

The *Area de Protección de Fauna y Flora Yum Balam*: The Initiation and Challenges of a Development Program for the Communities and the Environment in the Maya Zone of Northern Quintana Roo

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ABSTRACT

In 1994, after five years of struggle to establish local, Indigenous control over the natural resource base in an area of northern Quintana Roo, the *Area de Protección de Fauna y Flora Yum Balam* was established. Under the guidance of a locally directed Committee and in consultation with the local people and a Consultative Council of scientists, Yum Balam is striving to establish a sustainable society, based on traditional Maya practices but also taking advantage of new opportunities to strengthen their self-sufficiency and economic autonomy. In so doing, they are at once revitalizing their ancient cultural heritage *and* protecting a valuable natural area.

INTRODUCTION

Although the Maya area of northern Quintana Roo is very close to the resort city of Cancún, it is one of the poorest regions in Mexico. Our strategy for improving this situation is based on the joint effort of communities, traditional authorities, the region's college of agronomy, and Yum Balam, a local environmental organization. We have analyzed the problems, expectations, natural resources, and alternatives that we, the communities, believe can be the solution to our problems.

Our *municipio* comprises an area of 3,881 square kilometers and a population of 15,967. Sixty-nine percent of the inhabitants are of Maya origin and in many cases speak only our language. The alarming economic situation in our region is forcing many of our young people to move to the nearby tourist zones to seek work. The Yum Balam Civil Association is made up of technicians, farmers, fishermen, and scientists. Working with the Supreme Maya Council in northern Quintana Roo and various NGOs, we are coming up with development alternatives that are culturally, ecologically, economically, and technically feasible for the region.

These alternatives focus on reinforcing the cultural identity of the Maya people in the face of tremendous external acculturating forces and improving the income and employment levels of the communities, so as to be able to live in health and dignity. These

*Hunab-ku bóhtik tu lakal a
lalahk'abehehsh, huayaneu ta
huetelekshé tiah cáh tzicbatohon
le meyah kmetic yetal cajalohon.*

[Thank you for your welcome, I am grateful to you all. We are here with you to share an experience of community development.]

goals are interrelated, because we believe that the process of taking control of our natural resources will help us to retain our culture, while at the same time, our traditional knowledge will enable us to manage our area sustainably.

To fulfill these objectives, it is necessary to take advantage of the possibilities offered by controlled logging, game management, fishing, ecotourism, and crop production techniques that are less damaging to the environment. For this, we need to rescue and use the knowledge that we have about the forest. The project seeks to establish conditions in which we can overcome this preposterous situation: extreme poverty in the midst of natural riches. To do this, we need to overcome our marginalization and seek social justice and harmonize our production by always following our traditional forms of social organization and work, as well as the knowledge that can help us achieve ecological harmony.

Another of Yum Balam's objectives is to promote the exchange of ideas and experiences among Indigenous leaders and with the people of the United States, so as to gain support for local self-determination and to help promote traditional natural resource uses.

Our next step is to propose the creation of a Mexican sustainable development association. We are also proposing a change in Federal Law to include a new category of protected area: a conservation area that preserves the cultural and natural heritage of Indigenous people. Here, I would like to present our experience in one of our programs: the Yum Balam Protected Area.

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THE YUM BALAM PROTECTED AREA

Usually, when protected areas are established, the people who live in and around them are not consulted. Some of the best preserved areas contain and are surrounded by Indigenous peoples who depend on these areas' resources, yet these people are often seen as a threat to the biological resources of these areas. The exclusion of local people from protected areas not only weakens their material welfare, but also weakens their chances for cultural survival. This situation leads to conflicts between local people and conservationists, and often creates conditions that are worse for both the people *and* the wildlife.

Two key natural events and a change in government policy made action necessary for us. In 1988 Hurricane Gilbert devastated large areas all along the northern part of the Yucatán. It tore up many thousands of trees and left the region leafless and without fruit — a destruction of habitat that led to a 40% decrease in wildlife in the area. Then, in 1989, we had a drought that led to large wildfires

throughout the area — 30,000 hectares of forest were consumed by the flames. The last straw came in 1991, when the fishery was opened to groups other than the fishing cooperatives, including to foreign fleets. We realized that our patrimony was in grave danger, and we had to defend Yum Balam, our Jungle Lord, the God of Nature, from destruction, for our benefit and that of our sons and daughters.

