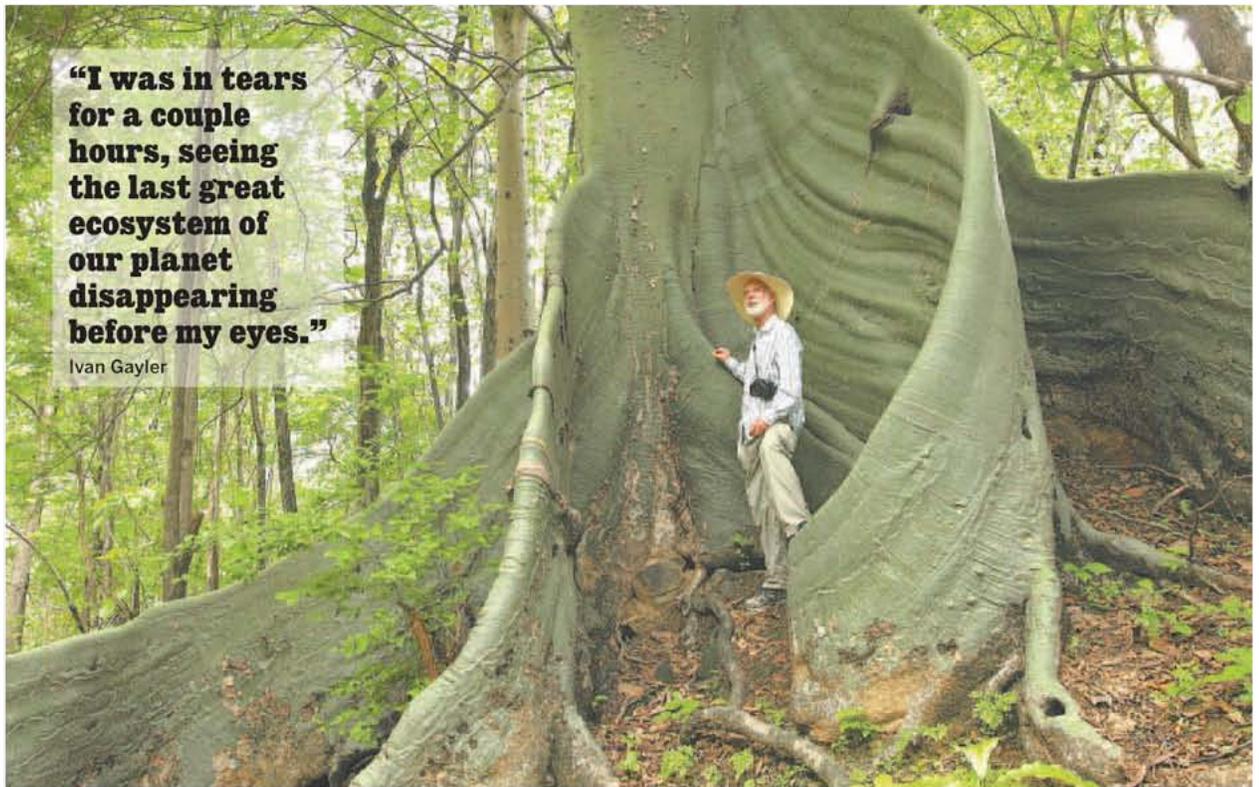
THE NATION

CUBAN-BORN JUDGE CONFIRMED: The first Cuban-born judge to serve on the Atlanta-based U.S. appellate court was confirmed Wednesday by an overwhelming margin. The U.S. Senate confirmed Judge Adalberto Jose Jordan by a 94-5 vote.

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Local conservationist acts globally



"I was in tears for a couple hours, seeing the last great ecosystem of our planet disappearing before my eyes."

Ivan Gayler

Ivan Gayler, founder of Nature and Culture International, pauses against the massive trunk of a ceiba tree near the border of Ecuador and Peru

His small Del Mar-based group has helped to preserve millions of acres of rain forest

Mike Lee • UT

Developer Ivan Gayler had an epiphany about 20 years ago as he flew over South America and peered down at the Amazon rain forest: The whole thing seemed to be a lattice of logging roads and land-clearing fires.

"I was in tears for a

couple hours, seeing the last great ecosystem of our planet disappearing before my eyes," Gayler said.

