



CHOCTAW NATION

2022-2023

BIG GAME HARVEST REPORT



Choctaw Nation

Wildlife Conservation

HISTORY WAS MADE IN THE CHOCTAW NATION THIS PAST FALL

Choctaw Nation made history this past fall by administering our first hunting and fishing seasons. When the State of Oklahoma failed to renew the hunting and fishing licenses on December 31, 2021, tribal leadership exercised our sovereignty by ensuring the rights of tribal members to hunt and fish within the Choctaw Nation Reservation. The Choctaw Nation Wildlife Department was formed to conserve the fish and wildlife resources of the Reservation for future generations of tribal members.

In what can take agencies years to achieve, the Environmental Protection Service accomplished the following in just a few short months:

- Established the need for a CNO Wildlife Department
- Identified staff positions needed to begin a CNO Wildlife Department
- Established as a trusted resource for wildlife conservation in our communities
- Applied for and received the US Fish and Wildlife Service Tribal Wildlife Grant (\$200,000)
- Updated the CNO Title 110 Fish, Game, and Animals Code
- Mailed out 38,000 letters to tribal households notifying them of upcoming changes to the hunting and fishing license requirements
- Collaborated with CNO departments to create a fish and game registration (check-in) system through the Chahta Achvffa membership portal
- Implemented the first CNO sanctioned hunting seasons for Choctaw Tribal members within the Reservation
- Coordinated with staff from the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) to share harvest data and reports to ensure the proper management of game species within the Reservation



BLACK BEAR SEASON

The black bear population in the Choctaw Nation continues to be a success story in modern wildlife conservation. Once extirpated from Oklahoma due to over hunting, Southeast Oklahoma is now home to a healthy, growing population of black bears. The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife (ODWC) opened a black bear season in 2009. Originally the season was only available in McCurtain, Pushmataha, Latimer, and LeFlore. Since then, it has expanded to include all counties east of Highway 69/75 and south of I-40. By allowing a bear season and properly managing the big game species, successful and sustainable bear populations have been recorded since its implementation.

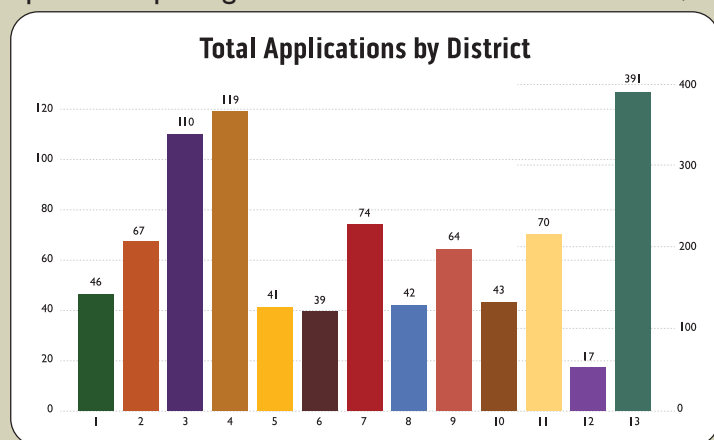
The inaugural Choctaw Nation archery black bear season began on October 1, 2022, and closed on October 16, 2022. The muzzleloader season began on October 22, 2022, and closed on October 30, 2022, holding a quota of 20 bears. This quota was held in conjunction with ODWC's 20 quota. CNO Wildlife associates and the ODWC kept open lines of communication to make sure the quota numbers were accurate and over harvesting did not occur.

Drought conditions during the late summer and early fall were indicative of a high harvest, as bears would be relying on bait piles to build up fat reserves for the coming winter. Most reports of acorn and mast production were bleak. Hunters reported having several bears on trail camera pictures and bait piles leading up to the opening of the season. Harvest it turns out,

would be lighter than anticipated on during the opening weekend. Acorn and mast crops were underestimated. Oak trees showed their resilience and were still able to pull off a decent mast crop in some areas despite the intense drought. Once acorns fell just before the opening of the season, bears began leaving bait piles and gorging on the mast they were able to find. A total of 8 black bears were harvested for the season. All were taken with archery equipment and no muzzleloader bears were reported. Bear sex breakdown was balanced at 4 female and 4 males.

