



Salvadoran Research Program on
Development and Environment



Community Management, Strengthening Livelihoods and Conservation: Lessons from the Forest Communities of Petén, Guatemala

A Community-Based Model for Territorial Control and Biodiversity Conservation

Nature conservation areas are often rife with conflict, burdened by a legacy of disputes over control of their resources. This is the consequence of the demarcation of conservation areas in frontier territorial dynamics without consideration of other land uses. Such is the case of the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR) in the Guatemalan Petén.



Created in 1990 under the management of Guatemala's National Council on Protected Areas (CONAP), the MBR is a territory in northern Guatemala covering 2,112,940 hectares (ha). It is part of the Mayan jungle, which is shared with Mexico and Belize and is the second-largest tropical rain forest in the Americas, following the Amazon. The MBR has the peculiarity of being equally rich in biological and cultural resources, the legacy of the ancient Maya civilization.

The zoning of the MBR complies with the conditions for belonging to the Biosphere Reserve Network (see Map 1). This management model was supported from the beginning by a large injection of resources from different international cooperation agencies. For example, between 1989 and 2003, an estimated US\$92 million was directly invested in projects by USAID, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the German state-owned development bank (KfW) and Guatemalan government matching funds.

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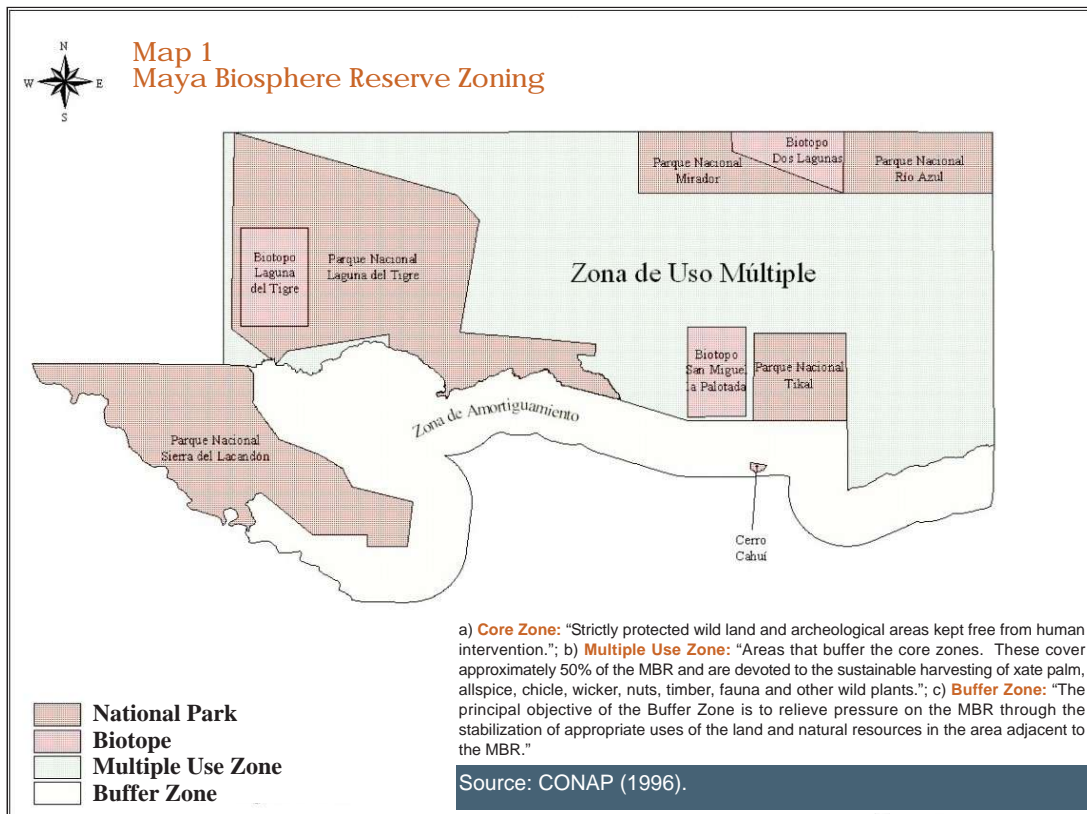
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In just a few years, the forest communities of Petén, united in the Asociación de Comunidades Forestales de Petén (ACOFOP), have developed a successful forest management model that is both conserving natural resources while improving livelihoods. This experience offers important lessons for development efforts that seek to involve rural communities in managing natural areas.

