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## **WARRING FUTURES: RUSSIA vs. COSTA RICA**

**2022 sees the forces of regeneration battling it out with those of degeneration**

John Elkington



*Mother-and-baby sloths (John Elkington, 2022)*

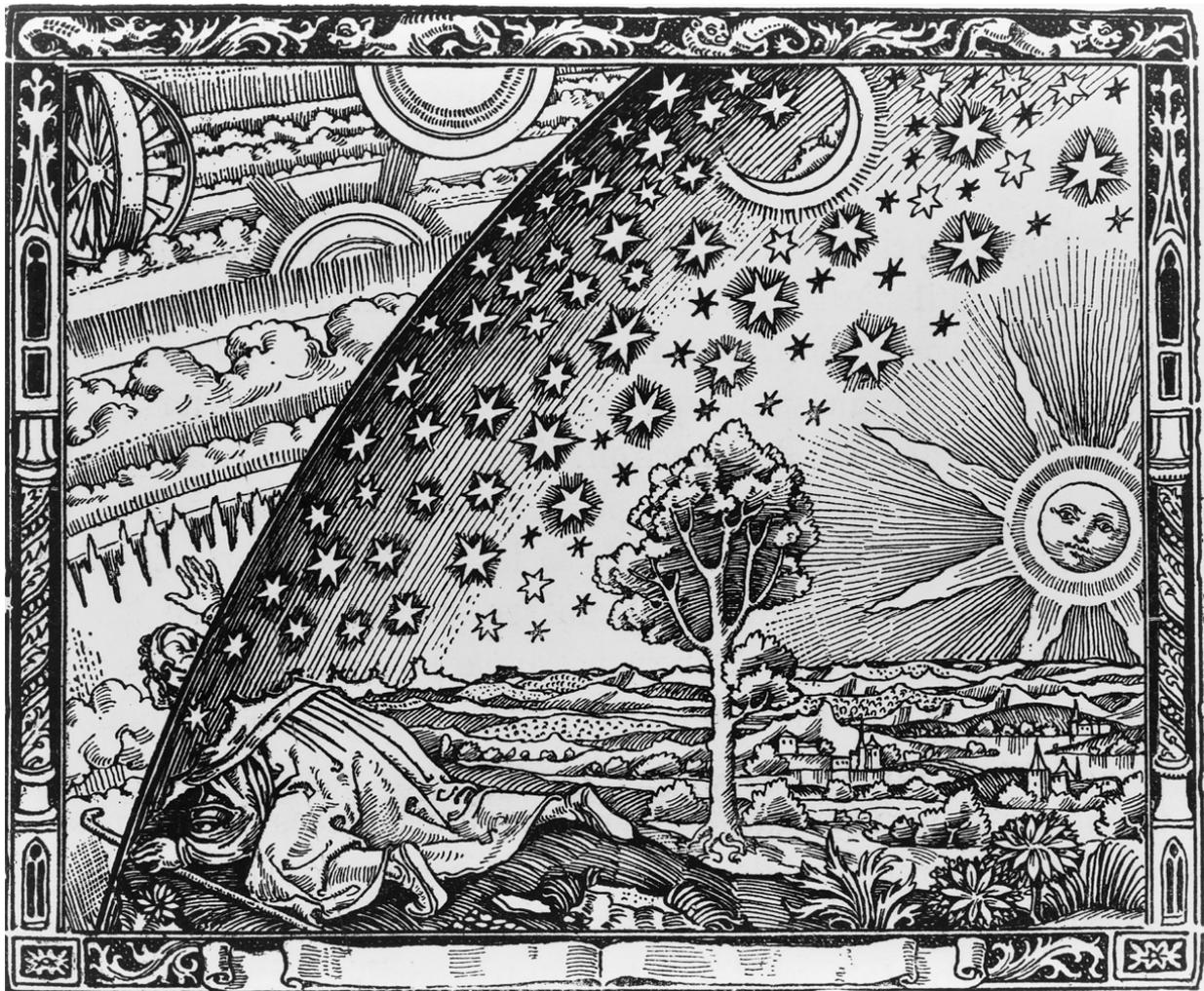
When Russia shocked much of the world by cranking up its long-running war against Ukraine with a full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, we had just arrived in Costa Rica. In our first real breakout since COVID-19 hit in 2020, my wife Elaine and I downed tools and headed west to experience regeneration at the personal, ecosystem and country levels.

