

United Nations Development Programme
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Synthesis report



of the project

Recognition and support to Indigenous and Community
Conserved Areas (ICCAs) in northern Mesoamerica

Global Diversity Foundation, Mesoamerica Regional Programme

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**Recognition and support to Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA) in
Northern Mesoamerica**

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1. Introduction

The present document is the final synthesis report of the project "Recognition and support to Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs) in northern Mesoamerica." It summarizes the activities and results that the team of the Mesoamerican Regional Program of the Global Diversity Foundation (GDF-MA) achieved during 2009 and 2010.

This report includes the general results from the 4 thematic areas included in the original project proposal: 1) identification and documentation of ICCAs in northern Mesoamerica, 2) institutional capacity building of regional ICCAs, 3) promotion of acknowledgment and support for regional ICCAs, and 4) creation of a model towards the strengthening of ICCAs.

General results are synthesized and analyzed, describing lessons learned during the project, which permit the making of recommendations for possible strategies, strategic areas, and preferred project modalities to engage with indigenous groups and local communities in support of ICCAs.

The results presented here were complemented with the processes and results of two projects focused on research and promotion of community conservation in Mexico, on which GDF-MA is currently working. The first is conducted with support from the UK Darwin Initiative, for the development of participatory management for the ICCAs in two communities of La Chinantla, Oaxaca. The second is a research project funded by the Mexican Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) in conjunction with the European Union, which is evaluating the role of local participation in the activities and outcomes of forests and biodiversity conservation in Southeast Mexico. The approaches and results of these projects, combined with the results of the GEF-SGP funded project, have allowed GDF-MA to understand the environmental, social and political context for Mesoamerican ICCAs, and therefore, develop and refine a series of methods to support and strengthen the safeguarding of biodiversity and ecosystems in the rural and indigenous territories of northern Mesoamerica. The next step to build on these understandings is to share our lessons learned and analysis with those making decisions at the local community and all governmental levels.

2. Identification and documentation

Within the thematic area of identification and documentation, activities were proposed to complement an inventory of northern Mesoamerica ICCAs. The inventory had been previously initiated in 2007 (Camacho *et al.* 2007) in the Mexican states of Yucatán, Campeche, Quintana Roo, Chiapas and Oaxaca, as well as in Guatemala and Belize. The new inventory includes a review of new research, and new certified areas or areas which have come to the GDF team's attention in the past two years through other means. For Mexico, this review was extended to include the states of Distrito Federal, Estado de Mexico, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Michoacán, Morelos, Puebla, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí, Tabasco, Tlaxcala and Veracruz. The main objective of this thematic area was to have a database that allows us to understand the basic characteristics of regional ICCAs.

In the case of Mexico, the research work gave as a result an inventory of 301 cases, distributed in a preliminary classification of 5 categories:

1. Government certified areas – 146 cases
2. Community protected areas without official recognition – 121 cases
3. Protected areas with a forestry certification – 28 cases
4. Natural sacred sites – 3 examples
5. Wildlife management units – 3 examples

The Guatemalan inventory, includes 78 cases, distributed in the following categories:

1. Officially-recognized communal forests with community management – 31 cases
2. Community protected areas without official recognition – 30 cases
3. Community management areas (Unidades de manejo comunitario) – 17 cases

It is important to note that in Guatemala, the Promoting Group for Communal Lands (Grupo Promotor de Tierras Comunales) composed of several governmental and non-governmental organisations, has completed a comprehensive study to identify community conserved areas and strategies in the country. A final report of the study, finalised in 2008, can be accessed at:

<http://www.conap.gob.gt/Members/admin/documentos/documentos-centro-de-documentacion/conap-1/Diagnostico%20de%20Conservacion%20y%20Manejo%20de%20Recursos%20Naturales%20en%20Tierras%20Comunales.pdf>

The present inventory for Belize includes only 3 cases that meet the characteristics of the accepted definition of ICCAs. This situation may reflect land tenure and resources management limitations for local initiatives. But this also suggests that the real scope of community conservation in Belize has been understudied.

A database was created in the format of information sheets for each case, containing all the compiled information. Information fields for each case includes the name of the community involved, its population, ethnic groups present, local name for the area, type of recognition, principal ecosystem, and a brief description of its biodiversity and natural resources.

The database will not be shared publicly at this time, as we do not have the authorization of every one of the cases included to do so. Even so, this database will serve as a point of departure for its ongoing updating by the Mexican group of community conservation initiatives. It will be available to the members of the registered cases and will serve as a source for baseline study for later analysis.