Community-based natural resource management and use of forest concessions constitutes an efficient model for assuring territorial management and control. It has been successful in reducing forest fires and deforestation and ending the encroachment of new settlements and illegal lumbering. These communities have also made successful inroads into the certified lumber market and are organizing themselves around its commercialization.

This contrasts sharply with the rampant deforestation taking place in the national parks of the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR); which are under siege from illegal land invasions, known as *agarradas*, and other problems, such as illegal trafficking in flora, fauna, archeological resources, undocumented migrants and illicit drugs.

The reasons why these communities have been so successful at community-based forest management lies in their access to forests rich in precious wood, their abundant community social capital, their strong technical knowledge-building, and the integration of forest management into their livelihood strategies. However, this model is currently facing new challenges from economic integration and free trade proposals that are bringing in megaprojects such as the Cuenca Mirador Park. Given this scenario, the communities need to consolidate a more integrated community-based model by linking their forest management with the conservation and the preservation of cultural goods. This will lead to recognition of the true ecological and social value of community concessions.



With the creation of the MBR, conservation became the core objective of land use planning, opening the way for a radical shift in the economic and political role of the Petén.

The rural land colonization policy (1954-1986) had turned the Petén into an agricultural frontier zone for landless peasants and indigenous people, incurring high social and environmental costs. In the late 1980s, attempts to turn back this tide rapidly transformed the zone into an area of interest to international conservation agencies.¹ However, despite the different policies enacted to counteract this influx and its effects, numerous disputes continue over resource access and management. Tensions and conflicts persist between attempts at conserving the territory's valuable natural and cultural resources and the social pressure for access to land and interest in seeking economic gain from ecosystem resources and the services they provide, including those related to natural patrimony, recreation and

tourism. An appraisal of the current status of the MBR seems discouraging when looked at as a whole; however, notable differences exist between the natural areas and the 445,804 ha of community forest concessions in the Multiple Use Zone (MUZ) and surrounding areas, managed by 22 community organizations united in the Association of Petén Forest Communities, ACOFOP (see Table 1).

Community control over the territory clearly contributes to resource conservation. The advance of the agricultural frontier has been stabilized, the incursion of people unrelated to the concessions has to a large extent been prevented, as well as the looting of archeological sites, illegal lumbering and hunting, and other destructive activities.

There has been a considerable reduction in forest fires and deforestation in the areas of community concessions, in comparison to the buffer zone and some of the national parks, such as Laguna del Tigre and Sierra del Lacandón (see Map 2).

¹ USAID, along with organizations including The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Conservation International (CI), the Rodale Institute and CARE International, exert pressure against the loss of biodiversity from settlement patterns and uncontrolled extraction.

Table 1
ACOFOP Community Forest Concessions:
General characteristics and current status

