



PROVOCATEURS

## PERU'S 71-YEAR-OLD HOTELIER IS FINDING NEW WAYS TO SAVE THE AMAZON

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### WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because 28 new species have been discovered on his properties. So far ...

By Nick Dall

THE DAILY DOSE • JUL 14 2017

“I’ve never restored a marine forest before,” says Jose Koechlin, who at 71 is proof that you can most definitely teach an old dog new tricks. He flashes a naughty smile as he describes how they’re attaching the seaweed to a massive “sausage” on the [ocean floor](#), which “as an added bonus will also destroy illegal fishing nets” off the coast of Cabo Blanco, a remote part of northern Peru that was once the greatest game-fishing destination on the planet.

The kelp forest, Koechlin hopes, will restore the ecosystem and lure the marlin back. Since acquiring the land in 2010, Inkaterria — the hotel company Koechlin founded in 1975 — has spent \$10 million without so much as laying a foundation. Instead, he’s been conducting marine inventories, petitioning the government to declare Peru’s first ever marine reserve and restoring Miss Texas (the boat [Ernest Hemingway](#) fished on in the 1950s).

“Why?” I ask. “Why not?” he says in his gentle, grandfatherly voice. “If you had access to an ocean which holds 70 percent of Peru’s marine biodiversity, a mega fauna breeding ground for orcas, whales and tuna which is also tied up with Hemingway and The Old Man and the Sea, you would do the same.”



 The Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba in Valle Sagrado

SOURCE • [COURTESY OF INKATERRA](#)

Koechlin, a born-and-bred Peruvian, became an eco-warrior long before people talked about “going green.” At 11, a school trip to the Amazon left a lasting impression, which was rekindled when he met the German filmmaker Werner Herzog in Lima in the 1970s. They decided to collaborate, a plan that would kick-start both men’s careers when Koechlin produced Herzog’s 1972 classic *Aguirre, The Wrath of God*, followed a decade later by Fitzcarraldo.

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**KOECHLIN IS LOOKING SO FAR AHEAD THAT HE’S LEAPFROGGED OUR GENERATION AND THE NEXT.**  
CARLOS LORET DE MOLA, FORMER HEAD OF PERU’S ENVIRONMENTAL AUTHORITY”

Drawn by the films’ otherworldly depictions of wild Peru, what had once been a trickle of tourists to the country began to swell and, in 1975, Koechlin launched Inkaterra in the hopes of bringing wealth to rural Peruvians — without destroying the environment through mining or logging. His first lodge was built on a concession in a remote patch of rain forest next to the Madre de Dios River using native techniques and materials. Today the company runs seven hotels in Peru, catering to more than 220,000 visitors each year.

Three years after launching Inkaterra, Koechlin sponsored a team of researchers to produce the company’s first flora and fauna inventories. The scientists quickly realized they had unearthed one of the planet’s greatest biodiversity hot spots, prompting further research and conservation



projects. Since that initial inventory, according to the company website, “a total of 814 bird species, 365 ants, 313 butterflies and over 100 mammals have been inventoried within hotel grounds and surroundings. 28 species new to science have been described: 19 orchids, 5 amphibians, 1 butterfly, 2 bromeliads and 1 tropical vine.”



“It’s not about being green,” says Koechlin. “It’s about keeping our main asset intact. Nature is our main asset, and to quantify our assets, to be able to measure our impact, we do inventories ... just like any business.” The only difference is that his ledgers contain numbers of species. “Koechlin is looking so far ahead that he’s leapfrogged our generation and the next,” says Carlos Loret de Mola, former head of Peru’s environmental authority.

Koechlin and his wife, Denise, who makes many of the aesthetic decisions at Inkaterra properties, know a thing or two about hospitality too. La Casona, a restored 16th-century manor house in Cusco, a city in the Andes, is one of the most gorgeous places I’ve ever stayed, with original murals and pre-Colombian textiles decorating each suite. The Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel has the world’s largest native orchid collection — and waterfalls.



 The Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel  
SOURCE COURTESY OF INKATERRA

I ask Koechlin how he feels about charging guests \$300 per night in a country where the average daily wage is \$17. “I’m running a business,” he says. “High-end tourism allows me to maximize profits and minimize environmental impact.” What’s more, he says Inkaterra has employed more than 4,000 locals and spawned an industry.

But the issue, says Roberto Ochoa, international editor of La Republica newspaper, is not the price



of Koechlin's rooms; it's that he cannot compete with Peru's \$2.6 billion-a-year illegal [gold-mining](#) industry. When Koechlin started more than 40 years ago, he was helped by the fact there were hardly any people in Madre de Dios (the Amazon covers 60 percent of the country but is home to just 5 percent of its population). In 2012, the Interoceanic Highway opened the region by linking Peru and Brazil — with dire consequences for the environment.



 Jose Koechlin  
SOURCE • [COURTESY OF INKATERRA](#)

Koechlin has no time for grudges (“The miners and loggers don’t know the damage they’re doing”), but he is doing everything he can to present them with a viable alternative. Part of that effort includes teaming up with longtime collaborators like the Smithsonian Institute to try to establish a 192,000-acre sustainable development corridor — a strip of land without mining or logging where animals can move freely between two larger conservation areas. He describes the project as “much bigger than a hotel” and knows that its success rests on convincing both locals and outsiders that it will provide a sustainable source of income. Both Loret de Mola and Ochoa are amazed that Koechlin has even managed to get the miners (including Luis Otsuka, the governor of the region and a self-confessed illegal miner) to come to the table.

Keeping them at the table is another matter — and it might depend on Koechlin’s most paradigm-shifting plan yet. He’s currently looking into partnering with a legitimate mining company to open a trial mine on Inkaterra property. If he can prove that concentrated mining activities using high-tech equipment can yield higher profits than the destructive shallow mining favored by illegals, he might just help save his beloved Amazon. It won’t be easy, but for a man described by a current employee as “some sort of a charmer,” Koechlin still has a few tricks up his sleeve.

[Nick Dall](#), OZY Author 

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**Lana Cher** · New Westminster, British Columbia

wow - what refreshing reading - thanks to the writer for sharing and educating readers about the encouraging earth positive actions by Mr. Koechlin over the decades in so many important vital areas - here's to continued successes..!

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**Deborah Percival**

And now I have a new hero. Thank you Mr. Koechlin. You are a true inspiration

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**Bruce Lozito**

My new hero as well. What an amazing example for an entrepreneur to set for others. Thank you!

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**Samantha Berg** · Rice University

What an incredible man!! The world is a better place because he is in it

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**JC Wandenberg** · New Mexico State University

The world needs more people like Jose Koechlin!

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