Successful 20 years of community forest management in Guatemala informs an Integrated Community Forest Management pathway to support scaling

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Abstract

Research increasingly highlights the powerful link between environmental and social challenges and outcomes, and how local communities can be effective guardians of the forest.

In the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala, which Rainforest Alliance supports since more than 20 years, a broad alliance has been made between forest communities, local and national government bodies, companies, as well as academia and implementing partners. This public-private alliance supports the local population in its responsible management of forests, as a powerful tool contributing to peace and social justice, as well as to human development. Impact studies show that the deforestation rate in the forest concessions is near zero, while protected areas and buffer zones nearby suffered high deforestation levels, and that the initiative contributes to all the 17 SDGs.

Based on a learning inventory of the Rainforest Alliances' work in Guatemala and other countries it operates in, we have broaden our approach in order to catalyze long-term transformation at scale. We have developed and tested tools and methods to foster an enabling environment and to support the deployment of viable community-based forest enterprises, implementing sustainable forest management, restoration or reforestation, and providing equitable benefits. We have organized this approach in an Integrated Community Forest Implementation pathway which is presented in more detail in this paper.

To deploy this pathway, a unique coalition of corporate stakeholders, forest communities, Indigenous Peoples and regional implementing partners are uniting with the Rainforest Alliance within its Forest Allies Community of Practice. Using the Integrated Community Forest Management approach, we leverage the power of partnerships to protect and restore forests in critical landscapes while also empowering communities and improving livelihoods. Because we believe the best guardians of the forest are those who make their living from it.

Keywords: Adaptive and integrated management, Community Forest; Sustainable forest management, Economic Development, Partnerships.

Introduction, scope and main objectives

Most societies have developed at the expense of forests by converting them to other land uses, mostly agriculture. However, 1.6 billion people still depend on forest landscapes for food, fuel, timber, and non-timber forest products, with a combined gross annual value of US$ 1.3 trillion – making them collectively,

the largest private sector in the world (Macqueen et al. 2020). Furthermore, almost one third of forests are under some form of community based or smallholder management, with studies showing an upward trend that will hopefully continue (RRI 2020).

With the right approach, resources can be harnessed for the benefit of the forests and people. Over the past decade there has been a notable shift from a dichotomy between industrial concessions and protected forest areas, towards 'rights-based' community forestry and biocultural conservation, building on the deep interdependence between local cultural heritage and the environment (Kaimowitz and Tomaselli 2020). But while an important first step, granting forest tenure rights to communities does not automatically halt deforestation and forest degradation, nor improve livelihoods, as the success of community forestry depends on a number of conditions (Kusters and de Graaf 2019).

For years, community forestry concessions in the Maya Biosphere Reserve have proved the effectiveness of the Rainforest Alliance market-based approach to supporting local communities while protecting the environment. Being the core geographic focus for Rainforest Alliance regarding technical assistance in the forestry sector, the success here has driven and inspired community forest enterprises elsewhere in the world, from Mexico to Cameroon and Indonesia.

This paper draws lessons from the Maya Biosphere Reserve and offers a pathway for supporting the development of community forestry, harnessing the power of the private sector alongside communities in a new partnership – the Forest Allies community of practice.

Methodology/approach

The Maya Biosphere Reserve covers 5 million acres (2.1 million hectares) in Petén Province, northern Guatemala. Recognized by UNESCO in 1990, it is home to the largest remaining natural forest block in Mesoamerica, the *selva Maya*. In this dense forest, nine government-granted community forestry concessions conserve a total of 355,000 hectares. Local communities have exclusive rights to sustainably manage their forest, extracting, processing and selling timber and non-timber forest products while ensuring long term forest health and integrity in a landscape once known for crisis-level deforestation and poverty.

For more than 20 years, Rainforest Alliance has supported these community forest concessions with support of USAID, building a broad alliance between forest communities, local and national government institutions, companies, local NGOs, academia, and implementing partners. The paper reports on numerous studies that have investigated the environmental and social impact of the approach (Grogan et al. 2015, Gilmour 2016, Polisar et al. 2016, CONAP and WCS 2018, Rainforest Alliance 2018, Stoian et al. 2018, Castillo Cruz 2020). This was complemented by an independent learning inventory and assessment of Rainforest Alliance's experience in the reserve over two decades, with additional interviews and external reviews that focused on tools, methods and approaches, completed with learning from community forestry in other countries including Cameroon, Mexico, Nepal and Peru.

