

Helping Communities Conserve the Maya Biosphere Reserve

TO CARLOS CRASBORN, PRESIDENT OF THE CARMELITA forestry cooperative, it's clear that his community's future rests on the conservation of the surrounding forest. With the help of the Rainforest Alliance, Crasborn and his neighbors in Guatemala's Maya Biosphere Reserve have steadily increased the profits from their sustainable forestry businesses, and have invested more than a third of their earnings in community development, improved technology and sustainable management methods.

"Our parents protected this forest for our benefit, and it is our responsibility to protect it for future generations," reflects Crasborn. According to the 23-year-old cooperative leader, investments in a community sawmill, carpentry shop and training have

and ocellated turkeys. The Rainforest Alliance has certified 12 community and two private forestry operations in the reserve, and assesses them annually to ensure that they follow strict standards for protection of the environment and people.

Forest-Friendly Loggers Open Million-Dollar Markets

The Rainforest Alliance works around the world to protect ecosystems and the people and wildlife that depend on them by transforming land-use practices and consumer behavior. It pioneered the concept of sustainable forestry certification in 1989 by establishing the SmartWood program, which is accredited by the international Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC). Since 1989,



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allowed coop members to increase their earnings while reducing logging to less than one percent of their 141,000-acre (57,000-hectare) forest concession. Crasborn explains that the concession is divided into logging blocks, each of which will be allowed to recuperate for 40 years following timber extraction, whereas more than half of it is reserved for ecotourism and the sustainable harvest of decorative palm leaves and *chicle* tree sap — the traditional base of chewing gum.

Carmelita is one of 12 communities managing tracts of forest within the Maya Biosphere Reserve, a mosaic of concessions, national parks and other protected areas covering more than 3.7 million acres (1.5 million hectares) of wilderness in northern Guatemala. The reserve holds over a dozen important archaeological sites and such rare wildlife as jaguars, brocket deer, scarlet macaws



With the help of the Rainforest Alliance, the Maya Biosphere Reserve's community-managed forest concessions have lost less than 4 percent of their forest cover.

the Rainforest Alliance has certified more than 1,600 forestry operations in some 56 countries. In Central America and Mexico, the Rainforest Alliance works with and receives support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to help forest communities make better use of their wood and gain access to premium markets as part of the Certified Sustainable Products Alliance.

Those efforts have significantly improved community-based forestry in the Maya Biosphere, where communities have hired professional foresters to design and administer forest management plans, improved their administrative capacities, ensured safe working conditions and made various other changes in order to earn their certification. Once certified, the Rainforest Alliance helps these communities gain access to preferential international

markets and provides the training necessary to meet buyers' demands. As a result, certified operations are making weekly shipments of palm leaves to the United States and exporting milled wood and finished products, mostly manufactured from little-known woods such as *pucté* and *manchiche*, for which there was no market just a few years ago.

According to José Román Carrera, Rainforest Alliance forestry manager for Central America, the export of new products — and the access to buyers willing to pay higher prices for value-added certified wood — have provided much-needed additional income to the more than 6,000 people involved in managing the biosphere reserve's forest concessions. He notes that this has not only led to new jobs and improved household incomes, but that part of the profits have also been invested in community works such as a potable water system, new schools, clinics and an emergency medical fund for poor families. "The increased earnings not only raise living standards, they also raise people's awareness of the need to manage the forest in a sustainable manner," says Carrera.



Carlos Crasborn and his neighbors have steadily increased the profits from their sustainable forestry businesses, and have invested more than a third of their earnings in community development, improved technology and sustainable management methods.

older students to take computer courses in the nearest city. "We invest in education because we want the next generation to be well trained and capable of defending our interests," says Ax.

Foragers Double as Forest Rangers

The success of the Rainforest Alliance's strategy for conserving the area's natural resources is immediately apparent, especially when contrasted with the conditions found in nearby national parks. For example, Laguna del Tigre National Park, the reserve's largest protected area, has already lost more than 40 percent of its forests to illegal loggers and slash-and-burn farmers, whereas the concessions have lost less than 4 percent of their forest cover.

According to Benedín García, a former forest ranger and one of the founders of the organization that administers Uaxactún's forest concession, the reason the concessions are better conserved than the parks is that they are protected by the people who rely on them for their livelihoods. He explains that part of the money earned from the sale of certified wood is used to pay local forest guards who patrol the concession every day, but all of the



The community of Uaxactún has sold non-traditional wood species to several companies, produced special cuts of mahogany for Gibson Guitars and exports weekly shipments of jade palm leaves to a US floral supplier.

town's residents also contribute to that vigilance. "Our secret is that we have more than 150 people working in this forest, collecting palm leaves, chicle and allspice, and if one of them sees something happening that shouldn't be, they report it to us, and we send a delegation to that area immediately."

For Carrera, this community approach to conservation is not only the best means of protecting the Maya Biosphere Reserve, but could be the key to saving the region's other large wilderness tracts, all of which are threatened. A career conservationist, Carrera was the regional director of Guatemala's National Council of Protected Areas, having joined the organization when the biosphere reserve was created, and spent years battling illegal loggers and squatters before going to work for the Rainforest Alliance.

"I used to think that the way to protect the forest was to say, 'Stop, don't touch.' We put people in jail and confiscated the illegal wood, but the forest just kept getting smaller and smaller," explains Carrera. "I realize now that a more effective way to conserve the rainforest is to show the people who live there that they can make a better living by managing the forest sustainably than they would if they cut it down. This is something we are accomplishing in Guatemala and that we would like to repeat in and around Central America's other biosphere reserves, in order to ensure the survival of this region's endangered wilderness."



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The mission of the Rainforest Alliance is to protect ecosystems and the people and wildlife that depend on them by transforming land-use practices, business practices and consumer behavior. Companies, cooperatives and landowners that participate in our programs meet rigorous standards that conserve biodiversity and provide sustainable livelihoods.

Rainforest Alliance

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