3. Institutional capacity building

The main objective of this thematic area was the strengthening of regional ICCAs' institutional capacities, and integration of a local component through diverse activities directed to our case study partner, the Chinantla Alta Natural Resources Committee (Comité de Recursos Naturales de la Chinantla Alta, A.C., Corenchi) and its 6 member communities, plus some regionally focused activities. Among the local-level activities, we developed: 1) Institutional capacity building workshops for CORENCHI, 2) Community workshops for development of research agreements and research monitoring procedures, and 3) Fora for dialogue, analysis and reflection on community conservation. Regarding activities for institutional capacity building, we included campesino-to-campesino exchanges to promote dialogue, analysis and reflection about community conservation and their effects on the environment and the community.

Below, a synthesis of such activities is presented, and the details for each of those activities can be found in the accompanying document “Final report of workshops and consultations results”, which also provides material for results analysis and contact lists.

3. 1. Institutional capacity-building workshops for CORENCHI

During 2009 and 2010 several capacity-building workshops for Corenchi were developed by GDF-MA and by project partner Geoconservación, with the main objective of strengthening the Mexican protected area category of Voluntary Conserved Areas (VCAs), and producing community management programmes. The workshops were carried on in member communities of Corenchi, and included about 75 local participants. The workshops covered: a) 11 working sessions between GDF-MA and two local research teams for the development of a management programme for two local VCA; b) training on video production and video; c) a workshop on social science research methods; d) a workshop on community mapping and participatory Geographical Information Systems (pGIS); and e) workshops on national environmental legislation. As a result, two community research teams and a team of community videographers were consolidated; advances on a local management programme for natural resources were achieved; good research results on the local social and environmental characteristics were produced; and the workshops fostered active participation of other community members in the process.

3. 2. Community workshops for development of research agreements and research monitoring procedures

With the goal of implementing Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and strengthening local consultation processes through specific tools, some dialogue and capacity building workshops were carried out on the themes of collaboration agreements and procedures to monitor external research. These workshops were carried on in Corenchi member communities and were directed to local authorities and to the two community research teams. We had a total participation of 30 people at the meetings and workshops. As a primary result of this process, a draft of the collaboration agreement was drawn up between Corenchi and its member communities and GDF-MA for the two-year project “Management programmes for Indigenous Voluntary Conservation Areas in Oaxaca, México”, financed by the Darwin initiative of the United Kingdom. In addition, in each community a local council of elders with experience in community service exists to monitor the development of the activities of GDF-MA in the region.

3.3 Fora and exchanges for dialogue, analysis and reflection on community conservation

Among these activities, two fora for Corenchi communities and two campesino-to-campesino exchanges were included. These fora and exchanges were developed simultaneously or in concert with cross-sector workshops described in section 4 of this document. As with the previous activities, details of these events are found in the accompanying document “Final report of workshops and consultations results”. The four events that made up the fora and exchanges were: 1) First forum and campesino-to-campesino exchange, 2) Second intra-community forum, 3) Second campesino-to-campesino exchange and first multi-sectoral workshop, and 4) Second multi-sectoral workshop and third campesino-to-campesino exchange.

The first community forum was carried on simultaneously with the first campesino-to-campesino exchange on May 26 to 28 2009, in the Chinantec community of Santa Cruz Tepetotutla, to dialogue, analyse and reflect on community conservation practices and the ICCA designation. A consultation about the inclusion of local ICCAs in international databases was also carried out. With the participation of 27 people from Corenchi and the Campesino Ecotourism Network of Los Tuxtlas (RECT), the meeting allowed a rich exchange of views, experiences, needs and concerns between two important cases of community conservation within the country.

The second intra-community forum, facilitated by GDF and Geoconservacion, was conducted in the community of San Antonio del Barrio, with the main objective of revisiting local community conservation strategies, especially given the issuance of an open call to design and develop a prior justified study (*Estudio Previo Justificativo*, EPJ) to establish a Protected Area in the Chinantla, promoted by the National Commission for Protected Natural Areas (Conanp), through the project “Integrated Management of Ecosystems in three Priority Eco-regions” (MIE). The workshop had an audience of 25 participants, inhabitants and authorities of the six member communities of Corenchi.

The second exchange took place simultaneously with the first cross-sector community conservation workshop, in Xalapa, Veracruz. Co-organized by diverse civil organizations, the meeting had as a general objective to share experiences and conduct a deep analysis of community conservation strategies in Mexico and their interaction with international initiatives, as well as carrying out a consultation on the inclusion of local ICCAs on international databases. 80 people,

from 12 Mexican states, participated during two days of work, through paper sessions, focus groups and plenaries.

