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## The Indigenous and Campesino Biological Corridor in Central America

Biological corridors are linear strips of vegetation that provide a continuous or near continuous pathway between habitats. They constitute a strategy used in nature conservation to cope with the problem of habitat fragmentation provoked by economic activities such as industrial agriculture and tree plantations, urbanizations and infrastructure works like highways and dams. Based upon modern theories of Ecology applied to conservation --e.g. island biogeography, metapopulations and minimum viable population-- the core idea of biological corridors is that natural populations, communities and ecological processes are more likely to be maintained in landscapes that comprise an interconnected system of habitats. The aim is thus to create a space for the free passage of animals and seeds to connect valuable areas from the point of view of biodiversity, which otherwise would sooner or later disappear.

Due to its location in the tropics and the different landscapes it comprises Central America hosts one of the major levels of biodiversity in the world. The Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (MBC), originally proposed in 1996, is an interesting initiative for the necessary conservation of biodiversity in this continent. According to the Central American Commission on Environment and Development the corridor is "a system of territorial planning formed by natural protected areas under a special regime; core, buffer, multiple use and interconnected areas, organized and consolidated in order to provide an array of environmental goods and products to the Central American and the global society, offering spaces for social harmonization to promote investments in the conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources, with the aim of contributing to the improvement of the quality of life of the inhabitants of the region".

Since human societies have occupied practically the whole of the Earth's surface, biodiversity is the result of the interaction between the natural world and human cultures. Thus every biodiversity conservation project should have a social and cultural component, which at least implies the inclusion of the viewpoints and the traditional knowledge of local dwellers. This is especially remarkable in Central America, where the relationship between human societies and forests is ancestral. Nevertheless, the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor was too much focused on preservation, ignoring the importance of rural communities for conservation.

In 1998 CICAFOC --a coordinating body of fifty Central American campesino and indigenous organizations founded in 1994-- proposed the creation of the so called Biological Indigenous and Campesino Corridor. The idea was widely accepted at the international level but initially resisted by the promoters of the MBC. The work of CICAFOC after the sad experience of the devastating Hurricane Mitch in 1998 clearly showed that the activity of local peasants and indigenous people was essential both to reduce the vulnerability of the region --its forests included-- to such kind of phenomena that are typical to the tropics, and to quickly recover the affected areas. Community-based practices, based on a rich cultural and ecological heritage, have been and still are an alternative for biodiversity conservation in a continent severely affected by civil wars, social conflicts and destructive export oriented activities.

As a result, in 1999 the Central American Commission on Environment and Development accepted

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the idea proposed by CICAFOC, including it into the MBC as the Social and Productive Component (SPC). This constitutes a regional strategy of rural development aimed at coordinating the efforts to protect and conserve the heritage of biodiversity as well as natural resources in Central America, and to enhance environmentally friendly activities in nearby woodlands and in the reserve areas of the region. CICAFOC is in charge of the coordination and direction of the SPC.

The SPC has been programmed to be operational during five years. What is now happening is that during the initial phase of the projects, cases of sustainable use of natural resources and biodiversity conservation are being identified, disseminated and given support. The strong linkage between natural and cultural biodiversity is underscored. In this way, CICAFOC is strongly contributing to a new type of conservation approach which appears to have much more chances of success than the previous approaches based on the exclusion of local peoples.