Analysis of the results of these studies informed the building of a Rainforest Alliance pathway to support the scaling up and deployment of community forest projects worldwide.

Results

Environmental and social impacts

The Maya Biosphere Reserve community forest concessions consistently outperform traditional conservation approaches. The deforestation rate in these forest concessions is almost zero, while nearby protected areas and buffer zones suffered high deforestation levels (Figure 1). Levels of poverty in the concessions are also significantly lower than in other parts of Guatemala, making out-migration virtually unheard of (Rainforest Alliance 2018, Stoian et al. 2018).

Consolidated research in a State of the World's Forests (FAO and UNEP 2020) case study highlight the following biodiversity results: sustainable levels of timber harvesting (Grogan et al. 2015), successful control of forest fires (Figure 2) and reduced incidence of fire during El Niño and La Niña years (CONAP and WCS 2018), and maintenance of jaguar populations (Polisar et al. 2016).
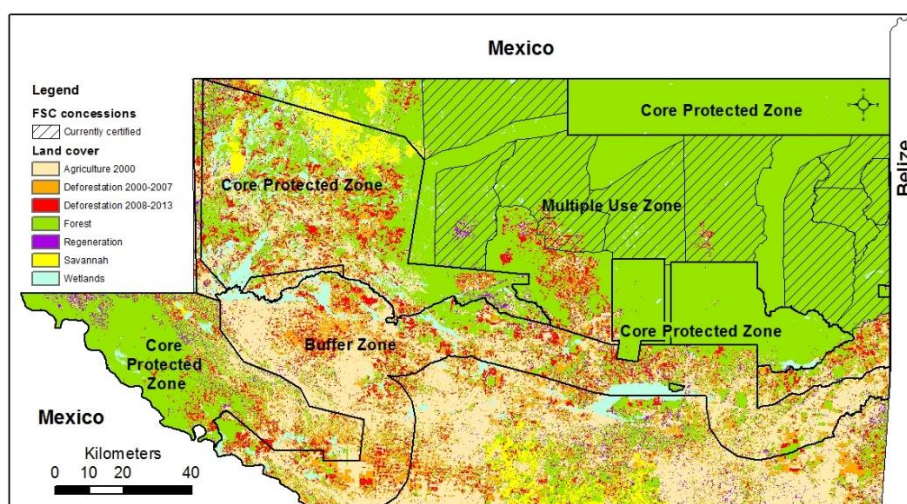
Fig. 1: Rate of deforestation (left) in the Maya Biosphere Reserve (Hodgdon et al. 2015)
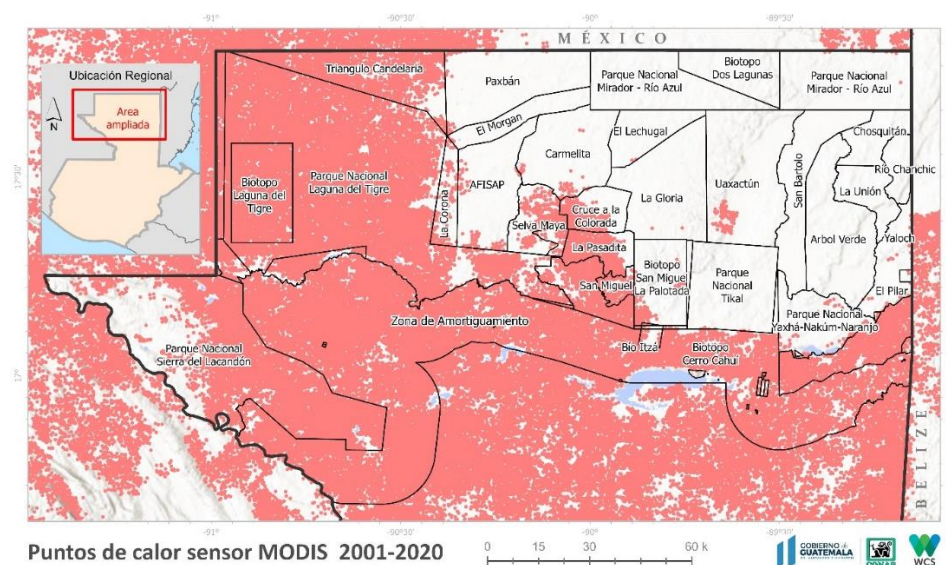
Fig. 2: Forest fires in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, CEMEC-CONAP-WCS

