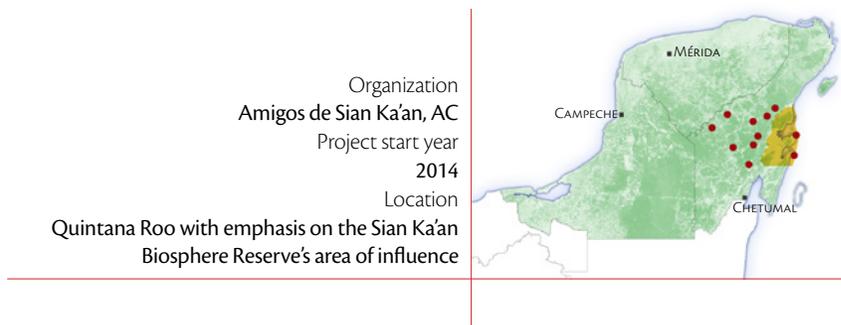




Ak Kuxtal wooden crafts.

MAYA KA'AN ECOTOURISM DESTINATION AND PRODUCTIVE PROJECTS IN THE MAYAN AREA



INTRODUCTION

Amigos de Sian Ka'an has worked since 1986 for the conservation and sustainable development of the Yucatan Peninsula, with a focus on Quintana Roo. Since its foundation, Amigos de Sian Ka'an considered it necessary to first address the needs of income of the Mayan communities in the State if they wanted to continue working on conservation issues. After several years of working with community groups, in 2005 a diagnosis of the producer groups was carried out, specifically on the type and quality of available products and the level of organization in communities. Crafts with rattan, embroidery, seeds, wood and honey were some of the products that could be found in the communities, but there were two weaknesses: product quality and marketing.

With resources from an award given by the Whitley Fund for Nature Foundation, Amigos de Sian Ka'an began to implement a comprehensive strategy in the area of influence of the Biosphere Reserve for marketing the community's products in the Mayan area. In 2009, with support from the Multilateral Investment Fund of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the proj-



Sijil Noh Ha, ecotouristic destination in the Quintana Roo Mayan area.

ect became part of a larger proposal: to create a new destination that integrated local ecotourism operators and production projects already initiated, under a regional scheme of promotion, marketing and sustainable development. In 2014, under the Tianguis Turístico México, the destination was formally presented as Maya Ka'an to the international community.

INITIAL SITUATION

In the year 2000, Amigos de Sian Ka'an increased its efforts to promote the integration of productive workgroups in the communities, and the need to advance in an organizational process to coordinate the activities became evident. According to Basilio Velázquez Chi, then office coordinator in Felipe Carrillo Puerto, artisans were individually going to hotels to sell their products, which of course meant a limitation in marketing. In 2005 a regional marketing strategy was initiated as a response, which had six stages: diagnosis, strategy design, training, strengthening of productive groups, environmental education and exchange of experiences, and finally marketing.

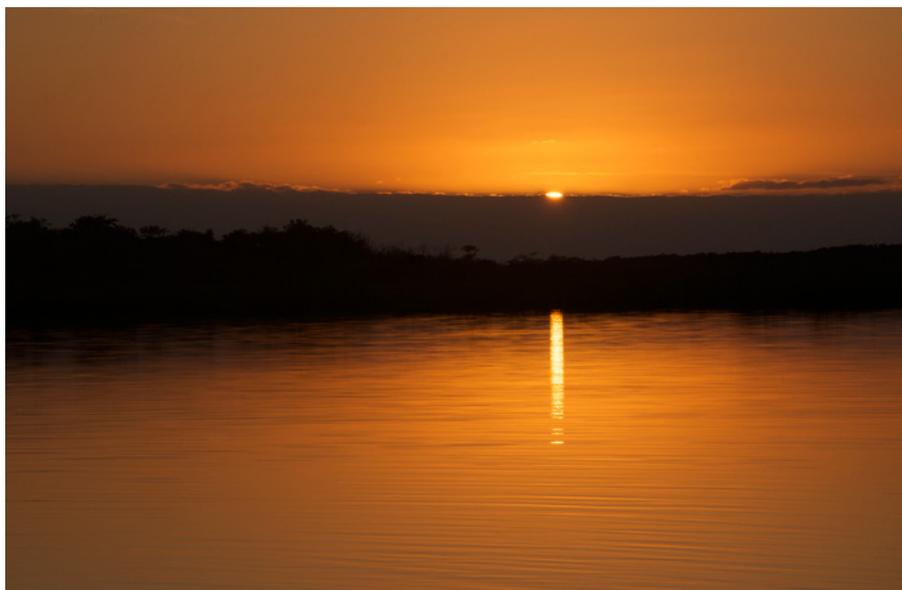


Pitahí.

In 2009, Amigos de Sian Ka'an and U'yo'olché, together with the artisans, created Mayak'ab (Mayan Hands) cooperative, a platform dedicated to promote local brands exclusively on the market. Its function is to create product catalogs, be the link with customers, answer emails and phone calls, receive and coordinate purchase orders, manage bank accounts and billings.

One of the most emblematic projects is Ulu'umil beh (Soil from the path), a group of women from the Chumpón community that was established in 2006 to produce dragon fruit, papaya and pineapple jams under the Pitahí brand. The group began meeting in 2005 with seventeen women, but the first steps encountered many obstacles, and the group was reduced to eight people. With the support of Amigos de Sian Ka'an and other organizations they were able to buy more equipment for the bottling plant and expand its sales channels, which are strong nowadays. Another local brand that integrated into the cooperative is Ak Kuxtal, mainly with wooden crafts and products from the Melitzaak hive.