One of the major concerns leading into the season was the high number of permits that the Choctaw Nation Wildlife Department issued. Permits were free of charge to tribal members but required members to view a conservation video through the Chahta Achvffa portal. A total of 1,123 black bear permits were issued to CNO members compared to the 530 black bear tags issued by ODWC. With the 200% increase in hunting pressure, there was concern of over harvesting being a possibility.

That turned out not to be the case. ODWC hunters had a success rate of 9.8% compared to the success rate of 0.7% for Choctaw tribal hunters. This data story tells us that sportsmen were either receiving bear permits due to the easy access or hunting bear opportunistically while deer hunting. It seems that the cost of the ODWC license limits it to hunters that are avidly pursuing bears where the percentage of CNO bear permit holders that may be considered avid bear hunters was much lower. The CNO wildlife department is gathering data to confirm these theories and will be looking at ways to improve the bear permitting process.



District 13 represents anyone who lives outside of the Choctaw Reservation



WHITETAIL DEER SEASON

Oklahoma has become one of the top hunting destinations for whitetail deer in the United States. Southeastern Oklahoma and the Choctaw Nation offer some of the best of the best when it comes to deer numbers and trophy potential. The Choctaw Nation has a diversity of prime whitetail habitats, from mature forests to mixed prairies. The agricultural and forestry roots of the region create ideal early successional habitat.

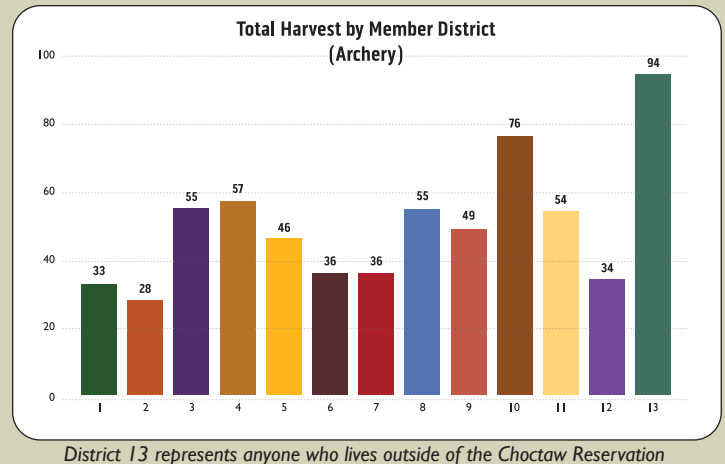
A severe drought plagued the Choctaw Nation Reservation during the summer and early fall of 2022. Preferred browse was limited for deer. Water sources were scarce as livestock ponds and ephemeral creeks dried up. However, deer numbers did not seem to be affected with a slightly lower numbers of fawns being reported from hunters that seemed to increase during the hunting season. Oak trees were able to produce mast and soft mast was present. Deer concentrated on these food sources and on supplemental feed locations provided by hunters. The overall season limit for Choctaw deer hunters was 6 deer with no more than 2 antlered.

ARCHERY

Archery season ran concurrently with the state season (October 1-January 15). Choctaw archery hunters were able to harvest 6 deer, no more than 2 antlered.

317 antlerless and 334 antlered deer were taken by CNO archers registering through the Chahta Achvffa for a total of 651 deer. The percentage of antlerless harvest was 48.6% which is a positive statistic. Hunters are being encouraged to harvest antlerless deer to keep the population in check and within carrying capacity. In many areas of the CNO, sex ratios are skewed heavily towards the female side. This unbalance can present challenges to managers and have negative consequences for populations.

Archery is quickly gaining in popularity, and it is great to see hunters taking advantage of the opportunity to harvest antlerless deer.



