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## Paraguay: Two pieces of good news for the Totobiegosode and for Humanity

The Ayoreo group (self denominated Ayoreode: “the true men or true people” comprising various clans, inhabit a region of the Paraguayan Chaco covering the Departments of Alto Paraguay and Boqueron,

The territory traditionally used by the Ayoreo people has always been vast with ecological characteristics of high biological diversity, providing the opportunity for multiple uses in terms of economy and nutrition. This territory, covering an area of 2.8 million hectares, includes practically the whole northern Chaco, except for the regions close to the large rivers and part of the transition zone between the Chaco and the Mojos savannahs in Bolivia.

In their great majority, the Ayoreo have been displaced by the occupation of their lands by farming, which has subjected them to great dependency on the religious missions and the regional market. However, one of these clans, the Totobiegosode (“the people from the place of the peccary”), have managed to continue living in voluntary isolation, applying economic land use systems based on hunting and gathering. For these activities it is essential for them to conserve forests, lagoons, streams and grasslands.

Over the past decades the continuous occupation of their territories, in addition to deforestation and destruction of the habitats that were their productive base, has implied the reduction of their territories as their mobility has been curtailed by the destruction of natural resources. This process has relied on the scant political and economic will to halt the encroachment of the cattle-raising frontiers on the final remnants of their ancient domains.

Considering the defencelessness of these groups, as a measure of protection at governmental level the competent national institutions with the support of civil society organizations such as “Iniciativa Amotocodie” (the Amotocodie Initiative) and the Totobiegosode Support Group (GAT), have promoted a plan to extend the Paraguayan Chaco Biosphere Reserve to incorporate the Natural and Cultural Ayoreo Totobiegosode Heritage within its limits.

Concurrently, the Government requested that the Paraguayan Chaco be declared a Biosphere Reserve included in the UNESCO World Network. The good news is that UNESCO has given its formal recognition of the Gran Chaco Biosphere Reserve proposal which, at the request of the Gran Chaco Biosphere Reserve Management Committee, covers the whole of the North of the Paraguayan Chaco and is extended to include the extensions promoted by Iniciativa Amotocodie (which is a member of this Management Committee) and by GAT, that is to say, the whole Amotocodie zone as well as the Cultural and Natural Heritage zone established by GAT in the eastern area of the Totobiegosode’s habitat.

The other piece of good news is that Iniciativa Amotocodie has concluded the first purchase of lands in Amotocodie. This is a 3,740 hectare plot that is part of the present habitat of one of the groups in voluntary isolation – the land purchased will be allocated to them and to the Ayoreo ethnic group in

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general.

The conclusion of this first purchase was possible thanks to the assistance of the Netherlands Committee for IUCN) and an important complementary donation by a friend to the Ayoreo's cause.

The presence of the Totobiegosode in the area guarantees its preservation, since their culture, that has enabled them to live for centuries in harmony with their environment without destroying it, makes them the best guardians of nature. In the words of Benno Glauser, of Iniciativa Amotocodie, "This is part of what the forest Ayoreo, with their cultural, spontaneous and natural way of being, are giving to the world of today: a different and diverse way of being, that not only sustains the environmental integrity of the Chaco forest where they live, but also sustains a diverse awareness and presence that without them would be lacking in the world of today."

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