

Conservation Concessions in the Maya Biosphere Reserve

Why payments for ecological services were not successful in Guatemala

In Guatemala, Conservation International and the Guatemalan NGO ProPeten tried to negotiate a conservation concession with local communities in the Maya Biosphere. According to the terms of the agreement, the communities would forgo their logging rights in exchange for annual lease payments. Although no agreement was ever established, this experience still offers valuable insight into conservation concessions.

Why is a Conservation Concession Necessary?

The Maya Biosphere Reserve is the largest contiguous tropical rainforest in Guatemala. Located in the north of the country where it borders Mexico and Belize, the reserve includes five national parks, a World Heritage Site, and a RAMSAR wetland of international importance. In addition, the reserve serves as a unique link in the Mesoamerican biological corridor used for annual migration between South America and Mexico. The region is rich in biodiversity with nearly 3,000 plant species, and fauna such as jaguars, pumas, ocelots, monkeys, tapirs, crocodiles, the scarlet macaw and several hawk species. Due to the region's unique climate, the reserve also supports several endemic species.



Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala. Source: oorb.awav.com/oorb/location/latamer/quatamal.htm

When the Maya Biosphere Reserve was established by the federal government in 1990, it was zoned into core areas and multiple use areas. Core areas were to be used only for sustainable activities such as ecotourism, while multiple use areas could be used for extraction of certified green timber. Timber concessions were granted to communities who resided within the multiple use zones, which allowed them to harvest trees on their land. However, several of the multiple use zones blocked the corridor linking the Tikal and El Mirador National Parks.

How Was the Conservation Concession Supposed to Work?

Within the Maya Biosphere Reserve, two communities decided to decline their logging rights, and offered to lease their timber concessions for a small fee. The lease would ensure the preservation of 75,000 ha of land and the rent would benefit 110 families in two communities. (Hardner and Rice, 2002) In 2002, Conservation International and ProPeten responded to the offer and began drafting agreements with the two communities. According to the terms of these agreements, the communities would invest a portion of their revenue into ecologically sustainable projects such as guiding tourists to nearby archeological sites. In addition, they planned to invest in infrastructure for education and health care. (Hardner and Rice, 2007)

Why Did the Conservation Concession Fail?

The conservation concession never came to fruition because of intense opposition from local logging companies, who proposed that selective logging would yield higher returns and was more sustainable in the long run. They convinced the head of Guatemala's forestry regulatory agency to withhold his approval, and eventually, CI and ProPeten lost interest in the project. There has been speculation that foreign assistance was provided to organize loggers and block conservation in the region, but these accounts have not been verified. (Ellison, 2003) Recently, negotiations have resumed between the local communities and the NGOs, but it is generally presumed that well-organized logging companies will once again put an end to the agreement.

What Would Have Been the Social Benefits of the Conservation Concession?

The main advantage of this conservation concession would have been funds paid directly to local communities. In the past, setting land aside for conservation has been a useful method of protecting biodiversity, but it has not engaged local communities in conservation efforts. By paying landowners to protect their land, conservation concessions not only engage local actors, but also provide a source of financing for additional conservation services such as ecotourism.

What Can We Learn From This Case?

Although this case was not successful, it still provides some interesting information about conservation concessions. In general, conservation concessions can be successful in countries where communities have control over resource extraction. It is not always necessary that revenues from the lease equal the revenues that can be accrued from alternative industries, because some communities might have alternative motivations to lease their land. For example, they may recognize the additional economic value of engaging in activities that rely on biodiversity, such as ecotourism. As sustainable industries develop and communities begin to earn larger returns from sustainable economies, it may be possible to cease conservation concessions without endangering the environment.

For Additional Information:

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