YOUTH DEER GUN

The CNO youth deer gun season ran from October 14-16, 2022. Mild weather and plentiful deer populations makes this a great way to introduce youth to hunting. CNO members under 18 years of age were eligible to hunt during this season. The season limit was 2 deer with no more than 1 being antlered. Weather conditions were favorable for this season and deer were concentrated on food sources.

CNO youth were able to harvest 123 antlerless deer and 91 antlered deer for a total of 214 deer.

MUZZLELOADER

Muzzleloader season ran concurrently with the state season, opening on October 22, 2022 and closing on October 30, 2022. The muzzleloader season limit was 2 deer with no more than 1 antlered deer. This differed slightly from the state season where only 1 antlerless and 1 antlered could be harvested. The difference gave Choctaw hunters more opportunity to harvest antlerless deer and hopefully took some pressure off of younger bucks for hunters looking

to fill their freezers. Choctaw muzzleloader hunters began the season with high temperatures and high winds. This led to slower deer movement and less harvest than expected.

CNO muzzleloader hunters checked in 115 antlerless and 173 antlered deer for a total of 288 deer through the Chahta Achvffa portal. Most hunters reported delayed rutting activity and slower movement than normally experienced this time of the year.

GUN

Modern deer gun season began on November 19, 2022 and ran through December 4, 2022. The gun season limit was 2 deer with no more than 1 antlered deer. This differed slightly from the state season where only 1 antlerless and 1 antlered could be harvested. The difference gave Choctaw hunters more opportunity to harvest antlerless deer and hopefully took some pressure off younger bucks for hunters looking to fill their freezers. Hunters reported seeing a lot of chasing and rutting activity in the first half of the season and it slowly tapered off during the second week. Weather was very favorable for most of the season with colder temperatures and mostly dry conditions.

CNO gun hunters were able to harvest 415 antlerless and 716 antlered deer for a total of 1,131 deer.

HOLIDAY ANTLERLESS DEER GUN

Deer harvested during this season do not count towards the hunters combined season bag limit. CNO members were able to harvest 2 “bonus” antlerless deer from December 18-31, 2022, with a modern gun. This gives hunters the opportunity to spend time with family while hunting during the holiday season. Once again, this season builds upon the management goal of taking more antlerless deer from the herd creating a more balanced sex ratio and healthier deer.

CNO members took advantage of this additional opportunity and harvested 134 antlerless deer.



DEER SEASON SUMMARY

Whitetail deer populations within the CNO continue to thrive. Summer and early fall saw extremely dry conditions which stressed deer during that time. Fall rain and oak mast crops were a welcome relief for deer during this tough time. Despite the tough conditions, most deer were in good to fair shape. Many landowners and hunters have begun managing their lands with wildlife in mind which leads to better habitat. Better habitat can support higher deer numbers even in extreme conditions. Many hunters and landowners are also supplemental feeding deer year around. Drought conditions did lead to less cover (grass, leaves, and underbrush) which made deer more visible for hunters. Deer were also on their feet more as they were searching for food and water

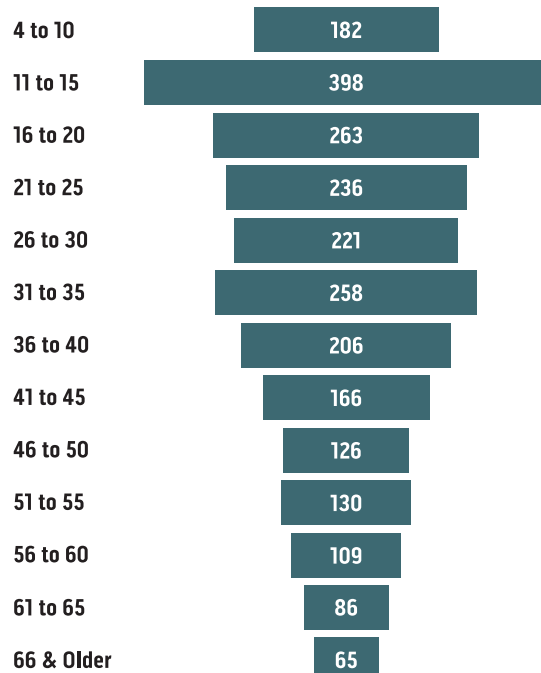
With all seasons combined, CNO members harvested 1,116 antlerless deer and 1,328 antlered deer for a total of 2,444 deer. Antlerless deer accounted for 45.7% of the harvest. Antlerless harvest will continue to be emphasized as it is imperative to the health of the deer herd. Oklahoma is poised to break the all-time harvest record with over 130,000 deer harvested statewide. CNO and ODWC will share harvest results for SE Oklahoma as they are available

