



# Forestry in the Field

## Latin America and the Caribbean

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### Maya Biosphere Project: Community Concessions

#### Introduction

The Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR), located in the State of Peten in the extreme north of Guatemala, is the largest protected area in Central America, covering an area of 2.1 million hectares of lowland tropical forest. High population density on the Guatemalan Altiplano, concentration of land ownership on the south coast, and degradation of natural resources in the east, have led to high rates of immigration to the Peten region, resulting in massive deforestation. Other threats to the MBR's natural resources include oil concessions, illegal logging, and forest fires stemming from drought and slash-and-burn agriculture.

#### Approach

In 1990, the Maya Biosphere Project (MBP) began promoting sustainable agriculture and forestry, land titling, enterprise development, parks protection, and resettlement within the MBR. One of the most innovative and successful MBP programs has been support for NGO and government efforts to implement environmentally sound management of natural resources through viable, sustainable, income producing alternatives to deforestation. Beginning in 1994, USAID's government partner, CONAP (Guatemala's National Council for Protected Areas), began allocating the management of the Multiple Use Zone (MUZ) to neighboring community groups and to the forest industry in the form of forest concessions. By the end of 1999, CONAP had signed concession contracts for almost the entire MUZ, including seven granted to organizations formed by subsistence farmers.

Concessions have a 25-year, renewable contract with the state that requires long-term management plans for the conservation and sustainable production of forest products (such




as chicle, date palm, timber, allspice, rubber, medicinal plants, or botanicals) in exchange for the right to obtain economic benefits from public land. As a part of the contract, communities receiving concessions form cooperatives and share in the work and proceeds of wood harvested and sold. USAID supports technical assistance to these community organizations through international and local NGOs.

#### Results

Because the forest concessions are an innovation in Guatemala, procedures, regulations, roles and relationships are still evolving; however, results to date are impressive:

- At present, 28 MBR communities are participating actively in the development of sustainable forest management contracts and concessions on approximately 400,000 hectares of land.
- Community concession and cooperative organizations have served as buffers to the core zones of the parks of the MBR, helping to control illegal logging, fires, and settlements. USAID/Guatemala estimates that 700,000 hectares of forest have been saved from conversion to agriculture since 1990. The success of concessions in protecting against forest fires was starkly visible following recent drought years, with only three percent of the MUZ burned in 1998, to less than one percent during the 2000 fire season.

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- The production of forest products and the improved management of forest concessions have had both social and economic benefits for these communities, including revenues to community members and joint community projects, a change of community members' attitude about the forest, a strengthened community identity, and the creation of an organizational structure on which to build viable financial enterprises.
- Over the life of the project, the capacity of many local NGOs has been strengthened and they have assumed more responsibility for implementing MBP activities.
- Recently, CONAP established a policy that requires all concessions to make efforts to obtain independent certification of sustainable operations from an entity authorized by the international Forest Stewardship Council. Four community management units have already received such certification, and Guatemala now ranks first in the world with the largest number of hectares (100,026) of community-based forest being certified. In addition, several communities have begun to develop joint ventures with their former adversaries-- local sawmill industries-- for the processing and marketing of certified timber products.

### **Outstanding Issues**

- Some communities are still debating basic issues related to their initial management plan, while others have been sustainably harvesting for five years. Many partners do not have the capacity to systematically evaluate or report to USAID on the broader environmental impacts of concession activities.
- With basic organizational and technical infrastructures in place, the challenge now is

to build capacity for community organizations and emerging producer groups to function as independent and viable business enterprises. Needs include improved management, administration, internal organization, and negotiation and contract management skills.

- In order to improve the financial viability of forest management, products and markets need to be developed to utilize secondary timber species, strategic business relationships should be developed, and longer-term contractual relationships with industry or buyers should be encouraged.

### **Lessons Learned**

- Community forest concessions have created a sense of ownership and have proven to be an effective mechanism for building strong, local support for forest conservation on public lands.
- The most important factor in MBP success has been the project's continuity and persistence.

### **Additional Information**

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