Like so many people, unable to travel, we needed a break. Among other things, I had just finished a full draft of my twenty-first book, *Ugly Ducklings*, chronicling my lifelong

journey from battling degenerative capitalism to championing the burgeoning regenerative economy. Happily, our trip exceeded all expectations.

We had long wanted to visit Costa Rica, but our appetite was significantly boosted when the country landed one of five first-round [Earthshot Prizes](#) in 2021. [Volans](#), our small London-based organisation, is serving as one of the nominators for the 2022 awards, so I was even keener to check whether local realities matched global perceptions.

To cut to the chase, they did. That said, Costa Rica is peculiar in several ways. Most notably, outlawing its own army a few months after I was born, in 1949. As UNESCO's '[memory of the world](#)' website recalls, it was the first country in the world to abolish its military. Ever sceptical, I kept a wary eye out for heavily-armed police, but those we saw seemed fairly human. Unlike the ongoing events as Russia invaded Ukraine.



*The Flammarion wood engraving ([Wikipedia](#), sourced 6 March 2022)*

## Has our 'Long Peace' ended?

As our cell phones relayed images of incoming tank convoys, bleeding refugees sheltering under shattered bridges, and grandmothers training to repel the invaders with cardboard AK47s, what repeatedly came to my mind, oddly, was the so-called [Flammarion engraving](#). Whatever its original authorship and intent, it had always seemed to me to illustrate those mind-blowing moments when individual human beings break through the constraints of their prevailing (and constraining) paradigms—and spy early evidence of new ones.

Moving around Costa Rica, my head seemed to be poking through old boundaries in a similar manner. Still, I often found myself wondering whether we are now looking out from a world of degeneration into a regenerative future—or, as Putin's War seemed to suggest, the reverse. Whatever the outcome, Putin's malign [disinformation machinery](#) now seems to be teetering on the edge of collapse. The implication may be that he will turn to a [scorched earth](#) approach, as he did in Syria.

Meanwhile, media coverage of the invasion certainly signalled that age-old realities are reasserting themselves. We are seeing a major disruption of the so-called '[Long Peace](#)' within which my own generation has been beyond fortunate to grow up. But, then again, I have never believed you can gain peace—or sustainability, for that matter—simply by wishing for happy outcomes. History suggests that praying only gets you so far.

In contrast to people like Stephen Pinker, who argues that the world is getting ever-less violent, I have long worried about the prospects for new levels of murder and mayhem caused by asymmetric tactics, including genetic weapons.

Meanwhile, there are those [who warn](#) that major wars are very far from predictable, often seeming to erupt out of clear, blue skies. Now, and for various reasons, different security agendas are increasingly blurring together, suggesting that we need to work harder to engage the military and intelligence agencies. In 2021, for example, I spoke at an invitation-only UK Ministry of Defence on societal resilience in the face of global heating.

Suddenly, ESG analysts are having to [reconsider](#) their handling of defence issues. And I have explored related themes in essays for *Limits to Growth* co-author Jørgen Randers, in his landmark book [2052](#), and (with Thammy Evans, who I had met via the Ministry of Defence process) for the European end of the Carnegie Institute in their 2021 report, [The EU and Climate Security: Towards Ecological Diplomacy](#).

I kept a constant weather eye out in Costa Rica for clues as to how we might co-create a future where, to quote the immortal Buckminster Fuller, today's weaponry would be turned into tomorrow's 'livingry.' A future where our species learned to work together on common challenges, particularly the climate and biodiversity emergencies. This quest has been central to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals—and has also been a key focus of our own [Tomorrow's Capitalism Inquiry](#).

Stand back and look at the bigger picture, however, and it is clear that progress to date has often been disappointing. In recent weeks, my Volans colleague Richard Roberts—who leads the Inquiry—completed a review of the 50-year history of the *Limits to Growth* agenda. He concludes that it has been largely ineffective in moving us into a post-growth world. In short, we seem to be stuck in low, degenerative gear. To shift into higher, regenerative gear, he argues, we must learn from how the neoliberals took their own agenda mainstream. Learning, in effect, from our enemies.

One vision of where neoliberal thinking may now be taking us can be had from the best science fiction. I was reading several books as we travelled, among them [The Water Knife](#). This is a shatteringly violent sci-fi novel exploring what the southern states of America might look like if—and when—a superdrought locks in.