Socioeconomic outcomes include increases in timber revenues, employment opportunities, social investments, capacity building and access to finance. Between 2012 and 2016, community earned US$25 million from timber sales alone. In concessions with more diversified production including non-timber forest products and a greater capacity for value addition, the income of participating households was 1.6–2.8 times higher than the poverty line. Out-migration is reduced, employment opportunities for women increased, and higher education achieved (Stoian et al. 2018).

Analysis of the contribution of the concessions confirmed the holistic impacts that contributed to all 17 SDGs, with specific contributions to 45 of the 162 targets (Castillo Cruz 2020). Additionally, strong and effective community forest enterprises demonstrate the capacity to withstand internal and external shocks (Gilmour 2016), which is critical in times of economic crisis and climate change.

Eight lessons learned from 20 years' experience

The Maya Biosphere model has demonstrated on the ground impacts, illustrating community forestry's potential as a global solution to forest degradation and deforestation. However, a global learning inventory showed that different conditions make exact replication of this approach difficult. In many countries, the absence of local rights over forests and trees do not allow for the development of forestry enterprises. In places where such rights are recognized, other factors make legal forest product harvesting and sale by communities difficult, such as administrative burden, and a lack of access to markets, knowledge and finance. Eight key lessons from the Rainforest Alliance's learning inventory are summarized below.

Lesson 1. Intervention strategies needs to fit local contexts
For support to be effective, interventions must focus on where the real needs lie. To determine such needs, site-specific theories of change should be developed through participatory processes with local stakeholders, based on analyses of the following four enabling conditions for successful projects.
  (i)   Secure rights to manage forests, exclude others, and sell forest products or services.
  (ii)   Equitable and fair governance, social organization and management capacity, that provides effective leadership and technical knowledge.
  (iii) A viable social enterprise model that produces financial benefits sufficient to reinvest, while also providing equitable economic benefits.
  (iv)   Strong alliances with national and local government, donors, civil society organizations, producer associations, and private sector entities.
Intervention strategies and priority activities can then be defined following an assessment of where a site falls with respect to each of these four enabling conditions.

Lesson 2. Building successful community forest enterprises takes time, investment and multiscale alliances
Wherever community forest enterprises have achieved durable success at scale – e.g. in Mexico, Guatemala or Nepal – they have been supported by government, donors and a broad alliance of international and local organizations over decades. In the Maya Biosphere Reserve, USAID has maintained support over 25 years, and a large number of technical-assistance bodies have worked with the community concessions since their establishment. For community forestry to go to scale in new geographies, there is a need to mobilize large investments over multiple project cycles, working through alliances with a range of local, national and international partners.

Lesson 3. Social governance is foundational, as is continuity in enterprise administration
Without a strong social basis for governance, investments in forest management enterprises have inherent risks. In communities where forestry operations are stalled or backsliding, governance problems are often the main issue, rather than resource availability, markets or finance. When functioning enterprise governance structures are in place, with adequate administrative and business capacity, durable success lies in the establishment of mechanisms to cope with leadership transitions. Also, of those that are doing well, almost all established some kind of separate, permanent institution to manage the forest enterprise.

Lesson 4. Grassroots organizations are the foundation of long term success
At the core of successful community forests – especially where a measure of scale has been achieved – are local organizations. They must have legitimacy in the community, be locally owned, represent local interests in territorial planning and management, resource use and enterprise development, as well as be part of policy reform agendas. They are help communities to stand up to organized crime, violence, and other human rights violations. International organizations must ensure that partnerships with grassroots groups genuinely strengthen them, rather than competing with them for resources and attention.

Lesson 5. Associations can be powerful and positive intermediaries
Communities that have achieved durable success with their forest enterprises are nearly always supported by committed individuals and strong associations. Some are more political in nature, while others focus on technical service provision, product aggregation, value-added processing, and/or accessing finance and new markets. Such associations are particularly important for smaller and more remote forestry communities that are not likely to achieve 'five-star' status on their own.