Organization	Size of Managed Forest ha	No. of Members	Ha per Member	Characteristics
More Advanced Organizations				
Sociedad Civil Organización, Manejo y Conservación Uaxactum (OMYC)	83,558	244	373	Area granted in concession <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More land and biodiversity (77% of the ACOFOP community concession land) • In <i>La Técnica</i> and <i>UMI</i> the management areas are owned by the coop.
Sociedad Civil Árbol Verde	64,973	364	178.49	
Cooperativa Camelita	53,797	122	440.95	
Asociación Forestal Integral San Andrés (AFISAP)	51,939.84	174	298.504	Institutional development and social capital
Sociedad Civil El Esfuerzo	25,386.48	39	650.94	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater internal cohesion, trade association activity and presence in ACOFOP • Greater political advocacy capacity
Sociedad Civil Custodios de la Selva (CUSTOSEL)	21,176.74	96	220.59	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional trend toward rotating leadership • Recent specialization of functions and differentiation between trade association and entrepreneurial roles
Sociedad Civil Laborantes del Bosque	19,390	78	248.59	
Sociedad Civil Impulsores Suchitecos	12,117	27	448.77	
Cooperativa Unión Maya Itza	5,923	138	42.92	Human capital
Cooperativa La Técnica	4,607	43	107.14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher human capital level (80% of members are literate)
Sub-total in hectares	342,865.06 (77%)			Livelihood strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversification of strategies: forest management is the principal strategy (70%), in combination with agricultural and livestock activities and management of non-timber products • Initial steps toward community enterprise management
Underdeveloped Organizations				
Asociación Forestal La Colorada	27,067	39	694.02	Area granted in concession <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23% of ACOFOP community concession land
Sociedad Civil Selva Maya del Norte	24,708	102	242.24	
Asociación Forestal Cruce a la Colorada	20,469	65	313.90	Institutional development and social capital
Asociación de Productores La Pasadita	18,817	110	171.06	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breakdown of the group, conflicts, cronyism, favoritism • Centralization of leadership
Asociación Forestal San Miguel La Palotada	7,039	30	243.63	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No differentiation between trade association and entrepreneurial roles • Little presence in ACOFOP
Cooperativa La Lucha	3,931	52	75.60	
Cooperativa Los Laureles	2,970	57	52.1	Human capital
Cooperativa La Felicidad	1,341	20	67.05	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low human capital levels (over 40% of members illiterate)
Cooperativa Monte Sinaí	1,048	22	47.63	Livelihood strategies
Asociación civil del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (ACIMARNAL)	358	428	0.83	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater dependence on agriculture and livestock (80%) • Low level of forest management knowledge • Low enterprise management capacity
Cooperativa Nuevos Horizontes	900	107	8.41	
Red de difusores agroforestales	Private Parcels	10	nd	
Sub-total in hectares	108,684 (23%)			
OTHERS: Sociedad Civil Amigos del Bosque	To be determined		ND	Community Forest Concession in process of adjudication



Source: Prepared by author; based on ACOFOP, 2003, updated by ACOFOP, 2005

Map 2
Forest Fires in the Petén in 2005



Source: CEMEC/CONAP et al., 2004; Nittler and Ischinkel, 2005.

- Environmental monitoring by CONAP shows a 36% reduction in fires and deforestation between 2003 and 2004 in concessioned areas.
- Between 2003 and 2004, the Laguna del Tigre National Park and Biotope had record deforestation—5,537 ha and 901.6 ha, respectively—primarily due to illegal land invasions; this is the highest level in the MBR, with the exception of the Buffer Zone.
- In Sierra del Lacandón National Park deforestation continued to increase, with 1,690 ha for this same period.



This is the direct result of a sizeable community investment in protecting and monitoring the management areas, including firefighting. Seventy-six percent (338,333 ha) of the forest area administered by community concessions is certified under the Forest Stewardship Council's SmartWood[®] seal. This management has beneficial effects on animal and plant reproduction; these areas are showing increased habitat heterogeneity, which is attracting new species and increasing biodiversity wealth.

The community-based forest management model

There is no prior history of this community-based forest management model in the Petén. The forest has been managed by poor peasant and indigenous communities, many of them migrants or people displaced by the armed conflict.

One of the pivotal elements in the process has been the access to, use and management of considerable natural resources. However, a combination of factors that were complementary to gaining this access brought about the social transformation of these communities and contributed significantly to conservation. These include the way in which forest management has been integrated into community livelihood strategies, the tailoring of forest management to community characteristics, and the development of strong community social capital, technical capabilities and human capital.

Negotiating Expanded Rights

The expansion of resource access, extraction and management rights in the form of community forest concessions enabled opening up traditional conservation paradigms, integrating the communities into the MBR's management model. At the same time, it served politically to contain growing community pressure. However, gaining access to forest concessions entailed a long process in which communities needed sufficient bargaining

power for their dealings with the government, conservation organizations and industrialists. This spawned debate, which brought out differences in views and disputes, still unresolved, between strict conservation, resource use and rural community demands for access to and use of natural resources.