The third *campesino* exchange took place at the same time as the second cross-sector workshop on community conservation, both with a regional and international scope, since we had the presence of diverse Mesoamerican countries. It took place on 7th March 2010 prior to the III Mesoamerican Congress of Protected Areas (III CMAP) in Mérida, Yucatan. The meeting was co-organised by GDF and several other civil, academic and government organisations. The overall objective of the event was to link the strengthening of voluntary community-based conservation work being done in various Central American countries with work in southeast Mexico. Plans were also made for further dialogue, analysis and reflection on conservation practices and community protection, and on the establishment of community-based conservation areas and other strategies concerning territorial management in safeguarding biological diversity. We had the participation of 44 people from 8 Mesoamerican countries: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, México, Nicaragua and Panamá. The workshop/exchange covered concrete experiences of community conservation and sustainable management of natural resources in Mesoamerica. A plenary discussion examined shared needs, and generated an enumeration of common needs and perspectives on joint work for drawing up a conservation agenda between Mexico and Central America.

4. Acknowledgment and support for regional ICCAs

With the goal of promoting the recognition of regional ICCAs among the general public and the relevant political spheres, this thematic area included: 1) community consultations; 2) review of the changes in Mexican legislation relevant to community conservation; 3) Review of the laws and policies affecting ICCAs in Mexico, and the national accords concerning the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD) and United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP); 4) Multi-sectoral workshops; and 5) dissemination of results. The following paragraphs describe the

methods and overview of results obtained from each component. The detailed results can be found in the accompanying documents specified in each point.

4. 1. Community Consultations

This section included consultations on: a) the optimization of recognition and support for regional ICCAs; and b) the inclusion of documented ICCAs in international databases like the Global Database of Protected Areas of UNEP-WCMP. These consultations were carried out during the forums and workshops described above in section three of this document. Detailed descriptions and more complete information concerning these consultations are available in the accompanying document, entitled “Final report of workshop and consultations results.”

In the case of consultations concerning recognition and support of regional ICCAs it is worth mentioning that, in general terms, the actors consulted seek a recognition at a variety of levels: within the community, at distinct levels of government, within academic institutions, and within civil society more broadly. In addition to a series of actions laid out in detail for each level or sector (see accompanying document), one of the basic ways of recognising and supporting ICCAs is to reinforce the recognition of property rights and the collective rights that go along with these. IN the same fashion, all the costs of conservation, which are incurred by communities, must be recognised, be it monetarily or in kind.

A variety of forms of support are also sought from the different social sectors mentioned above, as long as responsibilities are clearly established, along with a concrete plan of action for its effective execution, as well as concrete, long-term financing mechanisms. The support requested includes actions as varied as: help with the promotion of community organization; capacity-building and training; creation of working and learning networks; the creation of forums for the exchange of experiences; making available financing mechanisms; research investigations that assist with and adapt to the necessities and socio-cultural context of each site; and support for the creation of information systems, among others.

With respect to the consultations concerning the inclusion of documented ICCAs in international databases, the results of consultation were very similar in all the events conducted. The participants, both community members and members of other interested groups, mentioned pros and cons of appearing in public databases. Among the advantages they considered that the sharing of

local experiences at the international level would lead to greater recognition and to gaining access to economic resources, to the exchange of experiences with other groups involved in related efforts, and to the search for shared solutions to legal and management problems. Nonetheless, the interested parties wished to be cautious in the type of information that is integrated into these inventories, since this could be interpreted in skewed ways. To some government representatives it seemed important to develop national agreements prior to the publication of the information in international sources. Another point raised was to recognize the limitations of the inventories, since these could just turn into a listing of information that oversimplifies the great diversity and complexity of the ICCAs of each country. Leaving out the experiences not recognized by governments or in the literature. By the same token, the available human and economic resources are inadequate to develop information that has been duly verified with communities, or to obtain Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) to publish the information, as this requires a great deal of time and resources to visit and consult with each of the communities involved. Some participants expressed certain fear of publicly and internationally exposing information about their areas, resources, and forms of organisation.

4. 2. Review of relevant legal changes in Mexico

In recent decades Mexico has provided a good case study for ICCAs, due principally to legislation that permits communal landholding, and indigenous and campesino movements for socio-cultural and ecological claims. Similarly, Mexican legislation has been modified in the last several years to include community conservation in its environmental policies, as a way to comply with the international trends and obligations. The component of the report includes a review of the most recent legal changes concerning community conservation in general and the establishment of ICCAs in particular, and casts a brief light on the rest of the Mexican legislation related to the environment, indigenous peoples, and socio-economic development.

