

CHAPTER 1

Introduction



Despite decades of encroachment and degradation, the greater Amazon is still the world's largest tropical forest, containing over 6 million square kilometers of forest habitat (©Haroldo Castro/CI).

The Amazon Wilderness Area is the world's largest intact tropical forest. It is situated between the Tropical Andes Biodiversity Hotspot and the Cerrado Biodiversity Hotspot, two regions that are themselves characterized by an extraordinarily large number of species found nowhere else on the planet (Mittermeier *et al.* 1998, 2003). Although these three regions are linked by climates, ecosystems, river basins, and shared cultural experiences, the eight nations that share the Amazon have not succeeded in integrating their national economies. The Initiative for the Integration of the Regional Infrastructure of South American (IIRSA) was conceived to create a continental economy, forging links between all of the countries in South America. IIRSA is a visionary initiative and aspires to a level of integration that has long been an historical goal of all of the founding fathers of the continent's democracies. Its ultimate goal is to form a South American identity in which citizens see themselves as part of a single community with a common future. Although previous efforts to-