

Making secondary forests a priority

A mid-term evaluation of an ITTO project finds that it is performing a useful function in the development of plans for the sustainable management of secondary forests in Ecuador

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THE country of Ecuador is relatively small compared to most other South American countries. However, the Andes mountain range and the cold Humboldt and warm El Niño sea currents have made it one of the world's most biologically diverse nations.

Conservation organisations have identified a number of 'hot spots' across the planet in which biologically rich natural forests are threatened by clearing and other pressures, and have classified them as global biological conservation priority areas. One of these is the Chocó-Darién-Western Ecuador hotspot, which extends for 1500 km along the western flank of the Andes Mountain Range across Panama, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.

The moist tropical forests of Ecuador and the wealth of biological diversity found in these forests are seriously threatened by the expansion of single-crop farming and other production activities. Only 6% of an estimated original area of 80 000 km² of forests remain, and these are spread throughout the region, particularly in the province of Esmeraldas. The early devastation of these forests was related to an agricultural boom along the coastal region during the first decades of the 1900s, and over the past four decades logging activities have made further inroads. Over the past five years, a number of companies involved in the planting and harvesting of oil palm have also contributed to the loss of forest in the region.

ITTO PROJECT PD 49/99: 'Pilot plan for the sustainable management of 10 000 hectares of secondary forest in San Lorenzo, Esmeraldas' commenced in November 2001 in the northern part of the province of Esmeraldas. The project is being implemented by the Sustainable Forest Management Corporation (Corporación de Manejo Forestal Sustentable—COMAFORS), a private Ecuadorian non-profit organisation.

The project has two specific objectives: 1) to establish and implement a pilot plan to facilitate the management and valuation of 10 000 hectares of secondary forests and to reverse the process of forest degradation through the sustainable management of resources and community training; and 2) to provide the Ecuadorian Ministry for the Environment with technological packages for the sustainable management of secondary forests at the regional and national levels.



Resting on their laurels? The author (left) poses with the owner of one of the project's pilot areas. The dominant commercial species in this secondary forest is laurel (*Cordia alliodora*).

Visiting the area during a mid-term evaluation mission in May 2004, I observed that the project is experiencing difficulties and limitations as a result of a range of external factors. These include pressure for the conversion of these lands for the production of palm oil, the worsening of the conflict in neighbouring Colombia, and a national economic crisis. In combination, these factors have led to a reformulation of some of the project's action strategies and the reorientation of ongoing scheduled activities.

Despite the difficulties, however, activities have been carried out in 22 pilot plots and 64 neighbouring plots, which cover an area of 533 hectares of secondary forest. Demonstration and experimental forest management activities have been implemented in these forests; the aim is to replicate these in local communities within the area of influence, which covers an area of about 8000 hectares.

Experimental silviculture

During field visits I observed the application of weeding, liberation and girdling practices, as well as enrichment-planting activities with native and exotic species. A diagnostic sampling approach developed by Ian Hutchinson is being used to estimate the potential productivity of plots adapted to the particular circumstances of the project area.

Training

The project's target beneficiaries are farmers belonging to three distinct groups: black communities, Chachi indigenous communities, and mestizo communities (or settlers). These three groups have a basic knowledge of forest management and they currently log whitewood species and sell standing timber to logging companies. In most cases they have shown significant interest in forest management and a willingness to engage in it. Many of them have also carried

out logging operations independently and are familiar with timber marketing procedures, although up until now they have found it difficult to negotiate fair and remunerative prices.

One of the main activities implemented by the project has been ongoing training through field days, in which people in the local communities receive practical training on secondary forest management and different silvicultural treatments; they also attend workshops covering topics related to the introduction of forest management and the formulation of management plans. Beneficiaries acknowledge the importance of this training and the technical assistance provided by the project team, and demonstrate that they have assimilated the knowledge received. The owners of the pilot plots are considered to be local technicians by the project team as a result of the training they have received.

Technological tools

Based on the experiences gained over the last few years, the team will prepare a set of tools for improving the management of secondary forests and the capture of benefits from such management by local communities. This will include various types of learning tools, especially technical and promotional sheets, that provide practical knowledge that can be easily and readily applied. The packages will include information and guidelines on: simple land-use management techniques, inventory methods, the application of silvicultural operations, harvesting and processing techniques, production management systems, markets and marketing, and ongoing monitoring mechanisms.



Converted: The establishment of oil palm plantations is a major cause of deforestation in the secondary forests of northern Esmeraldas. *Photo: A. Gaviria*

National plan for secondary forests

Under an arrangement with the Ministry for the Environment, a Ministerial Resolution will be formulated and issued once the technological packages are ready with a view to promoting the implementation of forest management in secondary forests at the regional and national levels. The Ministry for the Environment has appointed two high-ranking officers to be part of the inter-institutional group that will formulate this special regulation; it has also entrusted COMAFORS with the formulation of a National Plan for Secondary Forests, which demonstrates the high priority that the Ecuadorian government is giving to secondary forests.

To what extent will secondary forest management be adopted as a land-use option in the Esmeraldas region, particularly in the face of currently lucrative alternatives such as the production of palm oil? Time will tell, but work on secondary forest management regimes and complementary policy development are certainly essential if the secondary forests are to attract the interest of local land-users. This ITTO project is making a useful start in that direction.

Translated from the Spanish by Claudia Adán.

Board meeting: Local people have experience in using timber from the forest. Here, *Cordia alliodora* logs are converted to boards in the forest before being transported to the market. *Photo: A. Gaviria*