

Reclaiming the Forests

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La Sierra Norte is the northern mountain range in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. It is an impressive region because the mountains are home to forests of great biodiversity including pine-oak forests, billowy cloud forests, and mossy tropical forests. It is a beautiful area thick with vegetation and rich habitat for many wild creatures. It is also a region rich in human culture where, for centuries, indigenous groups have practiced their traditions and cared for the land. Its beauty is simply unparalleled. However, as with many beautiful things, the region has also witnessed an extremely disheartening past in which the people have seen many of the natural resources of this land rapidly decline.



In 1850, the imposition of private property in Mexico on the pre-Hispanic system of communal ownership and management of indigenous lands brought about many changes. Whole communities were dispossessed as they saw their communal lands being converted into *haciendas* or state properties. Recognition of this unfair displacement became part of the Revolution of 1910-1917. As a result, an Agrarian law was passed recognizing the rights of the indigenous communities over their community lands and forests; however, these communities were still banned from the commercial use of their forests. The federal government gave private national and international companies concessions to commercially exploit the forests.

In the Sierra Norte, the *Fabrica de Papel Tuxtepec* (Tuxtepec paper factory - FAPATUX), a former Canadian company, was awarded rights of commercial extraction for a 25 year period (1957-1981). This company did not use, nor train their workers on sustainable forestry practices. Extraction of the very best wood took place at a rapid pace in the absence of reforestation and without any regard to soil or water conservation. Very minimal economic benefits were realized in the communities in whose forests the logging was taking place and community members began to worry about the accelerated deterioration of their forest resources. Much protest was generated and in order to have a greater power in halting the operations of this international logging company, four indigenous communities of the Sierra Mountains formed a union to be known as UZACHI: Santiago Xiacui, Capulalpam de Mendez and La Trinidad (of the Zapoteco ethnic group), and Santiago Comaltepec (of the Chinanteca ethnic group).

Community members took direct action, rising up to the state level. The actions proved to be successful with suspension of the timber exploitation permit of FAPATUX in 1981, and its final cancellation in 1983. The communities, striving to work together towards a community-based forest management strategy, legally formed UZACHI on 14 Sept 1989 in order to take responsibility for the protection, management, regeneration, and sustainable use of their forest resources; a total area of 26,000 Ha of which 88% is forested. An external agent, the NGO Estudios Rurales y Asesoría (ERA), was invited to provide critical, technical, and networking assistance to the community organisation after the community had regained control of the forests. Now, independently, UZACHI has its own technical staff made up of

trained community members including forest technicians, forest engineers, and biologists.



Canadians can learn from UZACHI's lead

UZACHI - four small indigenous communities who were up against both the state and federal government of Mexico, as well as a large international logging company, were able to successfully reclaim their land and initiate sustainable extraction practices in order to ensure that forest resources, as well as economic livelihoods, could remain for generations to come.

The goal of UZACHI, from its foundation, has been to ensure sustainable profits and livelihoods from the use of the timber wealth from its community forests. However, the organization has also incorporated a high degree of protection into its work as well as bio-diversity, conservation, and monitoring in order to ensure that it uses the most sustainable of management practices. A land use plan for these territories has

been developed based on the characteristics of the land and the needs of the communities. Only 40% of the total forest area has been allocated for forest production while the remaining 60% has been put aside for protection. They have even gone so far as to become certified by the forest stewardship council (FSC), meaning that their system of forest management complies with the international standards of good forest management defined by the FSC.

It has been a long struggle, but the communities that make up UZACHI are determined to recognize the true value of their forests and be active as leaders in community based forestry. They now lead training workshops and courses for other communities, and continue to explore alternative avenues of income from a forest setting. This means looking at a forest in a different light; not just seeing it in terms of cords/acre, but as an interactive ecosystem. It means managing ones resources responsibly.

UZACHI not only recognizes the benefits of forests in their timber products, but also in their non-timber products. Non-timber products include forest resources that are often overlooked such as medicinal herbs, ornamental plants, food sources, objects to be used in an art or craft, and much more. Often the development of these products are less damaging to the health of the soil and the forest ecosystem as a whole.

UZACHI currently works with two different non-timber forest products: mushrooms and ornamental plants. They are part of an organisation known as SAO (Servicios Ambientales de Oaxaca) which is an association of indigenous communities in the state of Oaxaca. The association looks at generating options for conserving biodiversity in their territory, which can also be converted into benefits or services that generate income for the families. Every SAO product has a label that informs the consumer of how and where the products were produced, ensuring that sustainable levels and methods of harvesting have been followed.

At UZACHI, biologists rescue rare plants which are found after an area of forest has been cut. They propagate these plants in a lab and greenhouse in order to reintroduce them back into the forests and to have a steady supply of ornamental plants for sale. Their mushroom project also involves propagation techniques in a lab setting. Edible mushrooms are reproduced as an added food source in the communities without depleting their source in the wild.



Antonio Cosmez, UZACHI Forest Engineer, shows how to collect seeds from tall trees!



There is a lot that Canadians can learn from UZACHI's lead. Falls Brook Centre in New Brunswick, Canada has been fortunate to work with UZACHI and realize the benefits of their forestry practices. The focus on non-timber forest products as an alternative to intensive

logging is also applicable within Canada. At the Falls Brook Centre we are developing guidelines for the sustainable harvest of ground hemlock and balsam fir. We also have a mushroom-growing demonstration site at the Centre that was influenced by our Mexican partners. In the summer months shiitake mushrooms are for sale and propagation workshops are held for others interested in growing their own mushrooms. As well, we maintain an *Acadian Forest Restoration Nursery*, recognizing the value of having a local source of trees and

woodland plants to use for reforestation and restoration purposes.

The forests are one of our most precious natural resources. It is time we take after UZACHI's lead and acknowledge the true value of sustaining this resource for generations to come.

To find out more about Falls Brook Centre and their international partnerships check out the website:

<http://www.fallsbrookcentre.ca>

Projects for Teachers and Students:

- 1) Have a debate! Split the class in half and make a list of reasons for and against deforestation.
- 2) Find out more about forestry practices in New Brunswick. Refer to the "Forest and Local Economy" leaflet for some related websites.
- 3) Take a trip to a local forest and see if there are non-timber forest products that you can use to make arts and crafts. Try to sell your work in the community.

Capulapam de Mendez

