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Series 4: Programme 1 (of 11) - 'Think Global, Act Natural'

Report 6 (of 6): Turtle Power - Honduras

Introduction

The Mosquitia area of eastern Honduras is part of the Greater Mosquitia Ecosystem, one of the last great wilderness regions in Central America. Boasting rich natural and cultural heritages, it is recognised as a world-class conservation area, with rainforest, pine forest and an important coastal-marine area. These are home to wetlands, lagoons, mangroves and the world's second largest coral reef. The Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve, within the Mosquitia area, has the largest relatively intact area of rainforest remaining north of the Amazon. In 1982 the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organisation (UNESCO) recognised the reserve as a world heritage site because of its rich natural and cultural diversity.

The Mosquitia region is home to four indigenous groups - the Miskito, Tawahka, Pesch and Garifuna - who have maintained the forest for centuries. The Miskito Indians are the dominant group in the region, traditionally making a living by subsistence agriculture, fishing, hunting and gathering from the forest and occasional wage labour. Compared to other areas of Honduras, these peoples have been able to keep their distinctive cultural identity because of the region's isolation. However, their resource base is under pressure from both national and external interests wanting to exploit the forest and natural resources of the region.

The main environmental threats include large-scale cattle ranching, logging operations, and petroleum and mineral exploration. These could potentially lead to deforestation, gradual loss of vegetation and wildlife, air and water contamination, soil depletion and nutrient loss. A local non-governmental organisation, MOPAWI or Mosquitia Pawisa (meaning development of the Mosquitia), has been working alongside local communities for over 15 years. Nominated for the UNDP's Equator Initiative, a project designed to reward conservation projects in the equatorial belt, they have recognised that change and development in the region is inevitable. MOPAWI are ensuring that when change does occur it is culturally, economically and environmentally sustainable.

Sustainability

MOPAWI's work focuses on ecological sustainability and strengthening of indigenous technical knowledge and resource management. Their work combines ecological conservation with the socio-economic needs of the local population. The majority of MOPAWI's field and administrative staff are indigenous locals who work from field offices within La Mosquitia and neighbouring towns. They understand and are sympathetic to local customs and traditions, and they are committed to the conservation of their natural biodiversity.

MOPAWI facilitates the co-development of people and resources, with the emphasis on local participation. They also carry out a mixture of participatory development activities, advocacy and criticism of government policy to secure

land access and resources for the communities of the region.



For the Miskito families in the Rio Platano region, ecotourism combined with income generation is just one of the many integrated development activities supported by MOPAWI. Other activities include the cultivation of organic cocoa by peasant farmers in the Rio Patuca region and community forest management in the Rio Mocerón region.

Ecotourism and Income Generation

Ecotourism offers the subsistence farmers an alternative source of income, while ensuring conservation of the natural biodiversity. More than 100 indigenous Miskito and Pech in communities neighbouring the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve have received training in ecotourism by MOPAWI. This includes training in guide services, food transportation and housing for tourists. An ecotourism management strategy is being prepared for this World Heritage Site.

Sustainable Agriculture and Community Forest Development

MOPAWI promotes the importance of appropriate management of forest resources throughout the region. In the Mocerón zone, MOPAWI has supported and trained communities in the use of 68,000 hectares of land allocated to them for 40 years by the Government. A management plan for 3500 hectares of pine forest and 14,500 hectares of broadleaved forest has also been prepared. The traditional economy of La Mosquitia was based on shifting cultivation supplemented by hunting, gathering, fishing and trading. It drew on the resources of the forest without destroying it and was dependent on communal access to land. The beginning of a market economy and the loss of communal management traditions began to increase social inequality. While this trend cannot be reversed, key areas of communal resource management can be safeguarded.

