

## Mexico: Community forestry boosts conservation, jobs, and social benefit

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- *More than 2,000 communal landholdings known as ejidos, and communities, have organized themselves to carry out sustainable management of forests in their territory.*
- *In states such as Oaxaca, Michoacán, Durango, Chihuahua and Quintana Roo there are examples of communities that have managed to conserve forests and their biodiversity, while generating jobs and other benefits for the population.*
- *Mining, organized crime, illegal timber trafficking, and the tax regime are just some of the challenges facing community forest management in Mexico.*

Laura Jiménez, Manuel Herrera and Elías Santiago grew up in a land where elders proudly related how they managed to recover their forests, hearing them recount how the Mexican government had allowed private companies to take advantage of the wood from trees that grew in their communities' territories for two decades. This ended in the late 1970s and early '80s when the towns forced the companies out, demonstrating that they could manage their forest resources.

Thirty-five years later, Laura Jiménez is a biologist and teacher of rural development, Manuel Herrera is a forest engineer, and Elías Santiago is a teacher of forest science. These three, each from different communities, are part of a generation that is continuing with the work that their grandparents, parents, and neighbors started: living from the forest, while at the same time conserving it.

Mexico is a pioneer in what is now known as community forest management, a model that is based on the organization of communities to sustainably use forests or rainforests within their territory.

Salvador Anta, a researcher and member of the Mexican Civil Council for Sustainable Forestry (CCMSS), explains that this model could be developed in the country as between 60 and 70% of its forests and rainforests are located within territories that belong to *ejidos*, communities where land ownership is communal.





In Guerrero, the Los Fresnos de Puerto Rico community carry out community forest management. Image by CONAFOR.

### Developing a conservation model

During the '50s, '60s and most of the '70s, the Mexican government allowed private companies to engage in logging in such forest areas.

In Sierra Juárez de Oaxaca, for example, a papermaking company was permitted to cut down and take advantage of the forests, says Santiago, the forestry technical director for the Ixtlán de Juárez community.

“The people of the communities organized themselves. They made alliances and managed — through constitutional appeals to stop concessions being granted to these companies.” The communities also organized to receive official recognition of their territories, thus enabling them to manage the forests.

“The government told the communities to manage the forests, believing that they did not have the ability to do so,” said Jiménez, from the Union of Zapotec-Chinantec Forest Producing Communities of Sierra Juárez (UZACHI).

The communities used their traditional methods of organization, such as decision-making in community assemblies, and were advised by forest management specialists.





Communities have forest management programs to determine how many trees can be cut without affecting the forest. Image by CONAFOR.

This process, which began in the early '80s in communities in Oaxaca, Durango and Quintana Roo, has extended to other states such as Michoacán, Guerrero, Chihuahua, Veracruz, Campeche, Puebla, Jalisco, and the state of Mexico, among others. For a time, government programs were implemented, such as the Forest Resources Conservation and Sustainable Management Project (PROCYMAF), to support communities in their forestry organization.

Today, according to data from the National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR), there are 2,362 ejidos and communities engaged in forest management in their territories, which represents about 18.2 million hectares (45 million acres), of which 73% is forest, 21% rainforest, and 6% scrublands.

Not all of these communities have the same level of development in terms of forest management, notes researcher Anta. Most are still at a basic level, meaning that they have a forest management program (a study that allows them to determine how many trees can be cut down to ensure their forests are sustainable), but do not possess their own sawmills, so they sell their wood as logs, therefore missing out on the full profit potential.

But some ejidos and communities have achieved significant development to the extent that they have formed forestry companies and have become important sources of employment in their region. They also promote the training of their own specialists and implement projects with biologists and other scientists to monitor the presence of plant and animal species that are found in their territories, ensuring their conservation.

Certified wood from the Llano Grande ejido in Puebla. Image by CONAFOR.

### **Cultivating the forest**

UZACHI was established on Sept. 14, 1989, comprised of four communities in Oaxaca: three Zapotec communities (Capulálpam de Méndez, Santiago Xiacuí and Trinidad Ixtlán) and one Chinantec community (Santiago Comaltepec).



These four communities manage 24,000 ha (59,300 acres) of lowland forest, pine oak forests, and one of the best conserved mountain mesophytic forests in the country. Each community has its own sawmill and produces on average 9,000 cubic meters (318,000 cubic feet) of pine and 8,000 m<sup>3</sup> (282,500 ft<sup>3</sup>) of oak per year.

“Cutting a tree does not always mean damage, as long as it is done in a responsible way,” says Jiménez, who explains that the area from which the wood is to be harvested is determined by the forest management program, and is an area where work is carried out to promote a natural regeneration of the forest.

With the same forest management resources, the communities have managed to establish an ecotourism center, community carpentry program, and a furniture manufacturing company. The communities also have

environmental management units for the conservation of orchids and white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*).



Communities that sustainably use the forest carry out work to regenerate the areas where they cut trees. Image by Elías Santiago.

In Oaxaca, there is also the Ixtlán de Juárez community, which on Aug. 22, 1986, had 19,310 ha (47,716 acres) of land recognized by the Mexican state as communal, and which is home to ecosystems such as tropical and temperate forests.