In Paolo Bacigalupi's nerve-jangling book, just such a drought triggers a future in which Texans flee north, treated along the way very much as Mexicans are today. And worse. We may choose to see this as far-fetched, but with that same region already locked into its worst [superdrought](#) in 1,200 years, the omens are scarcely encouraging.

Perhaps we should view Putin's War as further confirmation that we are now headed into a forcefully Hobbesian twenty-first century, red in tooth and cyber-claw. Russia, we might conclude, is now desperate not only for a security buffer between itself and key NATO countries but also to gain privileged access to Ukraine's immense natural resources. But will the price be worth it? It seems unlikely. "Welcome to hell," some Ukrainians said to the incoming Russians.

More positively, perhaps, you might choose to see such conflicts as the death throes of an old order built around violence to people and nature. There is something in that, I think, but with the current proliferation of leaders like Putin, Xi, Duterte, Bolsonaro and Erdogan, that conclusion will seem outlandishly optimistic to some. But, as I argued in my 2020 book

[Green Swans](#), whether the outcome is hell or some form of heaven, we are seeing the end of an old order we have all grown up with and come to take for granted.

Channelling long-dead economists like Nikolai Kondratiev and Joseph Schumpeter, I conclude that creative destruction always precedes creative reconstruction. The old order must die before new ones, good, bad or ugly, can fully break through. And maybe Bucky was right in insisting that, ‘You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.’

So is this what Costa Rica has been doing?

### **A growing appetite for regeneration**

Travelling coast-to-coast, we had a timely opportunity to find out. As we headed from Costa Rica’s capital San José to the east coast, boating for another hour-and-a-half deep into the stunning waterworld of the Tortuguero national park, I had one eye on the burgeoning wildlife, including crocodiles and tiger, green and blue herons, the other on another sharp-clawed predator, Vladimir Putin. Today’s version of [Vlad the Impaler](#).



*Evidence of biophilia is rampant in today’s Costa Rica (John Elkington, 2022)*

Costa Rica has had its own political convulsions, of course. In San José, we saw a spectacular set of bullet pock-marks in the walls of Bellavista Castle, the army's headquarters in the last civil war, in 1948. At the time, José Figueres was a towering figure, eventually serving three times as the country's president. He also signed the law banning the army. Nowadays, though, our security challenges are seen in a different light, with his daughter Christiana a global voice in climate diplomacy.

Around the corner from the Castle, we visited the city's gold and jade museums. Here two things struck me immediately. The first was that those who worked in gold in pre-Columbian times were deeply inspired by wildlife, from frogs and birds of prey to crocodiles. And, second, there was clear evidence of the rise and fall of cultures and civilizations, with conflict often endemic. Look carefully and you will see historical evidence of fairly extensive headhunting in the region, perhaps aggravated by periods of environmental change.

So it seems unlikely that Costa Rica's break with the military came from any long-standing peaceableness. Instead, as with the Bretton Woods institutions at the end of World War II, the decision was forged in the crucible of war. Interestingly, too, Costa Rica has come to see its security through wide-angle lenses, hence its focus on ecological regeneration.

To get a sense of how the regenerative economy agenda looks from the Costa Rican perspective, I turned to LinkedIn, contacting Eduard Müller shortly before we set off. Delightfully, we met for dinner on our first evening in San José. He is both founder and rector of the University for International Cooperation, which he launched in 1994, and has been a pioneer in online education in over 60 countries. More interesting still, at least as far as I'm concerned, is his initiative [Costa Rica Regenerativa](#) (Regenerate Costa Rica), founded in 2018<sup>1</sup>. 'True wealth,' they conclude, 'is found in the well-being of the web of life.'

We saw eye to eye. Indeed, like me, he was profoundly influenced by the systems thinking of Bucky Fuller—and noted how blind most of us are to the system dynamics that so powerfully shape our lives. Much of the work Costa Rica Regenerativa does is designed to help people see, care for and regenerate the ecological, social and economic systems they—and we—depend on.

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<sup>1</sup> See Eduard Müller interviewed by Doughnut economist Kate Raworth [here](#).

That said, and ever keen not to have the green wool pulled over my eyes, I constantly tried to view Costa Rica through darker lenses. In that vein, one of the most ominous sounds across the country, at least for anyone who has seen Stephen Spielberg's 1971 film *Duel*, is the constant growl of the 18-wheelers, or semi-trailers, that are pretty much ubiquitous. These lumbering dinosaurs of the internal combustion world growl and snarl pretty much everywhere you go—many sporting brands like Maersk, Dole and Chiquita (the old United Fruit Company).