MOPAWI has worked to improve people's livelihoods by identifying models of resource use, involving local communities in decision making and management. Setting up small businesses and experimenting with agriculture and agro-forestry are two examples. This was initially difficult as the region is isolated and people lacked the necessary skills and experience. MOPAWI persevered and the programme has now expanded to include food security and improved health and nutrition through the cultivation of vegetables.

The sustainable agriculture and agro-forestry programme covers 48 communities and involves 700 families and 20 primary schools. Farmers are encouraged to diversify and consider alternatives to the traditional hunter-gathering activities.

Technical assistance focuses on agro-industrial crops, plantains and bananas, basic grains and family garden plots. The cultivation of organic cocoa constitutes the only source of income for 600 families.

Other Projects

MOPAWI supports a wide range of additional projects in the region.

Marine turtle conservation

MOPAWI supports more than 100 inhabitants of Plaplaya in a protection programme for marine turtles. They patrol 12 km of beach and protect nests, monitoring them until the baby turtles are born. To date, 5967 baby turtles have been born and set free in the ocean.



Butterfly farm

The only butterfly farm in Honduras has raised butterflies for exportation. Zoos and museums in the USA buy the pupas that then convert into butterflies within exhibition houses. Based in the community of Raista, this is one of the main ecotourist attractions in the Rio Plantano Biosphere Reserve.

Environmental education

MOPAWI focuses its environmental education activities on the protection of three reserves: the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve, the Tawahka-Asangni Biosphere Reserve and the Patuca National Park. They design and distribute reference posters, stickers and children's colouring books and provide training for teachers and children in natural resource protection.

Diver training

MOPAWI supports the training of divers involved in the lobster export trade. Divers have been taught safe diving techniques through courses run by trained Miskito instructors. This educational process has contributed towards the reduction of common health problems such as decompression syndrome and paralysis.

Intercultural bilingual education



Language lessons

MOPAWI promotes an intercultural bilingual education curriculum and through this the Bilingual Education Committee of the Honduran Mosquitia (CEBIMH) has been established. Currently 150 teachers and 3000 pupils are benefiting from new Miskito-Spanish teaching and learning materials which are increasing students' skills in reading, writing and oral communication. The Honduran Ministry of Education has officially approved this curriculum.

Green Iguana Protection

MOPAWI supports two local initiatives for the protection and management of green iguanas by attempting to increase local awareness and undertake research. In Sico Paulaya a group has been involved in teaching local children and adults about the iguanas.

Credit and micro-enterprise

Through eight village banks, this programme has provided loans to 110 women who have established their own small businesses, generating employment, income and family savings. Their micro-enterprise initiatives include butchers' shops, libraries and the sale of clothing and mosquito nets.

Preventive healthcare

The Preventive Health Care Programme promotes education in sanitation and distributes Spanish and Miskito educational materials covering basic hygiene and the prevention of epidemics. It also includes the rehabilitation of water and sanitation infrastructure including the provision of water systems, water tanks for health centres and water pumps for family use. A wood stove and chimney improvement project has recently been initiated to reduce respiratory diseases and the use of firewood.

Biodiversity and Poverty Reduction

Sustainable cultivation and management of the forest has the potential to reduce poverty, while at the same time preserving the natural environment and ecosystems. It also provides the indigenous communities with alternative means of making a living.

There is some evidence that sustainable production capacity has increased within the communities. In particular, the production of organic cocoa, improved forest management practices and the development of ecotourism have brought benefits to over 1000 families in the region. As a result, more children have been enrolled in schools and some have gone to university. Development of micro-enterprise skills has wide-ranging benefits. The establishment of micro-businesses in conjunction with the ecotourism has significantly reduced pressure on natural resources and created a positive attitude towards conservation of biodiversity within the community. Strengthening the social organisational structure and empowering the people is improving participation of the community in the struggle for land and resources rights.