“The community may have chosen to develop agriculture, but chose to make proper use of the forest,” says Santiago, the community’s forestry technical director.

In the Ixtlán de Juárez community, around 18,000 m<sup>3</sup> (635,700 ft<sup>3</sup>) of pine and 8,000 m<sup>3</sup> of oak are produced per year on average. “The selection of the wood that is cut is made from the analysis of statistical, ecological information, taking into account social aspects. We need to understand the forest’s behavior so that we can use it and conserve it,” Santiago says.

For example, in 2016, this community cut 500 trees in one hectare (5 acres). By 2019, there were already a thousand trees in this same area.

As in the case of UZACHI, the Ixtlán de Juárez community’s forest management has made them an important employer in the region, providing 212 direct jobs, and the community has also diversified its activities and enabled the establishment of an ecotourism center, a furniture factory, a water purifier and a “forest beneficiary” that supports productive projects.

In this community’s forests, there are also programs for monitoring flora and fauna. “We are in a highly biodiverse region, so we have to take care of these resources,” Santiago says.





In the state of Hidalgo there are certified communities that carry out community forest management. Image by CONABIO

Three communities of UZACHI and Ixtlán de Juárez earned certification from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), which validates whether adequate forest management is being carried out and whether it provides environmental, social and economic benefits. In Mexico, according to CONAFOR data, 1.3 million ha (3.2 million acres) are already FSC certified.

Community forest management “is the proven method for conserving biodiversity and forests with people, it is a type of conservation that is not exclusive,” explains anthropologist Leticia Merino of the Institute of Social Research at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). Her claim is supported by several studies completed by herself and other researchers, such as David Bray and Salvador Anta, among others.

For example, in 2013, Eric Van Vleet, a researcher at Florida International University, published the results of a study on communities that practice community forest management in the Northern Sierra region of Oaxaca, which highlights that in the face of climate change and species extinction, conservation is more necessary than ever, so more support should be given to “communities that conserve biodiversity, store carbon and carry out balanced management of forests that does not result in deforestation.”



Ixtlán de Juárez has 19,310 hectares (47,716 acres) of communal forest. Image by Elías Santiago.

### **Against all odds**

Communities that are committed to community forest management not only have the strength of their community organization tested, they also have to climb a mountain of obstacles, Merino says. Excessive regulations, for example — the government asks for “studies that communities must finance and then do not help them” — and a tax system that “does not take into account the social nature of community companies or their ecological benefit.”

Santiago says the Ixtlán de Juárez community is treated as if it were a private and non-community company, when in fact its activities, in addition to generating jobs, ensures “the forest is conserved.”

Something that characterizes many community forestry companies, explains researcher Salvador Anta, is that their goal is not to generate profit, but to obtain benefits for the ejido or the community. A good part of the income goes toward work with social benefits such as schools, health care, road improvement, and good forest management practices. However, this is not taken into account when they have to pay taxes.

Manuel Herrera, the UZACHI forestry technical director, says that in addition to the administrative and fiscal obstacles they face, environmental challenges have been increasing. “There are changes in the rainy periods and we also have new pests, such as defoliating insects, which feed on the tree foliage and were previously only found in the lower areas — now they are present in the highlands.”

Community forestry companies also face the impacts of illegal timber trafficking on market prices. “Illegal wood is much cheaper than wood that needs to meet many requirements to be certified,” says Merino, who also notes that timber imports have increased in recent years.

Organized crime has become another challenge for forest communities, especially in states such as Guerrero, Chihuahua, Michoacán, Durango, and Tamaulipas, where groups that control drug trafficking also handle illegal timber trafficking and extort money from communities.

In addition, in recent years communities have come to realize, little by little, that much of their territory has been granted to mining companies. Merino points out that mining has been permitted in 33% of mountainous forest territory..



The Ixtlán community is FSC certified, which guarantees proper forest management. Image by Elías Santiago.



## **Low budget plans**

Under the six-year presidencies of Felipe Calderón and Enrique Peña Nieto, the communities that carry out community forest management also constantly faced decreasing government support. Under the current government, Jorge Castaños Martínez is in charge of the National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR). An agronomist and forest specialist, he has in the past directed projects to support forest communities, such as PROCYMAF.

For the current six-year term of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, “the intention is to find better mechanisms to incorporate more areas into forest management. We are strengthening the concept and returning to the experience of other years,” says engineer Julio César Bueno Talamantes, head of the CONAFOR Education and Technological Development Unit.

Among CONAFOR’s goals is to increase the acreage of nationally certified forests (750,000 ha, about 1.85 million acres, at present) and internationally certified ones (1.3 million hectares), but the great challenge that CONAFOR faces in developing its plans is the budget.

In 2019, its budget was 30.7% less than in 2018. The proposed budget to “support sustainable forest development” for 2020 included 1.3 billion pesos (around \$68,000,000), which is almost the same amount budgeted in 2019.

Laura Jiménez, Manuel Herrera and Elías Santiago agree, just as the elders did when they wagered on the sustainable use of forests, that today, their best tool to deal with the challenges they face is still their community organization, which like the forest, is something they nurture every day.

SOURCE:- <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/01/mexico-community-forestry-boosts-conservation-jobs-and-social-benefits/>