One of the most encouraging statistics emerging from the harvest data is not concerned with deer but the hunters themselves. 53.1% of CNO deer were harvested by hunters aged 30 and under. Nationally the hunting populations are aging. Changing times, urbanization, technology, and many other factors play into aging hunter populations. There is fear that hunting traditions are not being passed down as they were in the past. That does not seem to be the case in the CNO. Strong youth numbers are a testament to culture ties and significance that hunting has in the CNO

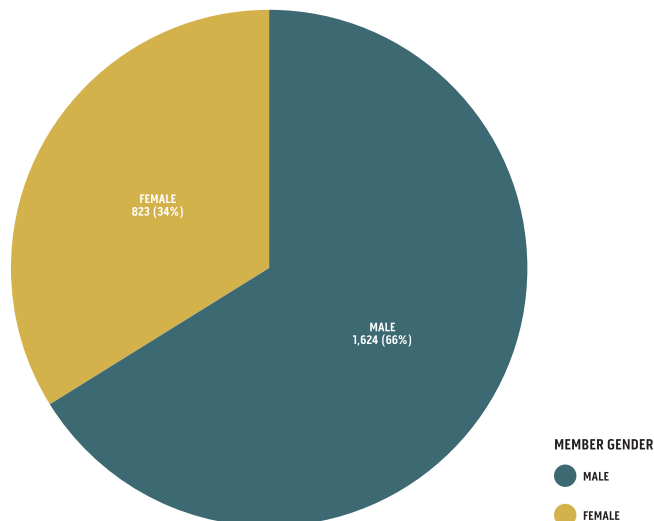
Female CNO members harvest 34% of the deer taken by CNO this year. That is also well above national averages that show female hunters make up 10 to 25%

of the hunting population. As we move forward, we can work with these groups to grow hunting within the CNO

Total Harvest by Member Age Range



Total Harvest by Member Gender



ELK SEASON

Elk occur within the Choctaw Nation in small numbers. Reintroduction efforts by the ODWC have had difficulty taking hold. Several factors may contribute to this including poaching, habitat fragmentation, and disease. ODWC has an elk season that runs concurrently with the deer season but has a season quota of 5 for the Southeast Zone. The Southeast Zone consists of the area south of Interstate 40 and east of Interstate 35. This season usually closes on the first day. Most of the elk harvest comes from Carter, Johnston, and Coal counties. Most of these elk escape from high fence hunting facilities and localized populations have occurred as a result.

The Choctaw Nation did not have an open elk season for the 2022-23 fall hunting season. Preparation for the upcoming bear and whitetail seasons took priority over the less sought-after elk. Many changes had to be made to the CNO Title 110 Fish, Game, and Animals Code pertaining to hunting regulations. The tight timeline required to get those changes in led us to table the elk season given the limited availability of elk. Elk are primarily found in Pushmataha and Coal counties within the nation. These counties have the most chance for success for tribal elk hunters.

Our recommendation would be to have an archery only elk season that would mirror the archery deer season dates. The recommended quota would be a collaborative quota with ODWC's 5 elk. This would give tribal elk hunters more opportunities. It would also be recommended to make this a bull only hunt.

