



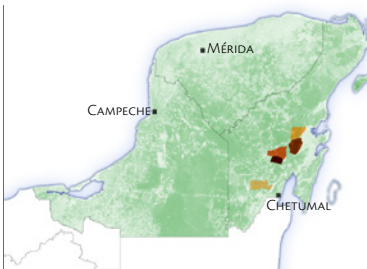
Mahogany in El Huasteco forestry *ejido* reserve, Noh Bec.

AN ALLIANCE OF EJIDOS FOR THE SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF FORESTS

Organization
Trópica Rural Latinoamericana, AC

Project start year
2011

Location
Ejidos Noh Bec, Felipe Carrillo Puerto,
X-Hazil, Petcacab and Bacalar, Quintana Roo



INTRODUCTION

While on many places of Mesoamerica mahogany is practically extinct, the Mayan Forest is one of the last refuges where it still is present in densities and volumes that can be utilized. The state of Quintana Roo has more than a century of wood extraction, mainly mahogany, but also cedar (now protected) and sapodilla gum extraction. In the beginning, logging was in private hands or under concession, as was the case of the company MIQRO, but today it is mostly under the administration of *ejidos*. Many of these *ejidos*, with technical support, have managed to make a sustainable management of forest resources, achieving a balance between the economic viability of the activity and conservation. However, in less than a decade the market conditions have changed, and many forest companies have started to decrease in profits, to the point of threatening the activity itself.

Sustainable forest management has proven one of the most effective approaches to forest conservation. However, when this activity becomes unprofitable, degradation and deforestation start to take over. Local communities need to sustain their livelihoods through other means and resort to land use changes



Mahogany from nursery of tree species in Noh Bec.

for agriculture and ranching. Herein lays the importance of sustaining these efforts in the forests of Quintana Roo through the promotion of cost-effective management practices and a clear connection to markets.

In this context and with the support of organizations like Trópica Rural Latinoamericana AC and U'yo'olché AC, five *ejidos* in southern Quintana Roo have taken the initiative to form an Alliance of Forest Ejidos with the clear aim of giving new impetus to the activity, convinced that forest management is one of the most effective conservation tools in the Mayan Forest.

INITIAL SITUATION

Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Noh Bec, Petcacab and its annex Polinkin, X-Hazil and annexes, and Bacalar are five *ejidos* in southern Quintana Roo with very different histories. But they have something in common, that which once generated competition and today unites them: the abundance and diversity of their forest resources. In 1983, the Forest Pilot Plan was a first attempt to promote sustainable use of timber in the region, and this policy initiative managed to promote a forestry vocation in the region.

Trópica Rural Latinoamericana (TRL) is an organization that has worked with forest *ejidos* since its inception; for example in 1998 they prepared the forest management plan for the *ejido* Noh Bec. According to Abraham González Sosa, *ejido* dweller and 34-year-old forestry engineer: that was the beginning of a golden age.

In 2009 Abraham was treasurer in the *ejido*; by then they were exporting wood to Sweden and Germany. In 2008, they obtained FSC certification for mahogany, blackwood and ciricote wood and began exporting to the United States, Japan and Italy. Then the “golden age” was challenged by unforeseen events that radically challenged forest management, says Claudia Palafox from TRL, Hurricane Dean hit Quintana Roo in 2007 and almost all the management programs of the five forest *ejidos* had to be renewed: much forest biomass had been lost and the usable volumes were no longer the same. Not all the *ejidos* were affected equally, but in that year there was also a severe drought that resulted in large wildfires.

This context, matched with lower timber volumes, increased operating costs due to increased diesel costs and a fall in the price of wood, created a costly business in a highly competitive market. Don Elías Be Cituk, former president of the *ejido* Felipe Carrillo Puerto, remarks: “It was clear we needed join forces, organize beyond *ejidos* and agree on timber prices, so in 2011 we began to think of the creation of an Alliance of Forest Ejidos”.

“The *ejidos* realized they needed to be united to face common problems,” said José Antonio Arreola Palacios, Director of U’yo’olché, “because although the essence is forest management, there are issues related to agriculture, administrative and tax matters that would be more convenient to work in a coordinated manner”. “For example, explains Don Elías, environmental impact studies are very expensive, and if we are united we can do one that covers the five *ejidos*. The same applies for certification from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), granted to forest operations that meet environmental, economic and social standards. Today only the *ejido* Caobas has it, which is not yet part of the alliance, and Noh Bec; while Petcacab is in the process of obtaining it this year”.



Noh Bec sawmill.

KEY MOMENTS

Between 2011 and 2012 a series of meetings to begin shaping the proposal of the Alliance of Forest Ejidos took place. The Noh Bec and Felipe Carrillo Puerto *ejidos* were the first to promote the idea, then Petcacab, Bacalar and X-Hazil joined the conversation and agreed to the proposal. Caobas is another *ejido* with a forestry vocation that has interest in joining the alliance, but does not yet have formal agreements. “TRL has been central in shaping the alliance,” says Don Clementino Ku Pakab, current president of the *ejido* county of Carrillo Puerto, as they have been responsible for convening the meetings, and its director Alfonso Argüelles has tirelessly worked on strengthening forest management in the five *ejidos*; as well as engineer José Antonio Arreola from U’yo’olché who has also driven this project.

During the year 2014 a process of appointing delegates from each *ejido* through assemblies took place, explains Claudia Palafox. As it is a union of *ejidos* it will be managed as a meeting with their delegates, who in turn are the presidents of the five *ejidos*. This structure would give transparency to the alliance, in part because decisions cannot be unilateral. While the alliance

has an executive director who manages it, decisions are taken by consensus by the board of directors, composed of the presidents of the *ejidos*; delegates are informed and they carry information to the *ejido* assemblies.

Mr. Elías Be Cituk was one of the initiators of the alliance in the *ejidos*, says Clementino, current executive president of the alliance, but it has been a long road for it to become consolidated. “The job is still not finished, but it already is in the public records and we have approval from taxing authorities; in the early days of 2015, the account was opened and we began operating as the Mayan Forest Alliance of Quintana Roo”. “The alliance is already a fact, mentioned Don Clementino, nobody objected to the process, we all injected optimism in the meetings, we always knew it was something that would benefit the five *ejidos*”.

LESSONS LEARNED

Consolidating the alliance is a major step forward, but five years had to pass before it obtained legal status and could begin to function officially, mentioned Abraham González Sosa. In part this is because the *ejido* authorities change over time, and therefore so do the delegates to the Alliance’s Council, which means we must take the time to update them on the process. We had to be patient, but it was worth it. In that sense, Arreola Palacios says, “some institutions tried to accelerate the alliance’s formation, but we resisted the pressure because we believe that this is a process that needs to be created and owned by the local communities, which means it may take longer but it is more legitimate. Building trust to talk about issues such as transparency and accountability is not something that happens overnight. You need to be willing to take it slow.”

“Some forest *ejidos* have been disappointed with forest management activities,” said Arreola, “because they no longer have the timber volumes they did 40 years ago.” The reasons behind this decrease in production lie in resource management techniques, industry and market dynamics, and in other aspects that may not have been adequately integrated in the strategies of some *ejidos*. It has been fully demonstrated that the *ejidos* that have good forest management are the ones who maintain a



Mahogany in El Huasteco Forest
ejido Reserve, Noh Bec.

healthy forest. “There are many nearby *ejidos* that have no management plan and depleted their resources, that is why through good forest management we not only conserve the resource, but also the livelihoods of communities , which in turn generated the incentive to avoid losing it.” It is very important to give new impetus to forestry, and the alliance is an ideal platform to accomplish it.