The accompanying document, “Final report on legal review of ICCAs in Mexico”, takes up this review and presents a brief analysis. Additionally, an article was developed, entitled “Negotiating the web of Law and Policy: Community Designation of Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas in Mexico”. Published in the October 2010 issue of Policy Matters journal, edited by the IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy. This paper further analyses the complex reality in which international agreements and national laws integrate with local customs, to create an

enabling context for the creation of ICCAs, a conservation model with an impressive past and an uncertain future. In addition, the paper documents the broader web of laws and policies that affects the security of land and resource tenure in Mexico.

4.3. Multi-sectoral workshops

Within the scope of activities focused on recognition and support of regional ICCAs, two multi-sectoral workshops were held. Participants were key ICCAs stakeholders such as communities, NGOs, academics, researchers and government. The details of these events can be seen at the accompanying document “Final report of workshops and consultations results”.

The objective of these multi-sector workshops was to create a space for dialogue, analysis and reflection among actors with distinct roles and points of view. This was designed to encourage the wider recognition of ICCAs and to lead to proposals for support based in the diversity of possible actions and subject positions represented.

Two multi-sector workshops were conducted, the first with a regional focus, held in the city of Xalapa, Veracruz, in August of 2009. Present were 80 people, coming from indigenous communities, campesinos, academic institutions, NGOs and the governmental sector. The second, entitled “Working session on community conservation experiences in Mesoamerica: creating links between experiences,” took place on 7th March 2010 prior to the III Mesoamerican Congress of Protected Areas (III CMAP) in Mérida, Yucatan, with the participation of 44 people from 8 Mesoamerican countries.

In both workshops a series of themes were covered to build a rich dialogue and common agreements on community conservation strategies, the diversity of such strategies, its needs and existing support, and the identification of agendas and common objectives among the Mexican states or countries represented.

4.5. Dissemination of results

The sharing of the information and processes generated in the aforementioned encounters, and in the research conducted, facilitates better knowledge of ICCAs. This at once supports their recognition as an acceptable conservation strategy, and the search for actions to continue to strengthen these arrangements.

The dissemination of the results of this project has been carried out both formally and informally, through meetings for their discussion, and presentations in conferences and congresses. IN this way we have communicated the achievements and promoted a broader dialogue concerning important and sometimes overlooked elements affecting ICCAs.

The specific events where dissemination of the project preliminary results were presented include:

- a) Presentation of the paper “Community Conserved Areas In Northern Mesoamerica. A review of their status and needs,” at the III Mesoamerican Congress of Protected Areas, 2010. Mérida;
- b) Presentation of the paper “Community participation in biodiversity conservation” at “Interdisciplinarity, participation, biodiversity and natural resources management,” a seminar held at the Social Research Institute, Autonomous University of Mexico;
- c) Two discussion groups (August 2009 and May 2010), within the research work conducted by the Conservcom research consortium. This consortium consists of two Mexican institutions: the Institute of Ecology, A.C. (INECOL) and the Autonomous University of Campeche (UAC); and two European institutions: the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) and the Centre for Biocultural Diversity, School of Anthropology and Conservation, University of Kent (Kent, UK), in association with the Global Diversity Foundation (GDF). Together, these institutions are undertaking a research project entitled “Community Conservation: The role of local participation in biodiversity conservation: Case studies in southeastern Mexico”.

5. Recommendations and Lessons Learned

The work conducted thanks to the GEF-SGP program has allowed GDF-MA team to carry on a comprehensive study of the status and needs of ICCAs in northern Mesoamerica. Although the community conservation movement is complex and adaptable, defined by social, environmental and political nuances in each country, we have gathered a series of lessons that will be helpful towards the support and recognition of such an important conservation approach.

Our study shows that collective environmental management is a fundamental precondition of all the ICCAs inventoried. Historical or traditional natural management systems become an endogenous root of community conservation, which work as the foundation for a diversity of exogenous drivers, including national legislation (see accompanying document “Final report on legal review of ICCAs in Mexico”), forestry initiatives, governmental certification schemes, community territorial planning, government development programs, and payment for environmental services. A further analysis of these drivers can be found in Martin and colleagues 2010 at: http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/policy_matters_17___pg_173_204.pdf

Aside from these drivers, there are conditions that currently go far beyond local control, the first being the lack of recognition of common land in some countries (Guatemala and Belize, for example), to provide security for community conservation strategies and sustainable production in the long term. The second is the lack of coherence between some of the various extant national and state policies, which contradict the apparent desire to include communities in conservation programmes.