The other option would be to have a closed season for CNO members. A yearly quota of permits could be awarded through a lottery system for tribal members. This would ensure that only a set number of elk are harvested, and that the population is not depleted.

TURKEY SEASON

Spring turkey season is a rite of passage for many hunters within the Choctaw Nation. Eastern wild turkeys are a species synonymous with spring and the mature forests of Southeastern Oklahoma. Populations within the Choctaw Nation can fluctuate drastically. The population has been in a downward trend in recent years. Turkey populations throughout the entire state have taken a dip in numbers and there aren't any hard answers as to why. ODWC has reduced bag limits to 1 tom statewide and pushed season dates back in a conservation effort.

YOUTH TURKEY

Youth turkey season took place on April 9 & 10, 2022 and was the first major hunting season administered by the Choctaw Nation. 8 bearded turkeys were checked in the portal. The end of the licensing compact with the state was fresh at this time and CNO had no staff devoted to wildlife full time. The associates with the Environmental Protection Service did an outstanding job of spreading word in this short time frame. Weather conditions were cooler than normal for this time of year and gobbling activity was reported to be lagging according to most hunters. The bag limit was one bearded turkey with archery or shotgun equipment.

SPRING TURKEY

Lower turkey numbers, cool temperatures, and a late start to gobbling activity led to a tough season for many hunters. Choctaw Nation hunters reported 17 bearded turkeys during the spring. Archery and shotgun were the legal methods. The bag limit for the spring and fall seasons combined in 1 bearded turkey. ODWC reported 616 harvested turkeys during the spring season for Choctaw Nation counties. Once again, the reporting system was fairly new but EPS associates did a great job of navigating the new circumstances. We are confident that our expanded

messaging and outreach will result in higher utilization of the Chahta Achvffa check in portal by tribal members.

FALL TURKEY

Fall archery turkey season saw 3 turkeys checked in with archery equipment. Many hunters are seeing the declines in turkey populations and laying off of hunting them in the fall season. With populations on the decline, many have called for closing the fall season but with such a minimal harvest this may not be necessary. We will continue to monitor this harvest and make changes as needed for the best practical management of the species.



RETROSPECTIVE

The success of the past year for the Choctaw Nation Wildlife Department is due to teamwork. Every facet of the CNO Environmental Protection Service pulled together for the common goal of serving tribal members and the resources they pursue. Much care, thought, and work were put into the foundation of the program. Applying for and obtaining funding through the USFWS Tribal Wildlife Grant is a huge asset moving forward in the next two years.

The CNO EPS team along with help from associates in Risk Management, were able to sort and stuff 38,000 envelopes to send to tribal members in just 3 days. The information contained in these packets helped tribal members understand the changes made to hunting and fishing within the reservation for them.

Bear harvest check in ran smoothly and was well staffed. Many members of the CNO EPS volunteered to work on the weekends during the first week to make sure all areas were covered. Harvested bears were responded to quickly and hunters were very pleased with the time and effort put into data collection. CNO contracted the services of a highly respected bear biologist, Jeff Ford, to train staff members on bear handling and data collection. He also assisted with the check in process and provided great insight on the happenings of the season. This greatly helped our knowledge of the bear season and what to expect.

Communication with ODWC worked well. We were able to relay harvest information, compare hunter activity reports, and share data. Field personnel for ODWC seem willing and eager to partner and work together. There is some hesitation when it comes to upper levels of ODWC administration. We will continue to foster a spirit of cooperation with field staff and seek ways to work together for the benefit

of wildlife resources, tribal members, and other citizens.

Considering the large amount of change in a short period, the Chahta Achvffa portal saw much use with tribal members checking in over 2,400 whitetail deer and 8 black bear. The Power-Bi dashboard provided daily updates to harvest statistics and demographic information. This system allows wildlife associates to track the progress of the season as well as insights on member usage.



