FOREST PEOPLE & PRODUCTS

MAY 2021

RAINFOREST ALLIANCE GUATEMALA CAPSTONE

A PROJECT BY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The premise of our website is to tell the story of the Maya Biosphere Reserve through the development of the non-timber forest products and the people who create the products which are known as the concession workers. This website tells their story and promotes their products for buyers such as wholesalers and consumers to read and learn about their livelihood, their dedication to their craft, and what the work provides for their families, and how they practice sustainability to protect the land that is there. This website also will eventually feature these non-timber forest products for purchase in the open market.

Our guide to creating the website was based on the research of the 2020 capstone team who through their market outreach with other interested buyers and wholesalers determined that the next step for the summer team was to create a storytelling website which encapsulates the desires of the people in the Reserve.

Before then, there were years of research conducted by previous summer field work teams, and capstone teams who studied the ramon seed's capabilities, impact, and production in the Reserve. There has also been research done on the xate palm products along with several business connections in the United States to sell palm products to local churches and organizations for such festivities as Palm Sunday. Along the way, there has been a little bit of research conducted on the chicle, honey and allspice as well which through it all, previous teams identified these non-timber forest products as niche oriented with a potential to reach the markets around the world.

And that is why this website was created. To tell the story of the Maya Biosphere Reserve and particularly the concession workers who create the non-timber forest products for future buyers and consumers.

THE MAYA BIOSPHERE RESERVE

The Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR) is the largest protected natural reserve in Guatemala. Located in the upper northern part of the country, it is the largest area of tropical forest outside the Amazon. The area ranges from sea level wetlands to low mountain ranges and has several lakes, rivers, and streams. The climate ranges from wet to dry, with a little humidity but mostly semitropical with temperatures normally in the mid 20 Celsius (UNESCO, 2020).

Despite its beauty, the Reserve has also been highly vulnerable to climate change and threats to the land from the effects of deforestation and loss of biodiversity. To combat these threats the government of Guatemala in 1990 adopted a forest community concession approach by granting rights to 12 local communities for sustainable uses of the forest products for manufacturing and production. This balanced approach of community production and sustainability aims to support the efforts of forest concession communities in the Maya Biosphere Reserve and their livelihood. The work is what defines these concession communities which offer them a way of life and in turn, they are more inclined to protect it (Rainforest Alliance, 2019).

With resource management from the Rainforest Alliance and National Council for Protected Areas (CONAP), the Reserve has been able to slow down the rate of deforestation by designating certain areas specifically for logging, ranching, and agriculture while protecting other areas for community and national parks.

The setup of community concessions has given the forest communities agency and a chance to continue their work for economic stability, sustainability, and livelihood of their homeland. This past March 2021, the Guatemalan government granted another 25 year extension to the community concessions to continue managing and protecting their lands (Rainforest Alliance, 2021).

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE MAYA BIOSPHERE RESERVE

The University of Minnesota has had a relationship with the Rainforest Alliance for over 20 years. Throughout the years, the school has collaborated with the Alliance on numerous research projects on the Maya Biosphere Reserve and its non-timber forest products. Scholars from the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, the College of Integrated Natural Resources and Agricultural Management have spent weeks and months in the Reserve to study the NTFP's capabilities, their niche market, the work of the concessions, and producing a value analysis to learn about the products' potential. There have also been many interviews and research done on the reserve workers, and their concession models with hopes that it could be replicated around similar areas in Latin America. The collaboration between the University of Minnesota and Rainforest Alliance has been very beneficial to improving the work of the concession communities and to bring their stories to the forefront.

PROJECT GOALS

The Spring 2021 Guatemala Capstone Team was tasked with negotiating desired outcomes from University of Minnesota partners alongside Guatemala partners. Our group's capstone objectives for this semester aim to synthesize and better present the materials that we already have at our disposal by doing the following listed items. Our work was done completely remote here in the States but through communication with the major stakeholders such as Rainforest Alliance, the local Guatemalan concessions and the forestry programs in the Peten. We have major goals that we focused our work on including:

1) Optimizing the already existing "Forests and People" website used to disseminate information regarding the Peten's entrepreneurial pursuits, specifically with non-forest timber products (NTFPs);

2) Creating data management system and organizing existing information and;

3) Creating a transition guide regarding the project for future capstone groups

4) Continuing to facilitate and foster the relationship between the University of Minnesota, Rainforest Alliance and other Guatemalan organizations.

