

## **Project Summary - Part I. Description**

### **Participating organizations and geographic location(s) of the project**

Participating Organizations: During the grant period, EcoLogic partnered with Mexican NGO, Na Bolom. Government agencies such as Mexico's National Forest Commission (CONAFOR) and (SEMAHN) were also active collaborators in both the planning and implementation this project. EcoLogic also developed mutually beneficial relationships with Mexican institutions such as the National Commission for Protected Areas (CONANP), the University of Chiapas's Center for Climate Change, experts at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and the technical working group for REDD in Chiapas (CTC).

Further, the Lacandón Jungle is home to five Mayan ethnic groups – the Tzeltales, Tzotziles, Tojolabales, Lacandones, Choles, and Zoques. Three Mayan communities, all part of Ocosingo Municipality and situated adjacent to the Reserve, will be engaged in and benefit directly from the project – the Chol of Frontera Corozal, with a population of 10,000, the Tzeltal of Nueva Palestina (~20,000), and the Lacandón of Lacanja Chansayab (~1,200). These three indigenous groups communally own all of the properties within the 35,000-ha Reserve. Community participation is an essential component to the long-term success of this project.

Geographic Location: The project site is located within the Sierra Cojolita Community Reserve in Chiapas, Mexico, in the Lacandón rainforest. The Reserve covers an area of approximately 35,000 ha. Established by communal assembly in 1992, it is within the larger region of the Cojolita mountain range (approximately 120,000 ha) extending from its terminus in the north to the Usumacinta River (east), the Lacanja River (south), and the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve (west). Approximately 15,000 to 35,000 ha of the Sierra Cojolita mountain range is standing forest that is eligible under Voluntary Carbon Standard (VCS) guidelines and is defined as the project area.

Outside of these 35,000 ha, there is a matrix of mixed land uses and eight protected areas. These protected areas' combined 456,634 ha represent 2.68% of Mexico's protected areas and 23.58% of its protected tropical humid jungle. In addition, the project's strategic location strengthens a 330,000-ha biological corridor between two protected areas– the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve in Chiapas and the Sierra de Lacandón National Park in Guatemala's Petén region.

### **Why was the project carried out?**

Forest loss and degradation are major contributors to global climate change, constituting the second largest source of anthropogenic CO<sub>2</sub> emissions after fossil fuel combustion. Climate-related weather changes are projected to adversely affect much of North America in the coming decades, accounting for 75% of natural disasters. The effects of these events will be especially pronounced in southern Mexico. Land use changes and habitat fragmentation also contribute to loss of biodiversity and vital ecosystem services

that humans depend on.

Besides working to mitigate climate change and addressing biodiversity loss by avoiding forest loss, the project assists vulnerable rural communities adapt to climate disruptions and build resilience. The project's long-term goal is to ensure that rural communities adopt sustainable land use methods, taking a rigorous, evidence-based approach to tailor interventions particularly to address local "hot spots" where deforestation pressure is highest in the project area.

### **Description of the project (what was done?)**

The project seeks to build the capacity of three indigenous communities to conserve their local environment while deriving ecosystem benefits that are sustainable and just. We are building local communities' capacity to design, implement, and manage an innovative conservation strategy (REDD+). By working to demarcate boundaries and further clarifying land tenure, we are in the process of securing indigenous rights to carbon within the project area. Future forest carbon-related benefits will be based on clearly demarcated boundaries. Communities' agricultural capacity will be increased, and they will continue using improved agricultural practices, with a decrease in forest clearing for agricultural purposes.

### **Description of outcomes and follow-up (what did the project achieve?)**

Many of the activities that took place throughout the project's year culminated in the final free prior and informed consent (FPIC) workshops that took place in February and March. Since the implementation of the workshops, EcoLogic has been able to confirm or clarify the drivers and agents of deforestation that we had been researching throughout the year. We also attained a clear understanding of the community conflicts and dynamics that must be resolved or strengthened for the REDD+ project to succeed.

EcoLogic captured on video one of the "break through moments" with the communities. Also on video are demonstrations of the SBIA methods used to guide the communities in evaluating factors that could potential limit the implementation of a REDD+ project. Lastly, EcoLogic presented a webinar that describes EcoLogic's stance of the criticisms of REDD+. Andrea Savage (asavage@ecologic.org) is able to share these materials.

### **Project Summary - Part II. Analysis Successes**

Thanks to the CEC funding we were able to move the project from the conceptual stages to implementation. As described above in the evaluation section, we made significant progress in all of our objectives.

