



Costa Rica: Cartels' Coca Plantation Experiment Confirmed

OE Watch Commentary: Are certain climates or locations better than others to grow coca plants? Perhaps, but certain key factors needed to grow coca plants can be mimicked to make an area previously deemed as unfavorable more favorable. In July 2018, authorities had discovered the first ever coca plantation in Costa Rica, which represented a completely new and possibly experimental method being employed by drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). As the accompanying passage from Costa Rican news source *La Nacion* discusses, this was some kind of experiment, specifically an “attempt by DTOs to develop biologic studies aimed at making cocaine plants more resistant to climate variations.” In June 2019, according to the accompanying article, “a laboratory analysis carried out by forensic scientists has confirmed that the plantation located last year was coca leaf or *Erythroxylum coca*.” The article points out that the July 2018 discovery was “the first and only discovery of those shrubs in Costa Rica.”



Coca plantation on a hillside near Caranavi, western Bolivia.
Source: International Center for Tropical Agriculture via Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caranavi_field5_lo_\(4387016012\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caranavi_field5_lo_(4387016012).jpg), CC by SA 2.0

Traditional cocaine production countries are located in the Andean ridge of Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. This is because cocaine plants require hot, damp, and humid climates as well as iron-rich clay soil to thrive; all of which are present in rainforest environments unique to the Andean jungle. However, similar environments are available in select areas of Costa Rica.

The coca plantation discovered in July 2018 was in the Perez Zeledon region of Costa Rica. Michael Soto, Costa Rica’s Minister of Security suggests that this plantation may have been experimental to see if the plants would grow. Guillermo Araya, Director of the Costa Rican Drug Institute (ICD), asserts that the initial attempts by DTOs to grow cocaine plants on Costa Rican soil were not successful and that “after evaluating the results, it appears that the producers did not obtain the objectives they had hoped for.” However, he points out that traffickers will always evolve and find new ways to achieve their objectives, which include “reducing shipping costs to the US by bringing production closer to the border and to increase harvest periods from the traditional two that occur in South America to multiple [periods].” **End OE Watch Commentary (Fiegel)**

“Growing coca plants in Costa Rica represents an attempt by DTOs to develop biologic studies aimed at making cocaine plants more resistant to climate variations.”

Source: “Grupos narcos ensayaron siembra de coca en montañas de Pelez Zeledon (Narco groups tested coca planting in Perez Zeledon mountains),” *La Nacion*, 16 June 2019. <https://www.nacion.com/sucesos/narcotrafico/grupos-narcos-ensayaron-siembra-de-coca-en/BW4MEAELOBC77E45DZCA7B2K5I/story/>

*A laboratory analysis carried out by the forensic scientists of the OIJ confirmed it: a plantation located last year in a mountainous terrain of the Daniel Flores district in Pérez Zeledón was coca leaf or *Erythroxylum coca*....*

That seizure, made on July 20, 2018, was the first and only discovery of those shrubs in Costa Rica, since the traditional zone is the countries of South America such as Bolivia, Colombia, Peru and Ecuador.

“I believe that these coca plants were grown as some type of test. After evaluating the results, it appears that the producers did not obtain the objectives they had hoped for,” according to Michael Soto, Costa Rica’s Minister of Security. For Soto, growing coca plants in Costa Rica represents an attempt by DTOs to develop biologic studies aimed at making cocaine plants more resistant to climate variations. He also asserts that it is an attempt for DTOs to harvest coca plantations more than two times a year.

According to Soto, these groups are looking for specific environmental conditions necessary to grow cocaine to include humidity, ground acidity, wind, and other variables that the coca plant requires to thrive. Soto also states that he does not rule out that DTOs will continue their attempts to grow cocaine in Costa Rica by adapting the coca plant to the environment. However, Soto stated that “At this time, we have no indications that DTOs have been successful at a national level in any specific area.”

For Guillermo Araya, Director of the Costa Rican Drug Institute (ICD), the fact that authorities discovered the first ever coca plants in the country in July 2018 makes it clear that organized crime is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon. He also indicated that drug trafficking organizations are obviously interested in cultivating coca plants in Central American countries for multiple reasons to include reducing shipping costs to the US by bringing production closer to the border and to increase harvest periods from the traditional two that occur in South America to multiple [periods].