

Center For Sustainable Development at FONMSOEAM

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Although in the past several development projects have addressed sustainability from separate socio-economics, gender, research, and conservation perspectives, few attempts have been made to link these concepts under one umbrella. Fewer still have fostered the ability of local communities to carry that umbrella.

The small scale cacao farmers association "FONMSOEAM", stands for "Federation of Black, Mestizos Organization of small scale cacao farmers from the South Western Esmeraldas, Atacames y Muisne). The FONMSOEAM community-based Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Conservation of Natural Resources will help cement an interdisciplinary partnership between small farmers, grass-roots conservation organizations, community-based financial institution, government officials, and the manufacturing and retail sectors of lucrative, high end chocolate products and chocolate byproducts. (See map)

TARGET AUDIENCE

This project targets farmers in the Esmeraldas province, one of the most economically depressed region of Ecuador. Per capita GNP is 48% below the national average, and most lack access to clean water, education and healthcare. The farmers' way of life helps protect and paradoxically threatens one of the last intact forest ecosystems in the Mache Chindul Ecological Reserve and surrounding areas, part of the Choco Bioregion considered a global priority for biodiversity conservation.

Of crops produced, cacao is the "greenest" and has considerable untapped market potential. However, farmers are unorganized, uninformed and commercialize unilaterally in an increasingly oligopolistic market. Cooperative agreements, infrastructure, technology and education are crucial steps to access better prices.

GOAL

The FONMSOEAM Center for Sustainable Development and Conservation of Natural Resources is an initiative to organize small cacao farmers and integrate them with local conservation organizations towards the common goal of increasing revenues and awareness of a sustainable and environmentally healthy crop.

OBJECTIVES

Specific objectives include community based monitoring of biodiversity in agroforestry systems, exploitation of sub-products currently discarded; local financial autonomy through the woman's bank; collective distribution of raw cacao to receive better prices; and creation of an international market image for environmentally friendly cacao and chocolate products.

IMPLEMENTATION

Project activities include strengthening of farmers organizations (currently ongoing); forge a collaborative agreement with a local conservation organization, partner with national and international NGO's willing to assist with the project (ongoing), computer and software training to members of the farmer's association (ongoing), GIS-based inventory of cacao plantations and biodiversity estimates (6 months); construction of Sustainable Development Center (SDC) including office with internet connectivity (10 months); expansion of SDC to include facilities for juice extraction, fermentation and drying of cacao (6 months); experiment with processing of byproducts for livestock feed (2 months); planting of a 1 hectare model cacao farm integrated with native timber trees (6mon); training workshops in post-harvest processing, use of personal computers and internet, accounting systems and cacao marketing and distribution strategies (6mon).

FONMSOEAM

FONMSOEAM (Federation Organization of Black and Mestizos Small Scale Cacao Producer from Esmeraldas, Atacames and Muisne) is an organization created in 2000, composed by 400 small scale cacao farmers living in 25 surrounding communities of the REMACH in the Esmeraldas province of Ecuador. This area is not only known worldwide for growing the exquisite native Cacao Fino de Aroma (Theobroma cacao), but also for being part of the globally important biodiversity region, the Choco-Manabi conservation corridor. This data contrast with the national statistical analysis that clearly establish Esmeraldas as the province with the country's, highest deforestation rate of 9,567,5 ha per year. These dramatic socio-economic indicators are also reflected in the dismal state of basic urban infrastructure; 80% of the population does not have access to basic services such as electricity, road, fresh water and hygienic services including waste disposal and being the most depressed region in the Republic.

Although FONMSOEAM is a legally established organization, it hasn't been able to reach full market potential due to deficient organizational capacity, insufficient post harvest infrastructure, inadequate technology, and lack of education. In order to remedy the situation, we propose an integrative solution that brings together small-scale farmers, local financial institutions, industry professionals and grass roots conservation organizations in an alternative to unsustainable economic activities such as logging, cattle ranching and annual crops that lead to biodiversity loss without alleviating poverty.

Specific objectives include strengthening FONMSOEAM organizational capacity to improve collective distribution and commercialization of raw cacao, improved post-harvest treatment of cacao to receive better prices; community based monitoring of cacao plantations; improve technical assistance; exploitation of sub-products currently discarded; and creation of a national and international market image for environmentally friendly cacao and chocolate products.

Great Wilderness recently donated funds to allow fifty FONMSOEAM cacao farmers to begin the organic certification process for their product. Certified organic cocoa producers are most likely to obtain better prices than conventional cocoa usually ranging from US\$ 100 to US\$ 300 per ton.

VISITING FARMS IN MUISNE

Great Wilderness visited cacao farms in Muisne and participated in a seminar on tree pruning. Coupling our experience with the local technician was a wonderful way to introduce ourselves to the farmers and created an important bond with these stewards of the Mache-Chindul Ecological Reserve. Many of these farm families have lived in the area for hundreds of years.

WORKSHOPS AT FONMSOEM

Soraya, Romina, Maria and Eloy got right down to work writing a grant for technical assistance at the drying and

fermentation center. Building capacity and expertise within farmers associations is a major component for increasing income. Increased income means less deforestation, healthier lifestyles and stronger communities.

POST HARVEST ACTIVITIES

Cacao “fresco” arrives at the facility from the farms by truck and is inspected for quality and cleanliness, weighed and carefully recorded as to origin by lot number. The bins on the right are for fermentation, a four to five day process before drying (seen in the foreground). Think of the many people responsible for bringing this wonderful product to market for our enjoyment. The list is long and in the end all of us are dependent on the health of the land for chocolate in its purest form. Hybrids and clones have become a huge part of the equation due in large part to the devastating deforestation of forests where cacao naturally occurs.

BIANNUAL FARMERS MEETING

Great Wilderness was invited to participate in the biannual farmers meeting at FONMSOEM. We were pleased to introduce ourselves to over a hundred farmers and offer our help. These families have a long history in the area and it was a humbling experience to get to know them and here their stories of the land and the struggles they have been through to improve their lot and protect their environment.