Lesson 6. Market-based approaches must work from the bottom up
It is undoubtedly the case that a market focus is fundamental. In everything from forest management planning, to investment strategy, out to business development, a forest enterprise needs to base its vision on what can actually be sold, as the enterprise must make a profit. And while it is right to look for ways to maximize the value of a community forest through deals with international buyers, the main focus must be from a bottom-up perspective, looking realistically at what the actual demand is in local and regional markets.

**Lesson 7. Certification is not a panacea, but it can help**
Certification has not significantly improved community forest management in the tropics. It has not been maintained at scale amongst enterprises where it is not required, or is heavily subsidized. But it can have other benefits, especially with Forest Stewardship Council (FSC®) certification that allows communities to overcome otherwise cumbersome government regulations, and as a way to identify problems and map action plans for improvement. Efforts should continue to make FSC more accessible to communities, while being realistic about the benefits that certification can actually deliver.

Lesson 8. Diversification reduces risk and is a benefit multiplier
The most successful community forest enterprises are those that diversify. The more reliance on a single species or product, the greater the exposure to risk, and the fewer benefits will be delivered to a smaller number of people. Diversifying enterprises to include a broader range of products like non-timber forest products (NTFPs) or payment for environmental services (PES) can also create different types of jobs, many of which may be open to women, youth, and people from more marginalized households.

The integrated community forest management pathway

As seen in the eight lessons above, not all contexts enable successful community forest enterprises. A strong focus is often needed on more fundamental issues, such as tenure security, land use, and social governance as building blocks. As a result, the Rainforest Alliance has broadened its approach towards an Integrated Community Forest Management (ICFM) pathway, which is an articulation of this holistic, inclusive, context-based concept (Figure 3).
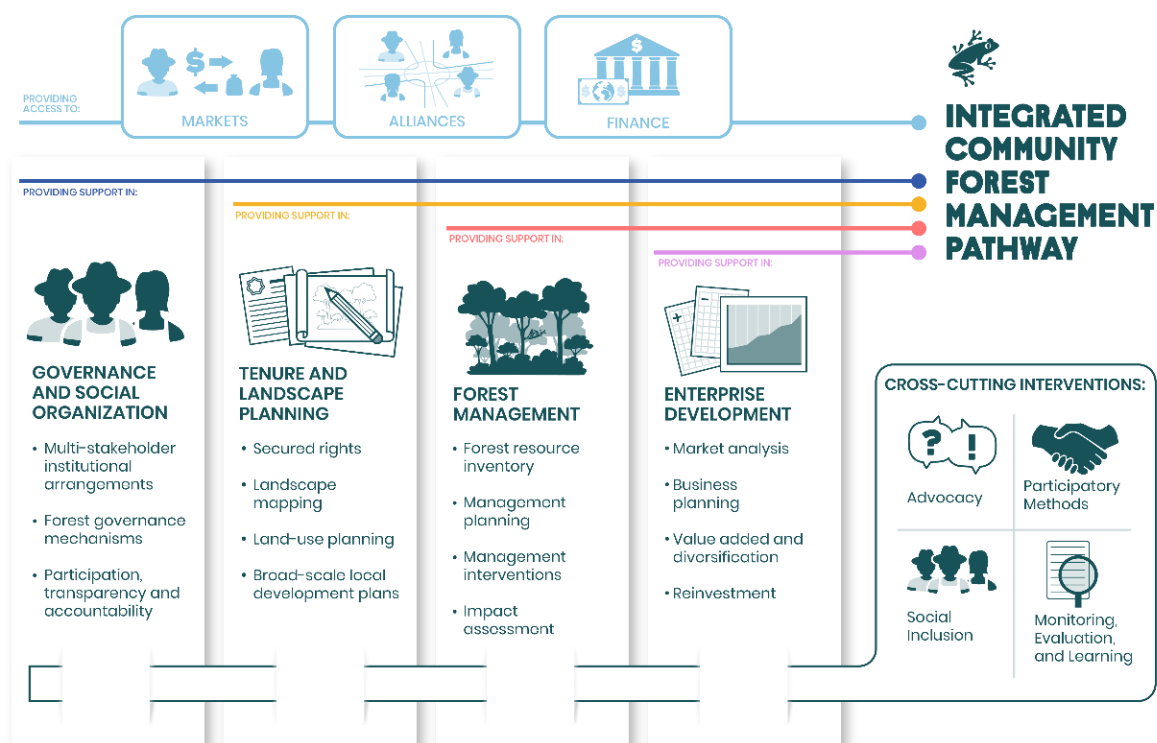
Fig. 3: The Rainforest Alliance's integrated community forest management (ICFM) pathway, Rainforest Alliance (2021)