Unlike many would-be visionaries, Gayler turned his despair into an enduring enterprise to curb habitat destruction in Latin America. Since 1997, his Del Mar-based Nature and Culture

International has helped conserve 8.7 million acres of threatened habitats and it's ramping up operations in the United States to make sure Gayler's vision endures as Parkinson's disease forces him to scale back his efforts.

"I can't think of any other organization of their size and scope that has achieved something like that," said Allison Alberts, chief conservation and research officer for San

Diego Zoo Global. "I just respect so deeply someone who ... says 'I am going to make this happen,' and then has the passion and perseverance to make it happen."

Nature and Culture International operates with a tiny footprint in San Diego County, working from the offices of Gayler's development firm, Del Mar Partnership. It had just two U.S.-based employees until it added three during



a strategic growth spurt in the past year because Gayler preferred to spend nearly all the group's money at the ground level.

"This organization hasn't been very visible, and that is one of our challenges," said John Evey, a former development officer for the J. Craig Venter Institute and Scripps Institution of Oceanography who was brought in about 10 months ago to help finance Gayler's goal of saving 25 million more acres by the end of the decade.

Despite its modest annual budget of about \$2.5 million, Nature and Culture International has caught the attention of some big names in conservation science, from famed Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson to Chicago's Field Museum. It also has attracted noted philanthropists such as the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation to help fund the mission.

"My work has been to find peers and colleagues so that my role is no longer necessary," Gayler said. "I think I am there. This organization stands on its own."

It formalized a partnership with the San Diego Zoo in January for joint fundraising efforts and work on projects in Columbia, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru. The arrangement pairs the zoo's expertise in conservation science with Nature and Culture International's connections

in South America. In early February, the two groups announced the creation of a 970,000-acre reserve in Peru designed to protect the homeland of the indigenous Maijuna people while preserving the rain forest.

Habitat in the Amazon is particularly important. Not only is it home to an extraordinary array of plants and animals, but the trees act like lungs for the planet by removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and releasing oxygen. In recent decades, the forest has shriveled under pressure from logging and farming.

"The loggers go in with a shotgun and chain saw," said Charles Smith, a local entrepreneur and a board member for Nature and Culture International. "It's wickedly devastating."

Deep concern about deforestation dawned on Gayler after he and his business partner David Winkler sold the upscale Del Mar Plaza in 1989 for \$36.1 million. "I essentially went on a walkabout after I finished the plaza ... to look at my life and my skills and what was happening in our era in terms of the defining issue," he said. "I determined the issue of our time is biodiversity loss and climate change."

As he talked with conservationists in South America, his vision focused on protecting large swathes of land. Of particular interest are

spots where parcels run from coastal lowlands to the mountains so animals can migrate up slope as the climate warms. "We are creating these arks of life for the future," Gayler said.

While Gayler pursued environmental goals, he kept his hand in business. The 33-year-old Del Mar Partnership has built or operated more than one million square feet of retail, medical, bioscience, offices and industrial properties. The partnership also played a pivotal role in bringing Idec Pharmaceuticals -- later acquired by Biogen -- to San Diego in the early 1990s.

Abroad, Nature and Culture International built the San Francisco Scientific Station on the northern edge of Podocarpus National Park in Ecuador, where the German Research Foundation and its partners run what's described as the largest tropical mountain ecology research program in the world.

The science involves locals as part of the education component of Gayler's vision. "We have now educated dozens of Ph.D.s and hundreds of master's students," he said. "They are the human infrastructure of conservation."

Nature and Culture International also purchases environmentally sensitive parcels and works with governments to restrict development across large tracts of forest. At

the same time, it helps indigenous people develop sustainable industries such as the sale of plant-based oils for cosmetics and making baskets from local palms.

Work in Latin America is made easier by the cost of land -- which can be put in conservation status for as little as \$1 per acre -- but it is complicated by ownership patterns that can take years to navigate even when Gayler's crews have won the trust of nationals.

Gayler attributes much of his success to his strategy of working from the highest political levels down to native villagers. "What makes it different is that we never say, 'This is what you should do.' Our approach is to say, 'How can we help you?'" said Gayler.

He has funded a substantial amount of conservation himself, but avoids discussion of the details. In 2010, his work earned the zoo's Conservation Medal, an honor shared with luminaries such as Jane Goodall and David Attenborough.

Perhaps more importantly, his enthusiasm has proved infectious to people such as Smith, who recently got a bid for redoing the patio at his home for about \$100,000.

"I can't do it," Smith said this week. "Do you know much I could get done in South America with \$100,000?"