And anyone wanting to understand the history of Costa Rica would also be well advised to dig into the story of the [United Fruit Company](#) which helped turn independent countries in the region into so-called 'banana republics.' UFC eventually morphed into Chiquita, at one of whose present-day plants we watched huge bunches of bananas being cut and processed for export. And we saw the pesticide-spraying planes used to battle pests.

In peripheral vision, we also saw evidence of coffee plantations moving uphill into largely untouched virgin cloud forests near Monteverde. More seriously still, we learned of some malign ways in which in-migration from countries like Nicaragua and Colombia has spurred rising levels of both waste dumping and violence in some places, with growing numbers of Costa Ricans fortifying their homes. This, in turn, links to the growing hold the drug trade has on the region, with Costa Rica a staging post between producers to the south and consumers to the north.

Perhaps most worrying for those who are suspicious about the ecological (and political) implications of China's Belt and Road initiative, and its global ramifications, is the growing Chinese presence in Costa Rica. At times we travelled on [national route 32](#), now the object of a massive road-widening project led by the China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC). Any such project will cause significant environmental problems, clearly, but how well do we understand where this Asian foot in the Central American door might take us? And how sensitive will China be to wider environmental, social and governance concerns?

One early controversy that indicated how future tensions might evolve was China's backing of the proposed (and highly controversial) [Nicaragua Canal](#), designed to capture traffic that would otherwise go through the Panama Canal. At one point, Nicaragua even [seized](#) a small amount of land from Costa Rica, by force, though the ensuing international court case was eventually decided in Costa Rica's favour.

### ... and then the good news

And now for the good news, with much of it to report from Costa Rica. Two hours' drive from San José, near Puerto Viejo, for example, we were taken around the [La Selva Research Station](#). Dating back to 1968, the reserve was originally a farm, but has been regenerated to the point where it now has 2,077 recorded species of plants; 125 species of mammals (72 of them bats); 470 species of birds; 48 amphibian species; 87 species of reptiles; 45 species of freshwater fish; and tens of thousands of insects, arachnids, and other arthropods.

Of all these lifeforms, the animal we saw there that will probably live longest in my memory was the eyelash pit viper—a snake that feeds, among other things, on the [hummingbirds](#) we so admired in other parts of the country<sup>2</sup>.

Later in the trip, we also did daytime and night time walks through cloud forests near Monteverde, where I was particularly struck by a nest of Tarantula Hawk Wasps, which prey on these feared spiders. This was in the Santa Elena [Cloud Forest Reserve](#). That night walk was in the nearby Bosque Eterno de los Niños, or Eternal Children's Forest, whose creation story is one of the most striking and inspiring I have come across. Among things that we saw in the dark were luminescent click beetles, sleeping birds, a lurking tarantula, a scuttling armadillo and flitting fruit bats.

Significantly, one key source of income for such reserves is so-called 'environmental service payments,' where conservators and regenerators of natural systems are [compensated](#) for protecting and regenerating forest ecosystems. None of the reserves and parks we visited are fully commercial, nor are they intended to be, so I was also intrigued to see ventures that were commercial—or designed to be so.

Near Sarapiquí, we visited [Paraíso Orgánico](#), where we were taken around the plantation in a tractor-trailer by the owner's son, Rolando Soto, Jr. The taste of the organic pineapples he sliced for us, out in the fields was, to put it mildly, heavenly. The ensuing Piña colada, when we got back to the ranch, was the best I have tasted. Nor do the family's plans end at pineapples: Rolando's sister later took me around their organic pepper plantation, where my taste buds exploded with organic spiciness.

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<sup>2</sup> So fond are we of the hummingbird that it features as the Volans logo, created for us by Silvio Rebêlo, a Brazilian living in Russia.

Still, Rolando made it clear that the price premium on organic produce remains an issue, with most producers still stubbornly sticking with the agrochemical model. The Paraíso Organico farm was started by his father, originally a banker, which may also suggest an even greater hurdle for those with less capital. And, as a reminder of the alternatives, not long after we left the farm we glimpsed a massive sprayer dispensing chemicals across a field of pineapple plants.



*Rolando introduces one of his organic pineapples (John Elkington, 2022)*

So how to move forward? One obvious answer is to (try to) go upmarket. Back in San José, Eduard Müller had introduced us to one of his partners in regeneration, Juan Sostheim, founder of [Rancho Margot](#). And, as chance would have it, a few days later our itinerary brought us within half an hour's drive of this extraordinary eco-resort alongside Lake Arenal.