Embodying the Rainforest Alliance vision of people and nature thriving in harmony, integrated community forest management contributes to a landscape management approach that engages multiple actors at multiple scales (Rainforest Alliance 2020):

- **Supporting community forest enterprises** through training, tools and knowledge to provide sustained economic development and foster strong social governance and inclusion, providing equitable benefits to households, incorporating young people in activities, and promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.
- **Implementing sustainable forest management, restoration or reforestation** to reduce forest degradation and deforestation, and increase forest cover, biodiversity and carbon capture.
- **Managing the forest in harmony** with other crops and ecosystems in the landscape.
- **Fostering secure rights to forests**, and access to alliances, finance and markets, to create an enabling environment for successful community forest enterprises at scale.

Recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all approach or single model for community forestry, this pathway serves as guidance which needs to be tailored to local contexts using a participatory approach.

Discussion

While the lessons learned during the Rainforest Alliance learning inventory and the resulting pathway underscore the importance of a bottom-up approach, it is clearly difficult to take any community forestry model to scale without top-down action. In the few cases where community forest management in natural forests has gone to scale, it is assisted by state-driven measures including favorable policies, sector-wide reform programs, and well-resourced extension services.

To develop successful community forests, partnerships between communities and government, NGOs, and private companies are needed. One key challenge is to secure financing and make it available over a long period. Bilateral and multilateral donors will thus continue to play a central role, though private sector funding will be become more critical over time, as companies play an important role in securing access to markets for responsibly produced and certified community forest products. They do so by creating partnerships with local communities to develop new value chains, by addressing supply chain challenges, and by connecting consumers to producers.

But if the proposed pathway is to be mobilized at scale, long-term partnerships with companies must be forged beyond supply chains, to secure an enabling environment at the landscape level. This work, is in essence, complementary to certification and favors it. Focusing on providing this enabling environment to community forests in critical landscapes, Forest Allies is the Rainforest Alliance's main vehicle. It also builds on the finding that successful outcomes from community forestry can be explained partly by whether there is a community of practice linking local people to external stakeholders for mutual learning (Macqueen and Mayers 2020).

Through the Forest Allies community of practice, the Rainforest Alliance brings together companies, regional civil society organizations and forest communities to form powerful partnerships that support an integrated community forest management approach. The initiative contributes to a pool of capital used to invest directly in community forest enterprises, and fosters a foundation of mutual respect, trust, and a shared vision and joint actions between forest communities and markets, and that aims at further engaging governments.

Conclusions/ wider implications of findings

As seen from the Maya Biosphere Reserve case study, the best guardians of the forest are those who make their living from it. But forest communities often lack access to the resources and support that would enable their enterprises to meet their full economic potential. Drawing lessons on successful approaches of community forests, from here and elsewhere, Rainforest Alliance has identified enabling conditions, entry points and a global integrated community forest management (ICFM) pathway, which describes a comprehensive and scalable approach that protects natural forests by partnering with communities, to build strong, equitable, local economies.

Successful community forests can only be achieved through and by communities and their organizations. But this requires collaboration, and that all actors take some responsibility. For the Rainforest Alliance, this takes place via Forest Allies, where business partners support the ICFM pathway through investment that supports an enabling environment through a community of practice, as well as encouraging responsible supply chains as detailed in the Rainforest Alliance's accountability framework initiative.

The public sector can promote community forestry through enabling policies and funding over the long term, which has been lacking in most countries – Guatemala, Mexico and Nepal being exceptions. But with a building momentum behind the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and the Paris Climate Agreement, there may be hope for more robust financing for community forests, and investments tied to post-COVID 'green recovery' plans. Finally, consumers can give preference to products coming from well-managed community forests.

This paper hopes to spark discussion about the guiding principles of integrated community forest management. The Rainforest Alliance invites partners from private sector, public sectors and civil society to help innovate, constructively review and comment on interventions, and hold it accountable to its principles, vision, mission, and goals. Together, we are inspired to make the coming years a time of successful ecosystem protection and restoration.

Acknowledgements

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