METHODS

As mentioned, the work for this capstone team ends this May but this partnership will continue beyond this time. The summer 2021 team will continue where we left off and add their own contributions to this project.

For this work we relied heavily on the past work of teams, existing literature and our own expertise and knowledge in different areas. We organized and took inventory of all past work to find and fill gaps for the Forest and People website including interviews, website design and feedback for improvement.

OUTCOMES

FOREST, PEOPLE, AND PRODUCTS WEBSITE

Our team continued the work of a client facing business to business website Forest, People & Products, which tells the story of the Maya Biosphere Reserve and the people who create products within this space in hopes of attracting potential buyers. We focused on content optimization, content creation, and accessibility to improve the user experience overall.

Telling the story of the Maya Biosphere communities and how they manage and protect their lands was at the core of our work along with presenting NTFPs in a way that is attractive to future partners.

DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The Rainforest Alliance and the University of Minnesota have had many iterations of teams for the past decade The previous folders have included past reports, scholarly articles, PowerPoint presentation slides, PDFs, written feedback, as well as rough drafts and important quantitative data but in separate dispersed folders.

We took inventory of all of these existing documents and folders and organized them all into a google spreadsheet. This spreadsheet organizes existing documents in relation to this project from literature, research, media content and interviews. The data is organized by type of document, language, region and includes word tags that allow for easier organization and finding information; these tags will be helpful when creating a more formalized database.

As new teams onboard, we envision they will use this to facilitate their research as well as continue to add on their own work. Potentially, we would like this to be further optimized into a formal database that can be both public and private for users.

TRANSITION GUIDE

Stemming from the work of creating a data management system, we sought to create a *Transition Guide* that will facilitate the onboarding and work of new teams. When we initially started this project we had a lot of learning to do about this subject since we all come from different backgrounds and disciplines. Some of us had public policy, human rights and development backgrounds that didn't exactly relate to the Maya Biosphere reserve and the market based knowledge about NTFP's that this project requires. Since there was so much learning to do before we could actually conceptualize where our project was going, we decided it would be beneficial for future groups to have a guide that could introduce them to the project.

This transition guide will include basic background information, an update of our team's work, and next steps including challenges and recommendations. We hope that this transition guide will aid future groups in understanding their role within the project and point them in the right direction regarding their work.

UMN AND RAINFOREST ALLIANCE RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Although the focus of this team was work done internally, we had a key component in continuing relationship building as University of Minnesota students with Rainforest Alliance and other partner organizations in Guatemala. One of Rainforest Alliance's points of focus was to continue their efforts with Guatemala's National School Lunch Program by creating an enhanced ramon cookie recipe. This ramon cookie recipe from Guatemalan community concessions groups is currently being created in collaboration with the University of Minnesota's Food Science and Nutrition department. Once the recipe has been finalized, our partners in Guatemala hope to add the cookie to their national school lunch program. This new recipe will add value and continue relationships with the local government.

To support these efforts we provided administrative and communication support to make sure our UMN food scientists and Rainforest Alliance partners kept in contact regarding the recipe. Ensuring that this relationship continues is crucial to this project's success in the long run to continue serving the goals of all parties involved.

CLOSING

As we wrap up our time with this project, we recognize that the nature of this work is inherently fluid and limited due to time and challenges brought on by COVID-19. We deeply lament the lost opportunities to visit Guatemala and the community concessions in regards to this project due to COVID-19 restrictions but we hope our work continues to set up future progress on this years-long project. Ultimately, we hope our work continues to aid local communities in the Peten region as they achieve sustainable economic agency.

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