Juan picked us up and drove us along a road that he described, with no great exaggeration, as “10,000 potholes” in the half-hour journey. And what a destination it proved to be, the whole resort built around principles of circularity and regeneration.

Among the most striking features were the wildly verdant green roofs on many of the farm buildings. Indeed, so verdant was the roof atop one of the hen enclosures that when chickens mysteriously started disappearing, despite anti-predator fencing designed to deter

everything from racoons to jaguars, the culprit remained a mystery for a while. Eventually, though, it was discovered that a large boa constrictor had made its home in that particular green roof, dropping down into the hen house for its chicken dinners.

Juan, clearly, is a phenomenon. Indeed, no-one I have ever met has reminded me so forcibly of Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald, aka "[Fitzcarraldo](#)" in Werner Herzog's 1982 film of the same name. Both men strain every sinew to make the apparently impossible happen. In the case of Rancho Margot, however, the positive results are evident everywhere you turn, from the medicinal herb gardens through to the compost heaps where the end product is virtually odourless. Rancho Margot's circularity and regenerative ambitions should be more widely known—providing a model for a growing number of tourism resorts worldwide.



*Green roof: Juan Sostheim with John and Elaine Elkington, Rancho Margot*

### **So, did Costa Rica pass muster?**

“We choose to ensure, for the first time in human history, the natural world is growing and not shrinking.” That’s how the Earthshot sums up its ambition under its ‘Protect & Restore Nature’ category, so, in my limited experience to date—does Costa Rica pass muster?

In three words, way more than.

True, I was struck by the criticism of the country's government that I heard from activists and regenerators alike, interesting given the fact that the Earthshot Prize announcement spotlighted the country's government. But maybe ambition always runs hand-in-hand with frustration at the speed of progress?

Impressively, Costa Rican President Carlos Alvarado Quesada has energetically championed a new global agreement on biodiversity loss. He has explained that conservation is in the [country's DNA](#), its intention being to "lead by example." He also quotes Nelson Mandela, to the effect that, "It always seems impossible until it is done."

Dig a little deeper and it is clear that government action has massively boosted forest cover, with extensive use of public [financial incentives](#) for private landowners and entrepreneurs. As a result, after an extensive period of deforestation, the country has stopped and reversed the process, so that total forest cover is now pushing towards 60% of its total land area. Even more dramatic were the numbers around the country's announcement that it was [expanding](#) the area of its territorial waters under conservation protection from 2.7% to 30%

Clearly, if Costa Rica's embrace of the regenerative economy is to be truly sustainable, it must moderate the negative impact of tourism. I spotted warning signs of coming overload. The coffee is glorious, but—as already mentioned—we saw coffee plantations pushing up into the cloud forest. Then, when we went crocodile watching along the Rio Tárcoles, our guide jumped into the river with fish morsels to attract the bigger crocs so we could see them better. If growing numbers of guides do that, what will be the impact?

Still, these are small quibbles, to date. Indeed, the evidence from elsewhere in Latin America is so worrying that we must give the Costa Ricans all the help we can, helping them expand their regeneration efforts and communicate them more broadly. From Amazonia, for example, we hear that the ecosystem is reaching a [tipping point](#) where it no longer has the necessary resilience to rebound. The region's fortunes may ultimately depend on whether countries like Brazil are willing to learn from countries like Costa Rica.

The benefits of healthy ecosystems were striking. When we left the main channel of the Rio Tárcoles and entered the mangroves, the air temperature cooled considerably—another example of nature knowing best. The more trees we protect or plant, the cooler our future can be.

But if there is one species that will come to mind whenever I think of Costa Rica, it is the strangest pollinator I have yet come across. This is [\*Tetragonisca angustula\*](#), or the Mariolas bee (see picture below). Just as Costa Rica has no army, the tiny Mariolas bee is stingless. Still, it can overwhelm some enemies by flying into their eyes or surrounding and overheating them. But the key thing here is that they produce an extraordinary—and much sought after—honey. Just as Costa Rica creates experiences and sweet memories for visitors that could well last a lifetime.

I'm not sure I can claim complete personal regeneration, but I did return refreshed and recharged. And even more committed to our work on the regenerative economy.

*Mariolas bees in old termite nest (top), eyelash pit viper (bottom left), crocodile and egret (bottom right)*



### The author

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