Combining forest conservation with income generation has brought various benefits to the communities and to the Mosquitia region. The giant loggerhead

and leatherback sea turtles and the green iguana, all in danger of extinction, are protected by the activities of the ecotourism programme. The programme teaches awareness and respect for the natural breeding grounds and habitats. The butterfly farm within the Miskito community is encouraging conservation of the tropical rainforest as a source of non-timber forest products that can bring many benefits to the people. The ecotourism micro-enterprises have demonstrated that protecting biodiversity is far more beneficial than hunting and cutting the trees for timber.

Lessons Learned

Involving local people from the beginning is key to success. They describe their needs and participate in the search for a solution. MOPAWI has been a catalyst for change, listening to and learning from the indigenous people. Staff understand the values and traditions of the Miskito way of life, recognising the need for change if they are to survive.

Given the confidence to stand up for their own rights, the women members of Miskito, Garifuna and Mestizo groups have formed action and advocacy groups to campaign for the protection of the forests. Armed with their new skills and knowledge they are able to make decisions and influence others on issues that affect their own lives.

Working to change government policy for the region through lobbying and advocacy, together with community involvement, has proven to improve livelihoods without harming the environment.

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The Nature Conservancy works with communities around the world to preserve plants, animals and natural communities that represent diverse ecological regions. They have been working with MOPAWI to promote conservation in the Rio Plantano Biosphere Reserve.

Websites

<http://www.equatorinitiative.org/>

The Equator Initiative is designed to reduce poverty through the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the equatorial belt by fostering, supporting and strengthening community partnerships.

www.jpviewfinder.com/travel/country/honduras/favorite.htm

Provides information on ecotourism in Honduras, including information on lodgings, ecotours and the indigenous peoples who live there.

www.nativeplanet.org/ngo/ngo1.htm

Native Planet is a non-profit organisation providing information on indigenous peoples around the world. This link takes you to a list of non-profit organisations or NGOs who support the cause of indigenous peoples.

Further reading

Books with underlined titles can be downloaded for free by clicking on them. Others can be ordered from the relevant address.

Community-based Forestry Management

IUCN - World Conservation Union Books

Participatory techniques for community forestry: A field manual

W.J. Jackson and A.W. Ingles

US\$18, IUCN, 1998, ISBN: 2-8317-0384-0

Provides a wealth of practical tools and methods for field workers who work with local communities in developing collaborative management of forests. While the manual focuses on participatory techniques for community forests in Nepal, many of the techniques can be readily applied to other forms of collaborative natural resource management

Collaborative management of forests for conservation and development

J. Fisher

US\$12, WWF, 1995, ISBN: 2-8317-0277-1

Explores various approaches to forest management, including community forestry and joint forest management as well as those concerned with protected areas. Covers key issues of theory and implementation and methodologies for implementation

Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) Books

Participatory Approaches to Planning for Community Forestry

FAO and Theo M.P. Oltheten

US\$32, FAO, 1995

The community toolbox. The idea, methods and tools for participatory assessment, monitoring and evaluation in community forestry

D. Davis Case, T. Grove, C. Apter

US\$19, FAO, 2001, ISBN: 9252044159

This title can be bought from the FAO or EarthPrint

[Field guide for project design and implementation on the women in community forestry](#)

(www.fao.org/docrep/T8820E/T8820E00.htm)

US\$8, FAO

Ecotourism

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Books

[Ecotourism: Principles, Practices & Policies for Sustainability](#)

(www.uneptie.org/pc/tourism/library/ecotourism.htm)

US\$15, UNEP, 2002, ISBN: 9280720643

This book can be bought from UNEP or EarthPrint

Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas: Guidelines for Planning and Management

US\$26.25, A UNEP/IUCN/WTO publication, 2002, ISBN 2-8317-0648-3

ITDG Publishing Books

Ecotourism and Sustainable Development

Martha Honey

£18.95, Island Press, 1999, ISBN: 1559635827 *Ecotourism: An Introduction*

David A. Fennel

£18.99, Routledge, 1999, ISBN: 0415201683

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