The inventory prepared during this study, enriched with the registers and inventories conducted by national governments, researchers and NGOs, hardly includes all the diversity and magnitude of existing conservation experiences. Regional ICCAs could be countless and hard to identify, if we take into account all the communities that care for and protect specific areas and resources without external recognition or support. In countries where communities have *de jure* (Mexico) or *de facto* (Guatemala) control over their resources and lands, locally based protection of

natural areas represents a promising prospect for the conservation of natural resources.

Nevertheless, communities and natural areas are under a series of constant pressures. Political and economic conditions in Mesoamerican countries create threats to rural livelihoods and the natural resources upon which people depend. Current context makes necessary some kind of external assistance in most cases, to help communities to maintain their territories and resources, while satisfying their livelihoods needs. On this line, our results suggest that community conservation can be successful if the communities involved have sufficient capacity to: a) understand economic, social and political pressures that alienate rural people from their links with the natural environments; b) comprehend and apply the variety of conservation and management laws and regulations; c) decide, negotiate, develop and evaluate their own conservation projects; and most importantly d) maintain their control over the use and protection of their natural resources.

Results of consultations, meetings and workshops conducted during the project reinforced the framework we postulated in our original proposal, that strategic areas for ICCA support are grouped into the themes of: (1) legislation and policy, (2) financial needs, (3) participation and communication, (4) productive activities and poverty alleviation, (5) human rights, (6) capacity building and (7) research. Communities that maintain ICCAs want to be recognised as effective models for the protection of natural resources, and want to be supported to maintain their characteristics as ICCAs, while providing a high quality of life for their inhabitants.

Thoughtful dialogues and discussion in meetings and workshops showed that main strategies to engage with indigenous groups and local communities in support of ICCAs should be preferably conducted through local representatives, helping them to form regional networks. Well-organised ICCA networks will be in a position to satisfy concrete needs, such as promoting recognition of their experiences in diverse spheres. Support to regional networks should focus on building their capacity to establish strategic planning that covers community organization, community-wide participation, and interaction with governments (federal, state, and municipal), and researchers.

Support to regional networks should also include:

1. Guidance and resources to link local, regional and national efforts to international processes.
2. Guidance and resources to create information systems.
3. Guidance and resources to generate effective communication.

For more details on these strategies and strategic areas, please see accompanying document “Final report of workshops and consultations results.”

A final crucial point is that territorial and collective rights concerning natural resources and the right of consultation to achieve FPIC should also be seriously taken into account in every programme or project supported by the GEF-SGP. Misinterpretation of these rights leads to uncertainty and produce obstacles in the path of the management and care of the land.

6. Consultation methods employed

Throughout the project, diverse consultation methods were followed, as described:

Literature and document review

A comprehensive literature and document review was conducted at the beginning of the project, covering government conservation policies in Mexico, Guatemala and Belize, academic papers addressing the complexity of community conservation in the region, and regional ICCA inventories previously prepared by government, research centres, NGOs, or conservation organisations.

Open interviews to key stakeholders

10 open interviews were conducted with key stakeholders to determine a knowledge and conceptual baseline for the events carried on during the project. Each interview covered a variety of themes such as local knowledge and meaning of “conservation”, recognition and local importance of community conservation, local organisation for decision making about the management and use of territories and natural resources, land tenure, relationships between local initiatives and governmental conservation programmes, perceived strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for community conservation, national and international legislation, population and natural resources use, and existence and need for management programmes for natural resources use. Interviewees included 4 community representatives, 2 researchers, 2 government representatives and 2 NGO representatives.

The results of the interviews provided important insights and information to prioritise and design the content covered in the fora, workshops, and exchanges.

Fora, workshops and exchanges

In each of the different events organised throughout the project, a series of group consultation and analysis tools were used, as described. The consultation and analysis methods used during each event were:

1. First forum and campesino-to-campesino exchange:
 - Group interview;
 - Historical diagram;
 - Matrix of community conservation justification and causes;
 - Matrix of community conservation results and consequences;
 - SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis;
 - Sociogram;
 - Weighted ranking
2. Second intra-community forum:
 - Focus groups;
3. Second campesino to campesino exchange and first cross-sector workshop:
 - Matrix of community conservation justification, causes and achievements;
 - SWOT analysis;
 - Focus groups
4. Second cross-sector workshop and third campesino-to-campesino exchange:
 - Focus groups

Contacts

A contact list was produced, comprising all the participants to the fora, exchanges and workshops. The people included in this list include community, NGO, government, and academic representatives interested and/or actively participating in the community conservation movement in Mexico and Guatemala. This list can be provided upon request.