After centuries of “development” at the hands of outsiders, the Yucatán Peninsula has a shrinking natural resource base. The very

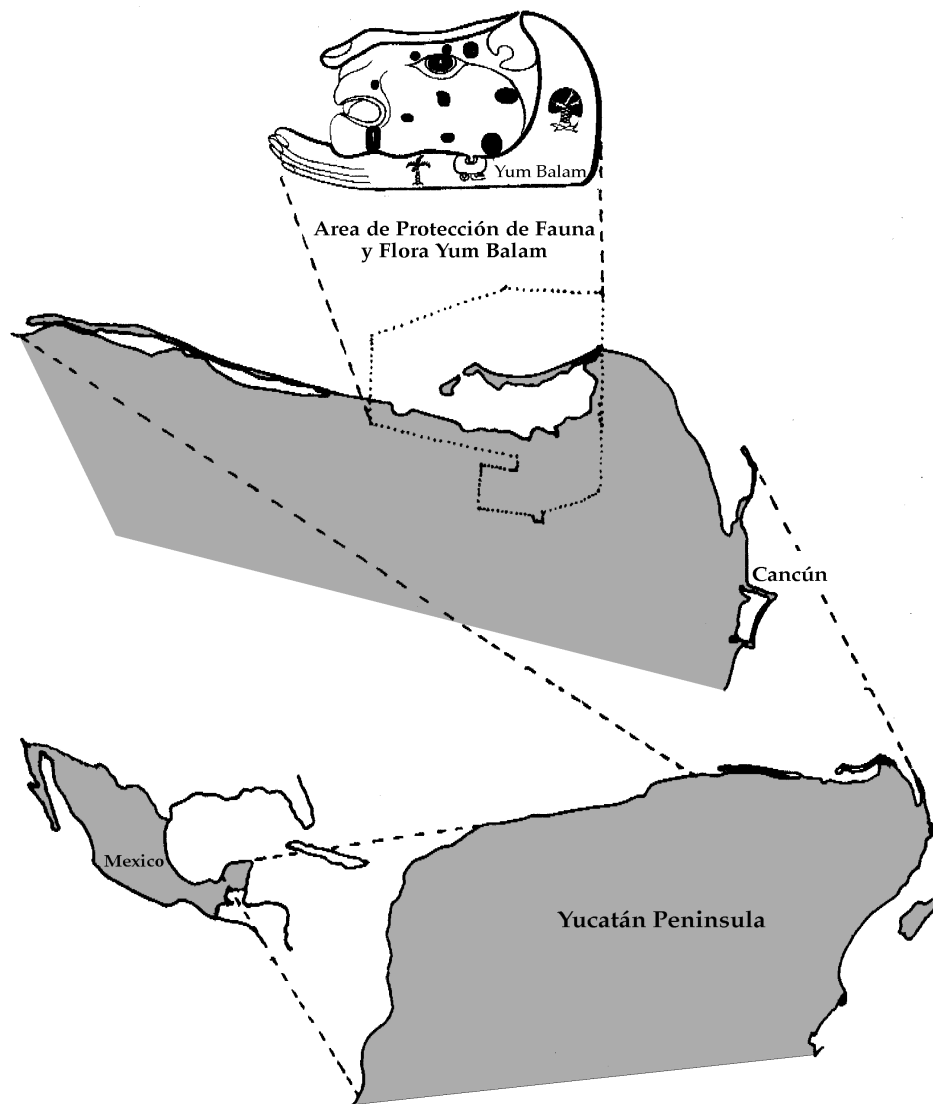


Figure 1: Locator Map of the Area de Protección de Fauna y Flora Yum Balam

natural heritage upon which our culture depends, and therefore our culture, was in danger of disappearing. For this reason we decided upon pursuing the creation of this preserve, but with a difference: we sought a reserve in which we would be able to participate fully, from inception to management.

After five years of deliberations and discussions between government authorities and the local people, the Yum Balam Protected Area (*Area de Protección de Fauna y Flora Yum Balam*) was officially declared on June 5, 1994. The process of formation of this area was slow and detailed, and included participation from the rural communities both inside and adjacent to this zone, as well as a critical component of consultation with sympathetic bureaucrats, scientists, and technicians. The agreement that was signed on June 5 was between the federal, state, and municipal authorities and organized civil and cultural groups, fishermen, farmers, and tourist guides, and laid out the compromises and agreements to support the operation, management, and administration of the area.

The reserve is located in the northeastern corner of Quintana Roo and is inhabited mainly by Mayan people. Covering an area of 154,000 hectares, it includes a variety of ecosystems: deciduous tropical forest, flooded forests, mangroves, lakes, wetlands, a marine bay, a barrier island, coastal dunes, and coastal waters. The area also contains numerous ruins left by our ancestors, and is contiguous with the Rio Lagartos Biosphere Reserve, an area of similar ecosystems.

