



Chachi Cocoa Farmers of Ecuador

Ecuador, as most Latin American countries, has lived short and intense economic boosts based on intense exploitation of natural resources highly valued in the US and Europe. As such, in the 70's it lived an oil palm boom, later the timber industry focused on the forests and into the 90's the shrimp industry replaced the mangrove ecosystems with pools to export cheap shrimp to the US. In many cases, foreign companies bought rights to community resources without fully explaining the long term impacts to local residents. Only a very few communities were able to resist the "easy" money these sales represented.

Some groups, because of strong cultural associations with the forest have avoided clearing their forests to grow crops. They have organized themselves as cooperatives and associations, not only interested in production but in protecting the environment in which they live. One of these groups, the Chachi of northeastern Ecuador, in partnership with *Conservacion y Desarrollo* (Conservation & Development, C&D) – a Rainforest Alliance partner – are seeking to protect their remaining coastal forests and mangroves from further development, while raising the standard of living in this exceptionally poor community.

The Choco forest, lowland coastal rainforest, is an environment that is crucial for rainforest conservation, and sustains the coastal mangrove system – itself unique and endangered. Mangroves are of great importance because they carry out many ecological functions (water filtration, land stabilization, protection from tropical storms) and serve as habitat and nursery grounds for many species of birds, fish and wildlife. Mangroves are the great filtration systems of the coast – filtering water from upstream farms and cities before dumping it into the ocean. The red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*) for example, is a medium sized tree found in tidal areas and offshore islands. Leaves are elliptical and leathery with a shiny deep green color above and pale underside, and flowers are yellow. But its most noticeable feature is the

interlocking network of prop-roots that arise from the trunk and branches to shallowly penetrate the soil. Red mangrove helps to ensure that sand is not washed away by the relentless tide. The black mangrove (*Avicennia germinans*) is characterized by medium sized trees with oblong leaves often encrusted with salt, and a system of upward growing pencil roots that radiate out from the tree.

Since 1992, Conservation and Development, as a non-governmental organization, has collaborated with government agencies and the private sector to promote sustainable development and rational uses of natural resources. With offices in Quito and Guayaquil, their primary objective is raising public consciousness about rational resource management. In 1997, with support from the Earth Love Fund (UK), *C&D* began to assist small coffee, cocoa and banana cooperatives to improve their systems of production and management by establishing fair trade systems, acquiring useful and timely technology and complying with environmental guidelines for sustainability.

Their latest initiative, with the community of Esmeraldas, will focus on using these same techniques to improve the environment, quality and production of traditional shade cocoa forests. Las Esmeraldas is part of the Ecuadorian portion of the Chocó, a region of dense, moist forests bordering the Pacific coast all the way to Panamá. This ecosystem includes the Cayapas Mataje Mangrove Reserve, the Cotacachi Cayapas Ecological Reserve and the Awa Indigenous Reserve. Chocó forests support an estimated 9,000 plant and animal species, including more than 800 bird species, 235 mammals and 210 reptiles. The coastal Ecuadorian Choco forests have already been reduced to 6% of their former extent. These forests are more than just home to wildlife. They are the supermarkets for local families. Small farmers use the forest as the source of fruits, medicines, firewood and fibers – helping them to survive. The Chachi of Esmeraldas have long recognized the importance of retaining intact forests from which they can harvest natural medicines, like pain-relievers, antibiotics and herbs. The forests provide families with mangos, papayas, bananas, citrus, guava and other vitamin rich fruits. The mangroves provide protein for the families, in the form of shrimp, crab, fish and other aquatic wildlife. And, since these communities lack electricity, the forest provides their primary source of fuel – trees. When each of these

things is harvested in a conscientious and coordinated manner, the forest is able to sustain both the Chachi and its abundant wildlife.

Unfortunately, not all their neighboring communities are still as connected to the forests as the residents of Esmeraldas. All around them old-growth forest ecosystems are giving way to mono-crops of oil palm, bananas and soybeans pose an increasingly large threat to remaining lowland tropical rainforests. Along the coast, mangroves are being cleared for shrimp ponds. While shrimp are naturally found among the roots of the mangroves, commercial production requires the creation of large pools where the shrimp are raised. These pools are major sources of pollution and disease, contaminating wild populations of shrimp.

Often, poor farmers are unable to think about their impact on the environment because of harsh economic realities. *C&D* realized that if they were going to ask farmers to care about wildlife they would have to help them live better lives. . In a partnership with government ministries, *C&D* worked with *El Progreso* (Progress) – a producers association -- providing an increase from 50 to 100% on crop production in two years. “Fairtrade” is a way of helping farmers to remove the middlemen who often keep most of the profits from the sale of cocoa and coffee for international markets. And, by helping farmers acquire simple technological innovations, like solar dryers, *C&D* was able to improve both productivity and quality on these farms. This allowed the farmers to begin to implement environmental safeguards that would have been too costly with their previous system. Similarly, certification standards for cocoa were developed and applied as part of the Rainforest Alliance and Conservation Agriculture Network program. The general principles include the protection of natural ecosystems and wildlife, soil and water conservation, minimal use of pesticides and fertilizers and the promotion of worker health and safety.

Ecuador’s native cocoa, which grows under the forest canopy, is “aroma” cocoa with a special flavor that is highly prized in the chocolate industry. For most of the 20th century Ecuador was considered the gold standard for cocoa production. Cocoa grow under the rainforest is very good habitat for wildlife. And, in fact, can be as diverse in species as healthy forests. Unfortunately, in the 1980’s farmers began to transform their forested farms

into full-sun high input systems, losing much of their quality in the process. Prices plummeted and farmers have still not recovered.

A major part of *C&D's* initial effort was to reestablish a system for quality in Ecuador to attract major chocolate buyers. In their new processing centers, *C&D* staff trained cocoa classifiers to separate the beans by quality, making them more valuable to buyers. *C&D* not only provides current market information to farmers so they are able to get fair prices, but has established revolving funds so that farmers can get credit to buy supplies therefore quickly paying back their loans and gaining control over their finances. This has helped to end the cycle of debt that is so prevalent among small farmers the world over.

With help from *C&D*, the farmers and families of Esmeraldas are rekindling their relationship with the forest, while teaching their neighbors that being good stewards can be profitable.