

# Lake Tota

Colombia

[Overview]

ABC Tota   
Centro de Humedales • Lago de Tota •  
« Amplia información del humedal, en un solo lugar »

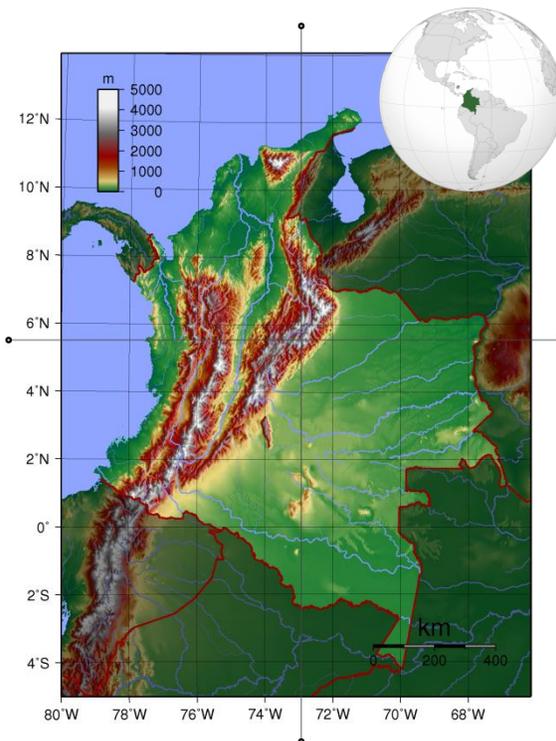


**Lake Tota** – *The lake in the clouds*, at 3015 m high in the Andes of Colombia.



Lake Tota is a tropical high-Andean lake, the largest in Colombia (5,500 Ha, it represents 44% of Colombian natural-lakes water volume). Its watershed (4x bigger than lake's area) is placed at 3.015 (water level) to 3.900 m high. It is also the 2nd highest navigable lake in South America, and it is water fed from *páramos*, a unique ecosystem found only in 6 countries worldwide.

Its outflow feeds both Orinoco and Magdalena river basins. It is an IBA site (Important Bird Area #CO-085), and easily meets 5 (out of 9) Ramsar criteria to be designated as such, although not a Ramsar site yet. According to isotopic research, nearly 70% of its water comes in the water-cycle from both Amazon and Orinoco river basins. Its catchment area is located inside shared boundaries of 4 towns (Sogamoso, Aquitania, Tota, and Cuítiva) of the Sugamuxi province, with a population of 22.000 inhabitants, and it provides water for consumption of 350.000+ people downstream.



Lake Tota received in 2012 the World Wetland Network (WWN) Grey Globe Award, for being considered a wetland of international importance under threat – a 1-page report attached, expands this info.

According to research and bird-watching developed since 2003, this unique wetland has reports of 145 bird species (30% migratory), in small populations, 12 of them are endemic (3 of these under IUCN red list – like *Cistothorus apolinari* on photo). Most info about these bird biological richness has been organized with details in ABC Tota wetland centre online: [abctota.org/aves](http://abctota.org/aves).



Lake Tota's main activity is bulb onion farming (it supplies 70% of country's consumption). Trout fisheries in cages are also an important economic activity in the lake, and tourism as well. Most of it still related to main factors of lake's threat: unwise use.

In tourism, a white sand beach is one of Lake Tota's most visited attractions, although what is more interesting for a visit to this ecosystem is its comprehensive patrimony, both ecological and cultural [[more](#)]. Bird watching, sport fishing, hiking routes, rural festivities are just examples.



Some of its main virtues are linked to the unique *páramo* ecosystem, water abundance, biodiversity, fertile soils, and a strong potential for tourism of wetlands. Problems are based on lack of protection, unbalanced economy and environmental injustice, weak governability/governance, poor support on education, and a weak inclusion of value chains in water management. Visionary opportunities for sustainability rely on research and academic development, also on scientific/educational/wetland/rural oriented tourism.





# World Wetland Network Wetland Globes

**Category:** Grey Globe Award, Neotropics

**Name of wetland:** Lago de Tota, Colombia

**Location:** Lat: 5.54184 Long: -72.92416 **Area:** 6,000 Ha (lake) and 24,000 Ha (watershed).



**Type and key characteristics:** Lago de Tota is a tropical high Andean lake on the eastern side of the Colombian Andean mountains. The largest of Colombia's lakes, it holds 2,000 million cubic metres of water, providing water to nearly 500,000 people in the region. The lake was designated an IBA site in 2008, and has had 116 bird species recorded since 2003, 7 of them endemic, and some endangered or at risk of extinction at an international level notably the Bogota Rail, and Apolinar's wren, both Endangered according to IUCN. The last sighting of the now extinct Colombian grebe was at lake Tota.

**Justification for why the wetland won the award:** The Lago de Tota suffers from a combination of point source and diffuse pollution, impacts of nearby industry, caged trout fisheries and over-abstraction. Introduction of commercially important fish species has also led to the extinction of the pez graso or grease fish. This situation is a result of a number of factors, largely an overall lack of knowledge and education on wetlands, their functioning and importance for people and wildlife. Importantly the lake is not designated under any form of protection.

**Quotes:** "After learning more about the problems of the lake, there is a growing need to protect, preserve and defend it. Yes, we need international recognition, as well as raising everyone's awareness; losing 5,600 hectares of still beautiful ecosystem would be unforgivable. We must take ownership, understand and take responsibility for these issues. We are responsible not only for the problem but also the solution."

"The iconic Lake Tota, the most important natural reservoir of Colombia, is disappearing day by day. Its deterioration is no longer a secret. It is terrible news . . . which the Foundation Montecito, the civil movement Mocilato, and leading authorities of the department of Boyacá have brought to the attention of environmentalists worldwide. . ." (press: Editorial/ El Tiempo, Roberto Pombo, 26.4.2012)

**Lessons learnt:** The Grey Globe definitely helps to raise awareness among local people and authorities of the need for urgent action. Running a strong and creative campaign is very important, and getting the media involved is vital if it is to lead to positive change. This impacts on politicians as wetland threats are publicised, ultimately leading to a reaction at governmental level.

However, exposing bad practice can be risky for campaigners, especially if it threatens economic and political/bureaucratic power. We need to present positive solutions for those local stakeholders that rely on the lake.



**Future plans for the wetland:** Designation as a Ramsar site. Government development of a Wetland Centre, and a "Centro Tota", a hub to host various officers devoted to the monitoring and protection of the Lago de Tota, its watershed, and High Mountain valuable ecosystems (*Páramos* or moor).



WWN is using the Grey Globe award to highlight wetlands that are actively being degraded, are being neglected, or are currently subject to a threat that is likely to lead to significant damage. The award is specific to a wetland and not the wetland management body, as factors affecting the wetland may be beyond their control. The award is intended to raise awareness of specific threats, and to encourage stakeholders and governments to find solutions to better protect and restore wetlands.

