
Guatemala: Community forest concession initiative at Petén questioned

A new type of forest conservation initiative is being implemented in Guatemala since 1995. According to its promoters, it attempts to couple community-based sustainable development with the protection of the Petén forests in the multiple use zone of the Maya Biosphere Reserve, the largest protected area in Central America.

The government has recently granted five community organizations --formed mostly by subsistence farmers-- permission to log trees in their neighbouring forests over the next 25 years. The process is being monitored to see how effective these locally managed forest concessions will be, both in curbing deforestation and in providing cash to local residents. The Costa Rica based Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center (CATIE), the Guatemala's Park Agency, (CONAP), two national NGOs ("Naturaleza para la Vida" - Nature for Life and "Propetén") and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) are supporting these concessions in the area.

From the official viewpoint, the increase of the population in the Petén area is the main factor for forest degradation and destruction. The government argues that the population of Petén --which nowadays is composed of some 90,000 inhabitants-- is expanding at a high rate, and that since 1986 settlers have deforested nearly 10 percent of the reserve area. The rationale of the initiative is that communities with concessions which have a contract with the state will prevent other people from settling in the area or convert the forest to other uses, and at the same time obtain economic benefits from forest exploitation. Communities that do not adhere to their contracts would lose their concessions.

Nevertheless, such view ignores the influence of other activities provoking the degradation of the reserve, as for example oil concessions granted by the government itself (see WRM Bulletin 21) and illegal logging which has affected especially cedar (*Cedrela odorata*) and mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*).

Additionally, the above referred concessions are focused on timber production, ignoring that forests are not only a source of wood for local communities, which find many uses from the non-timber forest products provided by the forest. As a result, granting of concessions has focused exclusively on timber production. For example, the community of Uaxactún found it difficult to get a concession, since its plans did not include logging but the exploitation of non-timber products. Some communities which derived their livelihoods from the use of different forest products, mainly "xate" (*Chamaedorea* spp.) and "chicle" (*Manilkara achras*) are increasingly devoting themselves to log extraction, which has created internal conflicts between those who want to maintain their traditional lifestyle and those who prefer logging.

The concept of "sustainable forest use" is also under question because social and environmental impacts of logging have not been taken into account, and it is doubtful that in all cases a monetary gain will be obtained. There are also allegations that the activities of the accompanying NGOs have not benefitted the communities and are said to have focused on perpetuating themselves. At least one of them has been questioned for trying to interfere in the internal organization of peasant

communities, while its activities should be limited to help them during the process of community forest management.

All the above has led to different opinions regarding this approach, which will need to be thoroughly analysed before moving forward. Local communities --and not external actors-- should be the real beneficiaries and non-wood products should be given priority over timber production in order to ensure the sustainable use of the forest and the well-being of the local population.

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