During the first six months of the project we collected baseline data on deforestation in Chiapas as well as initiating an analysis of the drivers of deforestation in the project area, which completed during the workshops in February and March 2013. We also further solidified our relationships with our local partner, Na Bolom, the local communities, and

local experts who were instrumental to our success thus far. EcoLogic and Na Bolom were also invited to form part of the REDD Sur Coalition—made up of non-profits and academic institutions in Oaxaca and Chiapas. EcoLogic was also successful in getting a seat at the table with Mexican government institutions, such as the National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR) and SEMAHN. These partners will be critical to EcoLogic’s understanding of conducting REDD+ projects in Mexico and establishing EcoLogic as a key actor. We were also able to engage with a Chiapas consultant, Abelino Flores, who was essential to improving community engagement, and we employed a program manager, Andrea Savage.

Early this year, we completed the three intensive FPIC workshops with ample community participation. We were able to provide over 300 community members information about EcoLogic as an organization, its proposed REDD+ Project, basics on climate change and the role of forests, and to clarify the concept REDD+ and carbon capture. EcoLogic guided the communities in analyzing the deforestation drivers and agents factors, and developing their own conceptual models specific to each community.

Finally, we were able to leverage CEC’s funding to gain financial support from a private donor for CCB validation over the next three years.

## **Challenges**

### Land tenure challenges

The Lacandón Rainforest has a turbulent land tenure history, which has created a land ownership scenario in the Sierra Cojolita project area that is highly conflicted. While we were at the project site in April 2012, we found that the communities have many boundary disputes, and lack formal legal documentation that delineates the boundary limits. As a result, EcoLogic has had to adapt the project timeline to direct more attention to mediating and addressing these land tenure issues.

### Ensuring community engagement

Despite the communities’ eagerness to learn more about REDD+, we faced some challenges during our site visits in getting community members to attend the meetings we had planned. To address this, we identified the need to have a closer relationship with communities, and contracted a local consultant Abelino Flores in September. Abelino’s help was a tremendous step forward for EcoLogic. As the project progresses, we expect to build capacity for community members to eventually fill the community coordinator role and take on the leadership of the project.

### Financial uncertainty

We have made some progress on obtaining matching and additional funds to ensure that we have sufficient resources to see this project to success by early 2015, but it continues to be a challenge. The progress we have made with CEC funding has enabled EcoLogic to secure financial support from a private donor for CCB validation over the next three years.

### Managing community expectations

Clarifying the communities' expectations for REDD+ was another challenge. SEMAHN had been delivering payments to the communities under the title, REDD+. It was not clear to the communities that they are supposed to be proactive about avoiding deforestation in order to receive payments. However, SEMAHN ended its payments in December 2012. By the end of the FPIC workshops, it was clear to the participants that REDD+ entails much more than what the State's payments had led them to believe.

### Lessons Learned

- 1) It will be several years before communities receive financial compensation from the sale of carbon credits. It is important that EcoLogic helps the communities gain meaningful short-term benefits in the early phases of REDD+ project development to ensure the project's long-term success. Providing appropriate short-term benefits requires extensive input from local stakeholders, but could take the form of capacity building, job opportunities, and other types of involvement in project management.
- 2) All three communities have been disappointed by the paternalistic approaches of government, researchers, and NGOs' past initiatives. Given this distrust, the project must embrace rights based (community-driven) approaches during project design/development and implementation as much as is financially feasible. Since projects with high community involvement can take longer, innovative fundraising is needed to allow for a fully participatory, yet slower, project development process.
- 3) EcoLogic is aware that helping local communities to delineate boundaries could exacerbate conflicts between communities. Encouraging the communities to resolve boundary disputes before progressing with carbon inventories or other aspects of project development will be necessary to minimize the risk of carbon profits heightening tensions.
- 4) The communities in around the Sierra Cojolita are accustomed to receiving subsidies from the government and other organizations in exchange for their participation in development/conservation activities. EcoLogic is setting precedents in how REDD+ projects are undertaken to promote community ownership over the project rather than perpetuating a cycle of unsustainable short-term payments. It is particularly important during FPIC that communities choose to participate because they see it as an opportunity for them to develop a project that will address their needs and not because they are receiving short-term financial compensation.

### What next?

In 2013, we will be working with two experts from the UNAM to provide the communities with trainings on mapping technology, such as GPS, conflict mediation, and social and biodiversity assessment so they can further their boundary clarification efforts, and gain the capacity to monitor social and biodiversity impacts over the life of the project. Once boundary conflicts within the communal reserve are mediated, we will train

the communities in carbon monitoring and help them finalize a carbon stock inventory. EcoLogic will also introduce the communities to partner organizations that can help them find ways to diversify their livelihood options and improve farming practices. If the communities are able to resolve their land use conflicts, we are confident EcoLogic can support the communities in developing a validated REDD+ project that is prepared to sell carbon credits in the next two to three years. If validation is accomplished the Sierra Cojolita communities will have developed the most advanced pilot REDD+ project in Chiapas, Mexico for potential inclusion in the California compliance market with reliable carbon stock estimates and establishment of social and biodiversity co-benefits.