In order to obtain expanded access rights, the communities needed to develop a strong capacity for political advocacy; they lobbied public officials and formed national and international alliances and networks to mobilize support. They successfully advocated for the creation of policy instruments that would enable shifting to a model giving communities greater access,² basing their actions on the political obligations acquired by the government in the Peace Accords (1996) to grant small and medium-sized organized peasant groups concessions for natural resource management.

In 2000, a significant percentage of the MUZ had been allocated as concessions to community organizations and two industrial concessions (see Map 1). The official regulations set as a condition for access to community concessions that the community concession-holder enter into an agreement with an NGO that would provide technical assistance and ensure the proper use of resources.³ This official technical assistance model is run by external actors, who employ an essentially homogeneous package with all the concession-holding groups. Strongly emphasizing forest utilization, this model did not consider the diversity of the concessions with regard to their size, forest characteristics and quality of species, nor the diverse community origins and livelihood strategies.

In this plan, cooperation funds were primarily channeled through governmental and international institutions, as well as national conservationist NGOs. A moderate portion of the investment went directly to the concession-holding communities and their organizations, focusing on institution building and self-management by concession-holding communities.

² CONAP is conducting a consultation process that is giving rise to new regulations: "Policies on granting concessions for the use and management of renewable natural resources in the multiple use zone of the Maya Biosphere Reserve."

³ Concessions are granted through 25-year renewable contracts and allow the rational use of timber, the extraction of non-timber forest products such as xate palm leaf and chicle, and tourism activities, in accordance with management plans. The land remains as State property.

Integrating the forest into community livelihood strategies

A community's origin has a bearing on understanding how community livelihood strategies change once access to the forest is obtained. It is also important to base the resource management models and instruments on an understanding of the characteristics of the communities. In this case, neither the origin nor characteristics of the communities were taken into account when the management plan was developed and the type of technical assistance needed was designed. The homogeneous model that was applied to very diverse conditions has resulted in uneven progress being made in forest management. Based on their settlement history, one can distinguish three types of communities: "Petenero" communities, communities arising from the dynamics of peasant land colonization, and communities formed as a consequence of war and uprooting (see Table 2)..

Most of the more successful organizations (see Table 1) are in Petenero communities. With a longer-standing relationship with the forest, they know the land well, along with the plant and animal species that live there, which is valuable information when they are developing their management plans. Even so, in the beginning, forest management was so new and unknown that it aroused people's mistrust. As a whole, these organizations manage approximately 70% of the community concession area. They have also established livelihood strategies strongly linked to forest management, with their primary income coming from the extraction and sale of timber and several non-timber products (chicle, xate palm and allspice). In these communities, forest management has become the dynamic hub of community economics and life. The society values the forest as community patrimony and not as a resource that is off limits or belongs to others, making this an effective poverty-fighting strategy.

Table 2

Origin	Organizations in the <i>Asociación de Comunidades Forestales de Petén (ACOFOP)</i>
<p>"Petenero" Communities Dating from the early 20th century, these are settlements established along the routes for extracting chicle, timber, allspice and xate palm. They identify themselves as "Peteneros" due to their greater time in the zone.</p>	<p>Carmelita Cooperative in the municipality of San Andrés; promotion organizations –Suchitecos, Laborantes del Bosque, El Esfuerzo and Custodios de la Selva – in the city of Melchor de Mencos; and the Management and Conservation Organization Uaxactún OMYC in the municipality of Flores.</p>
<p>Communities arising from the dynamics of peasant land colonization</p> <p>These arose as a result of rural land colonization policies starting in the 1950s. Indigenous and mestizo peasants from the country's highlands, south and east migrated in search of access to land for farming and cattle raising.</p> <p>Additionally, the dynamics of rural land colonization combine with the potential for extractive activities. For example, along the route to Carmelita settlements are springing up with livelihoods that combine the extraction of non-timber products with subsistence farming and small-scale cattle raising.</p>	<p>Cooperatives around Sierra del Lacandón National Park: La Técnica, Monte Sinai, La Felicidad, Los Laureles, La Lucha.</p> <p>Forest associations – La Colorada, Cruce a la Colorada, La Pasadita, San Andrés and San Miguel La Palotada – in the municipality of San Andrés; Arbol Verde Civil Association in Flores.</p>
<p>Communities formed as a consequence of war and uprooting</p> <p>With the end of the war in the 1990s, settlements of repatriated people and demobilized combatants appear as a new forms of settlement and access to land.</p>	<p>Unión Maya Itzá (UMI) Cooperative, located to the southeast of Sierra del Lacandón National Park.</p> <p>Nuevos Horizontes Cooperative, in the municipality of Santa Ana, made up of demobilized combatants, which functions as a Private Management Unit.</p>

