

Creating Ecologically-Based Businesses for the Maya Biosphere Reserve



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[Photo: This Petén micro-enterprise markets forest botanicals as potpourri.]

Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your doorstep, right? Not necessarily, argues [Sharon Flynn](#), the Director for Enterprise Development at ProPetén, a Guatemalan nongovernmental organization (NGO).

"Markets are not perfect," states Flynn. "There are lots of products the market doesn't know about and there are lots of demands that the products and the people near them don't know about. We try to resolve those market failures."

Talented team

In the process, Flynn has trained a talented team of local staff to provide local communities with an economic incentive for preserving one of the last large tracts of wilderness in Central America, Guatemala's Maya Biosphere Reserve.

Flynn heads Ecoempresas, a program designed to help people who live within the multiple use zone of the Reserve develop micro-enterprises based on value-added forest products and low-impact tourism. These community-based businesses will offer a sustainable alternative to the slash-and-burn agriculture and timber cutting that now threatens forests across the Petén, the country's largest and northern-most department.

Broader plan

Ecoempresas is part of a broader plan that ProPetén and [Conservation International](#), a Washington-based environmental organization, have put in place to protect the 1.5 million hectare Biosphere Reserve. Under this plan, Guatemalan officials have granted several communities within the Reserve exclusive rights to the resources in prescribed extraction zones around their villages. The government hopes that local control of the resource base will provide a strong incentive to keep new settlers out. This option is preferable to the nearly impossible task of policing an area besieged by land starved Guatemalans and resource hungry industries.

The Ecoempresas team consists of young Guatemalans who are an interesting mix of development worker and entrepreneur. The team is busy identifying business opportunities, developing specific products and, most importantly, evaluating the ecological basis of each product or service.

Pipeline products

Products already in the pipeline include traditional sources of income such as timber; *chicle*, a tree latex; *xate*, a floral palm; and *pimienta* or allspice — all of which have been harvested by Peteneros for the past century. But now that local communities control resources within the Reserve, new administrative and management systems are being established to create incentives for conservation and broader community participation. These tools include a monitoring and evaluation program, developed with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), which provides research data, such as resource inventories and extraction rates.

Also in the pipeline are forest botanicals — such as seeds, leaves, bark, and flowers — that can be used in items like potpourri; ramon seed, a wild parrot food with potential in the pet parrot market; corozo oil, which is used in personal care products; organic honey; and ecotourism.

Community-based ecotours

Of these, ecotourism shows particular promise. "Tourism is big business in Guatemala. It is the second most important economic activity in the country and relatively less investment is required than for other businesses," explains [Juan Carlos Bonilla](#), who is responsible for developing community-based ecotours.

Heeding industry trends and sticking to business basics, Bonilla and his team first defined and then targeted their market: independent travellers who visit the region on brief excursions. "Our market caters to tourists who are willing to endure fewer creature comforts for an experience that is closer to the people," he states.

Tour routes

The "product" his group developed is two to four day ecotours through the forest. The routes take in natural and cultural features of interest, such as the bat caves and temples of Zotz, once a Mayan outpost. Each tour is managed and operated by community ecotourism committees. Local people provide the equipment and pack mules, and act as guides, cooks, and interpreters. To date, three communities, with a combined population of under 500, offer ecotours. Bonilla estimates that 150 people benefit directly from the operations.

The litmus test for any new business is financing. "If an *empresa* cannot raise its own capital then there is probably something wrong with our analysis of the business opportunity," says Flynn. At present, loans are provided by the Fondo Maya, a credit fund developed in partnership with Guatemala's largest agricultural bank. The board that approves the business plans and authorizes the loans includes several bankers along with ProPetén personnel.

Eco Maya

To help fledgling businesses promote their products or services, ProPetén also launched Eco Maya, a limited partnership with eight Petenero communities. Conceived as the commercial and marketing arm of the Ecoempresas program, it will help these communities reach new national and international markets.

Although they now lack the skills to market their products abroad, Bonilla stresses that Petenero communities have embraced the idea of creating local businesses. "The barriers are more often in our minds not theirs," he laughs. "Most of the people already work in a market economy. Even though they have subsistence agriculture, they sell their surplus. So they understand buying and selling. The problem in the past is that people have given communities something for nothing and actually injured the entrepreneurial spirit."

For Bonilla and the rest of the ProPetén staff, rekindling that spirit may be the last hope for the Reserve.

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