LOOKING FORWARD

The hiring of a full time Conservation Education and Outreach Coordinator in December 2022 was a great addition to the department. Our goal is to be more visible and accessible to tribal members in the coming year. One of our goals for this coming season is to engage tribal members and learn what is important to them from a hunting and fishing perspective. Community center visits, community events, youth events, and surveys are some of the ways we will engage tribal members. Informational booths at events within the reservation will also be a great way to spread information. We are also looking forward to having a CNO Hunter Education course by the end of the year.

One of the challenges that we identified during this season is access to Chahta Achvffa in the field. The member portal works very well on a desktop computer but can be difficult to navigate on a phone. This proved to be especially difficult for older tribal members. We are currently working with IT and Purchasing to acquire a phone application (app) that will be much easier to navigate and be the portal for all things CNO wildlife related. An RFI and RFP was submitted for an outside company to develop and supply the app. These bids came back either out of scope or out of budget. Currently we are working through this process again. Getting this app secured will increase the success of the check in system and greatly assist tribal members. Having a check-in system that is user friendly is critical to increasing compliance among tribal members and generating quality harvest data.

As we move forward, the CNO Fish, Game, and Animals Code will need to be built upon to encompass more aspects of modern conservation regulations.

TRIBAL MEMBER CONCERNS

For the coming season we would like to write codes to address the following topics:

- A CNO Deer Management Assistance Program for CNO properties and Choctaw landowners
- Addressing bobcat/river otter tagging requirements to meet USFWS standards and to make furs obtained by tribal members marketable on a global market
- Codify rules for a controlled/lottery hunt system for tribal members on public lands and CNO properties
- Address elk season
- Address nuisance species that are restricted to transport and/or possess

Creating a stand-alone code that encompasses broader conservation issues strengthens tribal sovereignty and allows the CNO Wildlife Department to address resource and tribal member needs.

Working to strengthen relationships with state and federal agencies will be a priority. With limited staff in the past year, it was difficult to cultivate deeper connections with stakeholders and other conservation partners. Time constraints and a large list of tasks to prepare for hunting seasons left little time to devote to partnerships. The addition of a senior wildlife biologist and a conservation education and outreach coordinator has already increased the capacity for relationship building.

Coordinating with conservation partners and research entities will allow us to target the specific needs of the CNO as it pertains to wildlife research. Specific areas of interest at the current time are pinpointing factors leading to turkey population declines and monitoring bear populations within the reservation.

CNO Wildlife associates are developing management plans for game species within the Choctaw Nation. These plans guide the overall mission of the department and act a map of the future direction for the CNO Wildlife Department.

Our department received hundreds of calls and emails from tribal members with questions concerning hunting and fishing within the Reservation. These questions mostly revolved around how to obtain their hunting and fishing licenses and tags and how/where to check harvested game. Other questions that were frequently encountered were as follows:

- *Can we hunt CNO tribal lands and public lands within the CNO?*

Currently CNO tribal lands are closed for public hunting. Public land requirements vary depending on the governing agency on that land. ODWC owned land requires a wildlife conservation passport (basically an access permit) for entry. Tribal members expressed the need for additional access to tribal and public lands. It would create more opportunities for members if there could be tribal lands set aside for member hunting and fishing.

- *Do CNO tribal members have to purchase a land access permit to hunt/fish on Three Rivers/Honobia Creek WMA's?*

The ODWC leases the Three Rivers/Honobia Creek WMA's from Weyerhaeuser. Currently tribal members must purchase an access permit (\$40/ resident, \$85/non-resident) to hunt or fish on that area. There may be an opportunity to partner with ODWC on the lease with the understanding that CNO tribal members are exempt from these permits.

- *Can a Choctaw member hunt within another tribal nation without purchasing a state license?*

Numerous calls were received asking whether CNO members could hunt in other tribal nations or if other tribal nation members could hunt within the Choctaw Nation. Currently no reciprocal agreements exist between tribes that would allow different nations to hunt and

fish across nation boundaries. CNO members were advised that they would have to follow state regulations while hunting outside of CNO boundaries. Working towards these agreements would increase opportunities for tribal members hunting outside of the Reservation and allow CNO Wildlife Department to collect more data on harvested wildlife. This would also strengthen sovereignty for all tribes.