Source: Prepared by author



The less-advanced organizations are those that need, on the one hand, to strengthen social appropriation of community forest management and, on the other, improve their level of institutional development. They currently show little knowledge of forest management and their livelihood strategies still depend, for the most part, on subsistence agriculture. Most are concessions formed by migrant peasant communities and settlements and include the groups with the fewest hectares of forest that live within the concessions. Due to the origins of these communities, forest management was not an activity tied to their livelihood strategies, since they were more involved with farm work or the extraction of non-timber forest products. Rather, obtaining the concession was seen as a way to ensure the provision of resources and stabilize their access to land. In general, it has been more difficult for them to adapt to the different dimensions of forest management and what it entails.

Social capital and collective action: The underpinnings of institutional arrangements for integrated resource management

As we have seen, having guaranteed access to the forest has not automatically meant in all cases successful resource management and improved livelihood strategies. The way in which forest management has been adapted to the community's characteristics is also critical. Although the community's origin and the quality and quantity of the forest's resources are relevant factors, they do not appear to be determinants of the success of the process. Several of the less-advanced groups have concessions that are similar in size to successful groups. The case of Arbol Verde demonstrates that peasant migrants with good organizing ability can successfully take on the challenge of forest management. Another noteworthy case is the Unión Maya Itzá, a cooperative made up of indigenous repatriates, founded in a jungle area, with no overland access route or infrastructure. They have a small tract of forest, but they maintain strong social cohesion, which contributes significantly to strengthening community management. In 10 years, they have developed a strong sense of community living, ensuring resources and attaining notable improvements. They decided collectively to invest

part of the revenue obtained from managing the forest in social works such as transportation services and small community stores.

Social capital is a basic element in the institutional thrust of the organizations. In general, the communities that are more successful at management are those that have expanded the participation of various community sectors in the different phases of the forest management process. This enables them to significantly strengthen their institutional performance and make the qualitative leap to enterprise management. Organization in these communities has evolved toward more democratic management that promotes rotating leadership and the inclusion of young people and women in administration, forest management, non-timber product management and commercialization. Furthermore, they have invested in members' human capital, significantly improving local capacity and knowledge and developing a whole array of new technical skills. With these elements in their favor, they have begun a process of specializing functions and differentiating roles in running the community, technical activities and more recent enterprise activities.

In contrast, the less-advanced groups have low levels of social and human capital. Infighting and leadership through cronyism are common traits in these groups. The members' human capital continues to be scarce and in consequence, they face multiple difficulties in their organization's performance, which has kept them from differentiating trade association, technical and entrepreneurial roles.

Lessons for community resource management and rural land management

Community management and rural land management

Rural communities having access to natural resources and managing their use has proven to have extensive potential for exercising better control over the management of territories and constitutes an effective strategy for conservation and for improving livelihoods. Although this is

a promising experience, it is also confronting new and complex challenges in dealing with the economic integration scenario being promoted in Central America under the logic of free trade.

Conservation and natural resource management areas, such as the Mayan jungle, become attractive territories for large development ventures. The Puebla-Panama Plan and the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), the IDB-Mundo Maya tourism development proposal, and proposals such as expanding the Cuenca Mirador Park, can cause a shift in the conservation model and in community resource management projects, such as occurred with the creation of the MBR. In this context, the Petén experience highlights the importance of finding management methods for rural territories in Central America that take into account the complex mosaics of agricultural and natural landscapes, as well as their greater involvement in non-agricultural activities such as rural tourism or ecotourism.

