

Developing Community Forestry in Ecuador: The Ecomadera Project

Eccuador, along with the rest of the tropical Andes, supports the highest levels of plant diversity in the world. Ecuador is also the second poorest country in South America, with over 60% of its rural population living on less than \$2 per day. Most of Ecuador's remaining natural forests are owned by campesino farmers who have no economic alternative to clearing their forests for agriculture. The result is that Ecuador has the highest rate of deforestation in Latin America, having lost 12% of its forest cover from 1990 to 2000.

In this setting, the Pinchot Institute believes there is no viable way to conserve forests without addressing the roots of rural poverty and helping small farmers create profitable businesses through managing their forests. The Institute is working with these farmers on a community forestry project in northern Ecuador to assist these impoverished landowners create a sustainable economy by conserving their native forests.

In 2002, the Pinchot Institute established a partnership between the U.S. Peace Corps, Fundacion Jatun Sacha (Ecuador's leading forest conservation NGO), the USDA Forest



Latest forest management plan finquero Romulo, his wife, and her father, and assistant, Peace Corps forestry volunteer Cory Johnson

Service, USAID, and a group of communities surrounding the village of Cristobol Colon. These communities include some 300 campesino families who together own 100,000 acres of forest and farmland. They have been harvesting about 40,000 board feet of hardwoods each week, yet current markets pay only 10 to 15 cents per board foot for rough sawn boards.

Over the last two years, we have helped the communities establish a forest products company (Ecomadera Verde), develop legal forest management plans, create tree nurseries, and plant agroforestry plantations on abandoned cattle pastures. In addition



New Planer Molder in operation

we have helped them raise the capital to purchase a portable sawmill, build a solar/wood heat kiln, and construct a wood shop with production tools such as a planer molder, jointer, table saw, etc. The project has also trained community members in business management, marketing, wood processing, and forestry.

The central premise of the project is to help the communities turn their wood into high quality products and market them to the final consumer. For instance, installed wood flooring sells for 20 times the price the community is now getting for rough sawn boards. By accessing higher value markets, landowners with legal management plans can be paid at least two or



Solar Kiln, glass collector panels in front, kiln with exhaust fans.

three times the current prices, which creates strong demand for adopting sustainable management. During the last year, a full time marketer has identified profitable niche markets in Ecuador and the United States. The community is now producing hardwood flooring, moldings, furniture, and dried and planed boards. The business is just turning the corner to profitability with more requests for products than they can produce with the number of landowners with management plans growing rapidly.

The Pinchot Institute and Jatun Sacha have recently been requested by USAID to expand this project to two other groups of communities, one on Ecuador's western border with Colombia working with the Awa Federation of indigenous communities, and the other working with 22 Quichuan villages in Ecuador's northern Amazonian forests. This project has been generously supported with funding from Overbrook Foundation and the Ecuadorian USAID mission. These efforts are bringing to Ecuador Gifford Pinchot's original vision of sound forestry, which can be profitable for landowners while at the same time sustaining the forests as a renewable resource.

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