GOALS AND CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

Among our objectives are to:

- protect the Maya historical and cultural heritage
- safeguard biological diversity across all of the ecosystems, many of which contain endangered or endemic species, including some large mammals, such as manatees
- provide natural resources to the area's inhabitants in the form of fisheries, game animals, building materials, and alternatives for the future
- protect the aquifers critical to the area's water supply
- preserve the potential for scientific investigation and ecologically sound recreation

At present, the Committee is working and is having meetings each month in which different social and environmental problems are addressed in order to come up with solutions for garbage han-

dling, mosquito control, fishing, tourism, forestry, medicinal plant use, handicrafts, nature guides, and so on. We already have many proposals and projects and we are always looking for new ideas in cultural, social, and ecological matters. To assure the sustainability of our plans, we have established a Consultative Council, composed of the scientists who have been supporting us. This Council reviews the technical aspects of our plans and is conducting ongoing investigations of the resource base and our use of it. We have also established a series of workshops to foster an ongoing participatory analysis of our relations as a society with the environment and our future.

Yum Balam's major focus is to protect simultaneously local communities and the ecosystems in which they live. Traditional land uses are respected, and decisions are made based on scientific investigation, but always in consultation with the local people. This entire process of establishment and management is overseen by a committee of government authorities and local groups in coordination with research institutions and NGOs. Because there is no existing model for this alternative in Mexico, we are in the process of creating one. One of our challenges in the future will be to multiply this experience and help other Indigenous communities in Mexico to take control of their destinies as well.

In the end, we who live in the area must take responsibility for both objectives: improving our quality of life and protecting the reserve's species and ecosystems. By taking into account the needs of the local communities, both material and spiritual, the reserve is a trustworthy custodian of the area. If we can take advantage of our knowledge, with technical and government help, and if the laws are sufficiently adapted, we can manage our natural resources to provide us with the basis for a sustainable society.

Let us be the authors and actors in our own destiny. The Maya world is distinct. We have our language and our customs, but we want to share them with the entire world. We don't want to live on this planet separately — we are not a different world; we are a distinct world.

*Kíhmak in wolah uch a úhyikenehesh, in jajal puksik'ah
haik tenéh, yank náhatikabaou.*

[I feel happy to have been listened to with such attention, and with all my heart I hope that we will go on to exchange many ideas.]

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QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION

Q: What are the most serious problems your community faces at present?

SP: The biggest problem is the lack of support for traditional practices. Since 1970 the government has been putting a lot of money into the area for “development,” but in fact the approach they have taken has benefited very few people because they have not given the people the opportunity to decide how to improve the region — rather they just did whatever they wanted to.

Q: How do you see the situation in Chiapas with the Zapatistas affecting Yum Balam?

SP: I want to answer this question by saying first that the Indigenous communities see the ongoing struggle of our Maya brothers in Chiapas as a positive development. We in the Civil Associations are with them. But, for us it is a double benefit. We have encountered sensibility, we have encountered acceptance, and because of the initiatives we have brought forth the authorities are now beginning to give people the opportunity to decide what they want. So, one of the benefits that is coming out of the war in the southeast is that they have to take us and our plans seriously. I believe that this is a moment that we have to take advantage of.

As Ted Macdonald mentioned, groups like ours now have the political wherewithal to collaborate with scientists and technicians to our benefit, and we don't have to take directions from anyone anymore, because we know what we want.

Yum Balam invites all interested people and groups to participate in their struggle to attain a sustainable society for their people. They can be contacted through:

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SEBASTIÁN POOT BALAM

Ing. Poot is an Agronomist, with a specialty in animal science. Currently he is president of the Yum Balam Asociación Civil and General Coordinator of Area de Protección de Flora y Fauna Yum Balam. Yum Balam is located in the north of the state of Quintana Roo. Ing. Poot is also Coordinator of the National Commission of Justice and Social Development for the Indigenous Towns in the Municipality of Lazaro Cardenas. In addition he is a professor at the Centro de Bachillerato Tecnológico Agropecuario of Kantunilkin Quintana Roo.

Sebastián Poot Working Group

The workshop began with an overview of the history of the Yum Balam Civil Association. The group was initiated after two events in 1989 and 1990, the most significant of which was a fire that destroyed a large area of forest. People from the community began working with various organizations, including governmental and international groups. They began to form their own group with the intention of conserving all aspects of the remaining natural resources. Although the ideas and models for organization came from other groups, Ing. Poot emphasized that it is the Indigenous people who make all the decisions in their group. The group is trying to encourage education, technical expertise, and diversification of production so as to become sustainably self-sufficient.