- *Can I take my CNO harvested animal across state lines?*

Several members asked if they could transport CNO checked game across state lines if they were non-residents. CNO check-in confirmation codes are valid for transportation into other states if the members were following the import rules of the state they were returning.

- *Does my CNO harvest confirmation number meet requirements for tagging game at processors and taxidermists?*

All CNO harvest confirmation numbers meet those requirements and can be used in the same manner as a state issued confirmation number.

- *Can I still hunt on the CNO Reservation without a state license even though I am a non-resident?*

Yes. Choctaw tribal members that live outside of Oklahoma still have the sovereign right to hunt and fish upon the Reservation.

One of the hurdles for increasing antlerless harvest is the reluctance of hunters to take deer that may be wasted. Many hunters will only shoot what they will eat, and some hunters do not utilize much of their take. The creation of a tribal hunters for the hungry program would be beneficial from a tribal utilization standpoint and a conservation standpoint. Participating hunters could donate their harvest to the nearest participating meat processor and provide

high quality, organic protein for families in need. This could be done by paying the processing fee or giving vouchers to tribal members to redeem at participating processors. Hunters may be more willing to harvest antlerless deer if they are assured the meat will not go to waste and it is supporting a great cause. Utilizing an abundant resource to provide quality food for families, elders, and those in need is another way provide for members.





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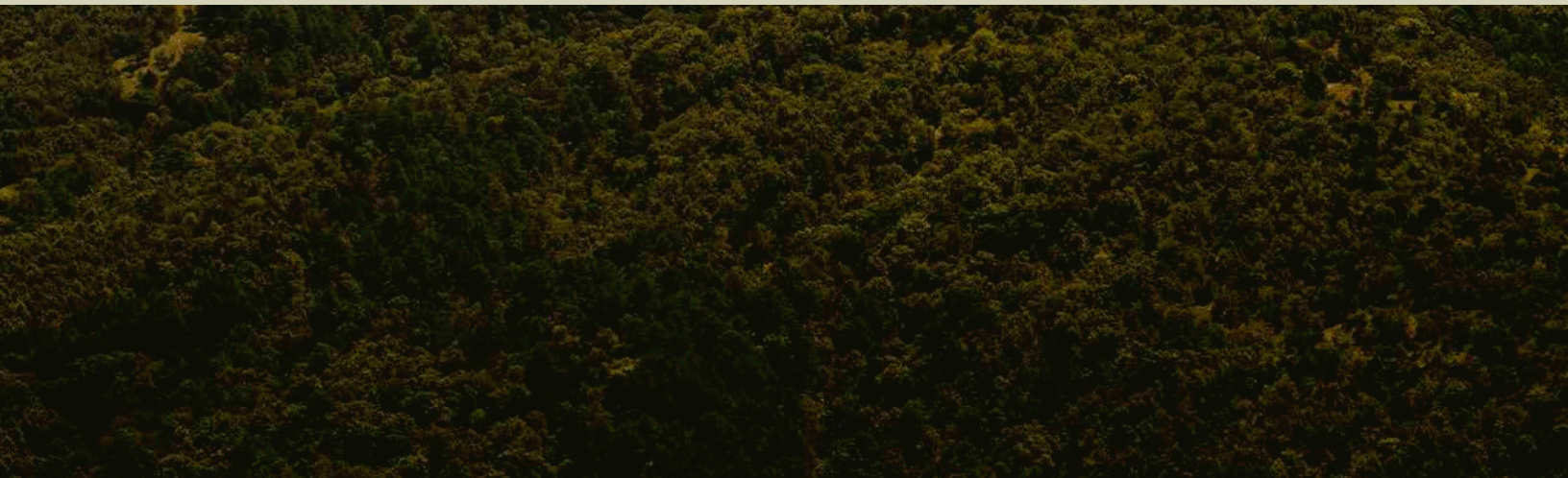
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