



The Ancient Ridged Fields of the San Jorge River Floodplain

Colombia

The Ancient Ridged Fields of the San Jorge River Floodplain, located in the La Mojana region of northern Colombia, is a unique vestige of a pre-Columbian water management and irrigation system that has been abandoned for centuries. Beginning in the sixth century, the Zenú culture that inhabited the inland delta of the Magdalena, Cauca, and San Jorge rivers created channels perpendicular to the rivers to help manage the overflow of water. When flooded, the channels would direct the overflow to a bog, retaining the nutrient-rich sediment that was later used to sustain the crops during drought season. During construction, the soil that was removed to create the ridges was used to create mounds where the inhabitants built their dwellings.

The irrigation system was maintained by the Zenú, followed by the Malibu culture through the tenth century. Aerial photographs of the floodplain still show the remains of this long-forgotten water management system. Today, developments in the area resulted in the construction of retaining walls and dams that have exacerbated the floods in other parts of the site. Left without maintenance for centuries, the 5,600-square-kilometer ridged landscape is in danger of disappearing due to increased flooding and the accumulation of soil in the channels. Inclusion of the Ancient Ridged Fields of the San Jorge River Floodplain on the Watch will help raise awareness of this unique cultural landscape and the social, technical, and economic potential that it has if protected and developed in a sustainable manner. There is an opportunity to resurrect a lost building method and water management system that would ensure the long-term sustainability of the landscape and benefit the local community.