In those years, the Amigos de Sian Ka'an team was thinking of giving a new momentum to the region so that communities could benefit from the high ecotourism potential they have. With



Sunset at Sijil Noh Ha.

the support of UNESCO through TNC, a trip to Costa Rica was organized with businessmen and landowners of Felipe Carrillo Puerto to get to know the example of a country that managed to make ecotourism an international attraction and a tool for conservation and development. This led to the dream of being able to locate the area of influence of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve in the stage of the great ecotourism destinations worldwide, and the dream began to take shape in 2009 with support from the IDB Multilateral Investment Fund. The project called "Diversification of the touristic offer in the Mayan Riviera based on the sustainable use of the attractions of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve" had included in this initiative, as one of its main objectives, the communities of the region.

KEY MOMENTS

In the 90s, Amigos de Sian Ka'an created a boat tour through the canals of Muyil to raise money. Over the years, the Chunyaxché community saw the benefits of the project and requested permission from the authorities to perform the ride commercially themselves. Amigos de Sian Ka'an and others supported them in



Lineated woodpecker,
Dryocopus lineatus.

training, access to finance, business strengthening, among other aspects, and in 2000 the complete eco-touristic space is given to the Chunyaxché and Punta Allen communities.

Since 2009, they managed to give a boost to ecotourism operated by communities themselves inside and outside the Reserve through a regional strategy for development and sustainable tourism. Vicente Ferreyra, then Sustainable Tourism Director of Amigos de Sian Ka'an, explains that the project to create a tourist destination under the Maya Ka'an brand is an important component in training, local empowerment and teamwork; while it emphasizes the design of tools for the promotion and marketing of seventeen tourist centers that they are currently supporting.

"One of the most important milestones, Vicente mentions, has been the establishment in 2013 of the Consultative Council as an advisory and consultative body. This allowed access to new finan-

cial incentives for agencies interested in supporting the proposal, and also led to the official launch of the Maya Ka'an brand in the 2014 Tianguis Turístico México, the largest fair in the country in this sector, and this marked one second important milestone".

Another key moment was the link with the Department of Tourism of the Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources (Semarnat), which funded the diagnosis of twelve companies in the area for getting the NMX-133 certification for ecotourism. In 2014, seven companies in the region were certified, thus ensuring sustainability in their operations. Moreover, Maya Ka'an has its own sustainability criteria to be met by those who adhere to the brand. It is an innovative tourism model that seeks to reduce the pressure for development in Sian Ka'an while generating development opportunities for Mayan communities in the surroundings, based on the natural and cultural wealth they have.

LESSONS LEARNED

Basilio Velázquez Chi said that in the beginning the idea was to open sales channels for products and that community groups followed the process, but it is difficult to tie the trading system to community life, the pace of life is different. "Keep in mind that many producers rely on a phone booth and a messenger, or at best they access email once a week". For this purpose it was essential to create the marketer, which is responsible for receiving the orders, and studying what is the quality of the product that the market requires. "Moreover," says José Gaspar, Commercial Manager of the Mayak'ab cooperative, "often the client needs a product with immediate delivery, and the craftsman takes time to get the parts. The cooperative reconciles this situation having a stock to supply in a timely manner."

Doña Homobona Borges Dzul, president of the Ulu'umil beh group of women producers, says that at first there were many steps, time, money and many meetings without receiving any income, which discouraged some women who had been there from the beginning. Also "some of us decided to continue without incomes, and today we have the reward of having a job in our community and be with our families." This initiative has given Mayan women the courage to face gender issues and the free-



Homobona Borges Dzul.

dom of having their own money. The change was very important, Doña Homobona says, “We have learned a lot and we like to support other groups. This consolidated work is never going to end; it will end when the world ends. Our grandchildren will see this company through the years”, she says confidently.

“As for ecotourism projects, Vicente Ferreyra says, communities are very good at giving field tours and telling local experiences, but they need to strengthen the commercial aspect. The purpose is to create an ecotourism network that in four years will operate the destination, that is to say, as Mayak’ab is in charge of marketing productive projects, the idea is that an Ecotourism Network will become the vendor of the Maya Ka’an ecotourism destination, and that communities become independent. For example, Muyil is a success story in which the community realized that they could be economically sustainable and provide a quality service. One of the main challenges is to let the communities know that they are entrepreneurs, and they need to have the tools to make projects viable.” Gonzalo Merediz adds that the success of this network and Maya Ka’an in general, will be based on an independent body to manage the destination and monitor their sustainability and good use of their brand.



Braiding of the henequén fiber at Señor, Quintana Roo.

According to Damián Gómez Xool, president of the Community Tourism Network of the Mayan Region, the most useful thing for communities is to have come out of the bubble, and become known at a national and international level with the launch of Maya Ka'an in the Tianguis Turístico México. To talk about ecotourism in a community is difficult, Damián accounts, "it is a task that we must constantly work on." "At first people are very jealous of their traditions, but they must be given time, and then communities begin to share their knowledge, tales, legends and stories. To grow as an entrepreneur is a new experience; it is about sustainable rural ecotourism".

The success of the Amigos de Sian Ka'an's productive and touristic strategies is based on not being isolated, but being an integral part of an institutional vision that encompasses the decree of and support to the management of protected areas, promotion of a network of private and social reserves, the creation of a payment mechanism for environmental services, promotion of wastewater treatment technologies, design of ecological planning programs, scientific research of natural resources and environmental education. Since the Reserve's decree there are voices in the region expressing the view that the reserve is an obstacle

to local development. "With Mayak'ab and Maya Ka'an we will demonstrate that the nature and culture of the Mayan area, and the presence of a World Heritage site, are the engines of a new model of development and environmental conservation," concludes Merediz.