The next major topic concerned the economic basis of Yum Balam. Ing. Poot emphasized the importance of diversity in community economic development. He spoke about the traditional agriculture of the Maya people, centered around maize, as explained in the *Popul Vuh*, the spiritual scripture of the Maya. It also features a diversity of other crops. Agriculture is only one part of their economic activity which also includes deer breeding, arts, crafts, fishing, domestication of plants, and tourism. The goal is to bring all of this together as a coherent basis for resource use. While the nearby tourist pole of Cancún makes ecotourism an important part of the strategy, it should not affect in any way the traditional diversified agricultural basis. Ecotourism must be undertaken with care, because it contains the seeds of its own destruction, at least in Mexico, where success is almost defined as exceeding the carrying capacity of the region.

The workshop participants also discussed the effect NAFTA might have on groups such as Yum Balam and the Mexican *ejidos*. Opinions were mixed, but the predominant opinion is embodied in this comment: "There is no such thing as an *ejido* which can live independently of the national and international system of pricing." Most, if not all, Mexican communities deal at least partially in the cash economy. Ing. Poot's community is trying to create a microeconomy alongside international market structures by finding "niche markets;" markets which remain outside world-wide competition. One example from Ing. Poot's community is the manufacture of railroad ties. Currently they have an exclusive market because Mexican law prohibits the government from buying this product from international suppliers.

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Lastly, the discussion centered around the Indigenous movement of which Ing. Poot is a member. It was pointed out that this international Indigenous movement gives them leverage within Mexico. Leverage and political pressure is very important for the success of community movements such as Yum Balam because it creates a political challenge to existing political structures.

The following excerpts expand on some of these issues:

Sebastián Poot: Our organization was established in 1989. I want to give you an idea of the two key events that led to the birth of the Yum Balam Civil Association (*La Asociación Civil Yum Balam*). In 1988 Hurricane Gilbert destroyed the coast of northern Quintana Roo. Then, in 1990 a wildfire destroyed 30,000 hectares of forest in the region.

Together, these disasters killed maybe 40% of the animals in the forest — *tepesquintles* (agoutis), wild pigs, spider monkeys and so on. We started to work with ProFauna, an organization based in Baldillo. They realized that the majority of the surviving animals had moved into the remaining forest, which surrounded our *municipio*, and they decided that they had to protect this area.

When we started this organization, we also had other things in mind, not just flora and fauna. We had to consider all of the resources that exist in the area — wells, ancient ruins, and other things. We intended to work toward conserving not just the plants and animals, but also the broad natural resource base that our lives depend upon. At first we were going to use ProFauna as a model for our own organization, but we decided that we wanted our group to be more independent. So we started to work with technicians and scientists from various institutions who were working in the area on coastal turtles and botany. We started talking to these people and became friends, and they helped us to establish our own projects.

At present, the government, including the State Governor and the Municipal President, are very supportive.

Nevertheless, even though we have all of this advice and support, the Indigenous people of Yum Balam remain in the decision-making capacity. We are the ones who make all of the decisions, based on the advice and support that we can gather.

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Q: What is the economic basis of the community development? Is the idea to make it viable through ecotourism, or through traditional swidden agriculture, or some modified systems? How do you plan to maintain economic sustainability?

SP: The agricultural system is basically sustainable by itself — we will always be self-sufficient, at least as far as food is concerned. Naturally, it's based on maize, in the traditional fashion, with about 20 other main crops, and this is perfectly compatible with our conservation objectives. However, we're encouraging a diversification in order to make our economy more robust. We are trying to diversify our sources of income by promoting projects to produce handicrafts such as hammocks, as well as deer breeding and fishing and orchid and other plant domestication. Ecotourism is obviously an important part of this strategy, but we will not allow it to affect in any way the traditional, diversified basis for our livelihoods. Hopefully this will keep our community reasonably resilient to turmoil elsewhere in the Mexican and global economies and sustainable in the long-term.

Jim Spencer, Moderator, Yale F&ES: How will NAFTA change the relationship between the local community and the government?

SP: We are trying to work within the government, using the local planning apparatus as a way to get control of government funds to promote regional development. Through these programs we are able to supply products such as railway ties that have protected markets within the country. To the extent that we can, we try to remain outside the markets that experience a great deal of international competition.

We are also a part of a national Indigenous movement in Mexico that is an attempt to create an independent political power. This group, the *Asociación Mexicana Indígena para Desarrollo Sostenible* (AMINDES), promotes cooperation among Indigenous groups in Mexico and seeks international support to help us advance our struggle. This gives us some greater bargaining power to create these protected areas.