Community resource management requires moving toward management methods that also include the conservation of natural riches (scenic beauty, wild flora and fauna) and the preservation of cultural goods (archeological and colonial sites, and vestiges of contemporary history). Clearly, this demands the development of new capacities in the communities and more integrated rural territorial management models. Furthermore, management of cultural goods needs to include building community tourism alternatives that can compete with traditional tourism controlled by private operators, which in many cases is leading to strong pressure to change land use in areas rich in biodiversity and landscape beauty.

It is also essential to develop agro-forestry models that could open a new range of

opportunities for diversifying livelihoods. Lastly, integrated territorial management also involves moving toward inclusive management where territorial actors play an active part in discussing the future, with regard to the significant changes underway with the economic integration of the Central American region.

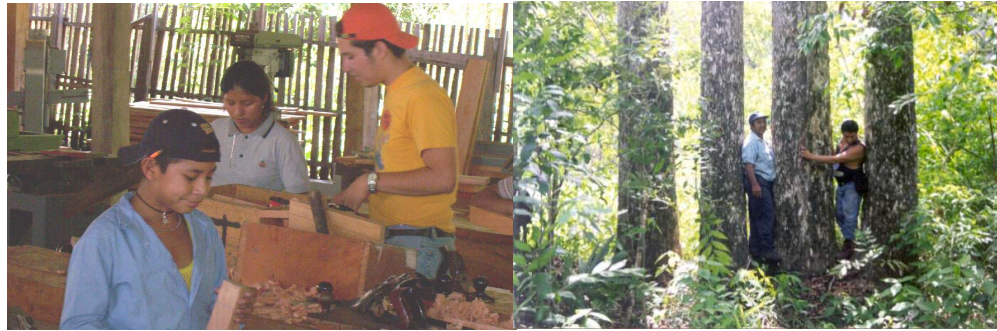
Strengthening community institutional fabric

It has been shown that a high level of social capital and collective action are critical elements for ensuring good management in the case of community resource management strategies and they form the basis for the development of a sustainable institutional framework. Another defining moment on the way to sustainability is market access.

Non-traditional export markets, such as the certified wood market or organic coffee, are emerging as development alternatives for rural communities, which in turn lead to the development of environmental-conservation-friendly farming or forestry practices. But this demands building new capacities and a broader comprehension of market dynamics. The great challenges of the community management model do not consist solely of seeking better markets, adding value to the product or converting into a business; it means creating an institutional framework for organizing community enterprise management based on developing arrangements that, taking into account the organization's identity, build skills for responding to the demands of the market.

Likewise, every community enterprise has to devise mechanisms for dealing with the inevitable tensions between social demands and entrepreneurial logic. Nascent community entrepreneurialism is a vehicle for development, which progresses at the pace of its actors, since it is based on their values and principles. This does not just mean the opportunity for creating direct and indirect employment, but also the





opportunity for turning the enterprise into a means for improving the social and human capital of the communities and their families.

Developing a model of their own that can meet the goals of the enterprise and of the community involves at a minimum: a) an investment in training and research to learn how to link up with markets and at the same time not lose sight of the community dimension; b) institutional reorganization, in order to more precisely define the venues for social-community and enterprise decision-making; and c) a clear definition of instruments, participatory strategic plans, and democratic leadership, that includes different community sectors, primarily women and youth.

Cooperation and accompaniment models

The case of the Petén forest communities shows us that any new experience in resource

management requires a large investment in strengthening the community's human capital stocks, which means, in the beginning, harnessing capacities from the outside. If the cooperation and technical assistance model is mounted on a base of highly-subsidized projects, with predefined, standard technical schemes, where the NGO takes the place of the communities in decision-making, this will generate dependency and predisposes outright failure.

Cooperation strategies for this type of process will be more advantageous to the extent that they develop more flexible methods that are committed to the process and its actors, considering their own pace and characteristics and channeling support that responds to each phase in the evolution of the experience. This assumes the creation of more flexible cooperation models, long-term commitments which invest in the institutional development of community organizations and their human capital, through improving local capacities and self-learning, in sync with the pace of the experience and its different phases.



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