

MISSION REPORT

THE CONSERVATION STATE OF THE RIO PLATANO BIOSPHERE RESERVE, HONDURAS

I INTRODUCTION

The current mission is carried out as an answer to a request made by the Governmental Secretariat of the Honduran Office of the Environment (SEDA). The said office asked for the support of UNESCO's World Heritage Unit to determine the conditions of the conservation and protection of the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve (RBRP). For this reason, UNESCO requests IUCN (technical support organ to UNESCO), to execute a report determining the above.

The mission took place on November 14 -19, 1995 and it was made up of a series of meetings, institutional interviews, over flights, visits to the zone under study, and analysis of the information available. Likewise, the draft of the document was discussed with the Director of Protected Areas of the State's Forest Administration, at the Honduran Corporation for Forest Development (AF - COHDEFOR). The current report is an extract of all of the discussions held by the work team and it doesn't necessarily reflect the institutional positions of the participating consultants.

It is worth mentioning that this mission was coordinated with a similar one generated through AF - COHDEFOR, in which this organism proposes to the Executive Secretariat of the Central American Commission of Environment and Development (CCAD), to seek the necessary technical assistance in order to recommend technical linements to guide the actions of the Honduran Government, in relation to the case of the RBRP and the specific situation in the Valle del Sico - Paulaya. CCAD, accomplishing the objective of horizontal cooperation, took the necessary steps before the Central American Forest Council and the Central American Council for Protected Areas (CCAB/CCAP), the formation of a Central American support team, in order to fulfill the request. The Technical Team, formed by CCAB/CCAP, was based on the following entities and regional institutions: Programa de Desarrollo Sostenible en Zonas de Frontera Agrícola en el Trópico Húmedo de Centroamérica (Programme for Sustainable Development in the Agricultural Frontier Zones at the Central American Humid Tropic) best known as "Agricultural Frontier" The World Conservation Union, Regional Office for Mesoamerica and its Forest Conservation Area (IUCN/ORMA), and CCAB/CCAP itself.

II. PROPERTY NAME:

Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, RBRP, Honduras, Central America.

III. REGISTRATION DATE AND CRITERIONS

Suscribed to the Mankind and the Biosphere Program (MAB) in 1977. Decreed by Law No. 977 as a Reserve of the Biosphere in 1980. Declared by the Organization of the United Nations for the Education, Science and Culture, UNESCO, as a World Heritage Site in 1982.

IV. TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE FROM UNESCO'S WORLD HERITAGE FUND

(1991-1992)

Up until now some technical assistance has been received from UNESCO, especially when the protected areas were managed by the Ministry of Natural Resources. During the days of AFCOHDEFOR there hasn't been any type of help. Besides, the Reserves receives non/integral support from WWF, World Neighbors, USAID-Peace Corps, CIDA (Canada), PNUD and aid is expected from KFW and GTZ.

V. STATE OF THE PROPERTY

The Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve has an extension of 525,100 has. Nevertheless, a Presidential Agreement exists, No. 1118-92 which amplifies the area up to 800,000 hs., awaiting the ratification of Congress. It was decreed as a Reserve of the Biosphere and suscribed as a World Heritage Site because of its biophysical characteristics, as well as cultural and historical. The Reserve is one of the largest and diverse humid tropical forests in Mesoamerica. It represents habitat for a significant biological diversity and counts with four ethnic groups within its limits. The area is also a historical one of archeological importance and it has more than 200 sites with this type of resources. Nevertheless, strong social, economic and political pressures exist today for its colonization. The advance of the Agricultural Frontier and the inadequate management of its natural and cultural resources is the expression of these pressures. The following state of the conservation of the reserve is documented after the achievements reached through field trips, interviews and interinstitutional meetings.

5.1 STATE ADMINISTRATION:

- The Reserve lacks an administrative regime. Since 1991 COHDEFOR represents the state entity responsible for the custody and management of the Reserve. However, it does not possess minimum physical infrastructure nor the personnel required for its protection. The only people who remain at the coastal zone are a fishing inspector from DIGEPESCA, two inspectors from the Ministry of Natural Resources and a technician from COHDEFOR assigned to Puerto Lempira (dozens of miles away from the Reserve). The latter is in charge of the general management of the protected areas of La Mosquitia, a zone engulfing the whole Reserve. In other words, as to the effectiveness in the control, protection and vigilance, the average is approximately 130.000 hs. per worker. Efforts have been made, during the last year, to coordinate actions and strengthen the institution.
- The Honduran Public Safety Force (police) remain in some of the villages of the Reserve limits. Nevertheless, it cannot stop the extraction of resources nor the land invasion.
- At present no Management Plan or Operation Plan for the RBRP exist. Likewise, the Reserve is not delimited or zoned.

- No agreements or formal links have been established between COHDEFOR and the governmental support organizations and the non-governmental organizations, to contribute in the administration and management of the RBRP or its parts.

5.2 SUPPORT FROM PRIVATE ORGANIZATIONS:

- There are positive experiences from the local people regarding the custody of certain RBRP zones. The Land Vigilance Committee (CVT) was formed as an initiative of the Miskitos indigenous to stop the agricultural frontier from advancing and the colonization of their lands. The committee is supported by MOPAWI, which is another NGO with local indigenous participation. Even though the CVT carries out vigilance rounds at the northern part of the Reserve only, these rounds are developed in a sporadic basis (with little support). The actions taken are mainly in the form of denunciations.

MOPAWI has a permanent presence of six years and is quite experienced about the north zone of the Reserve. It has established among all the residents, the concept of Biosphere Reserve. Besides promoting alternative development initiatives to support its conservation Vecinos Mundiales has a permanent presence of four years in the southern zone and its has worked towards the stabilization of the advance of the agricultural frontier, through the establishment of parcels for the settlers. It has also promoted, during 1994, the creation of the Cooperativa Agroforestal de Río Plátano. Other base organizations as well have been recently formed such as: the Comité de Pobladores de Sico (Sico's Population Committee), the Organización Fraternal Negra (OFRANE) (the Black Fraternity Organization) and the Comisión Cristiana de Desarrollo (Christian Commission for Development).

- The Ethnic groups of the Reserve (Garífuna, Pech, Tawahka and Miskito) have organized themselves and are requesting the effective participation of the management and administration of some of the zones within the RBRP. In the same way, the Tawahkas, an indigenous group located outside the Reserve adjacent to its occidental part, has formally asked for the administration of its land and its is promoting the creation of a Biosphere Reserve called Tawahka Asangni.

5.3 CHANGES IN LAND USE:

- - It is close to Río Wampú, a penetration road, introduced 35 kilometers inside the nucleus area (Río Plátano National Park). This access is allowing the advance of the agricultural frontier in the sector. The nucleus area in this zone has been invaded by more than one hundred families.
- The ethnic groups, particularly the Miskitos and Pech, practice migratory agriculture at the banks of the rivers in the northern zone of the Reserve. The Garífunas practice the agriculture at the coastal strip. This is a low scale and low impact agriculture and its current effects, when compared to those practiced by the ladinos. This way of production is not considered as a threat for the RBRP, at this moment.

- Due to the traditional system of agricultural products, driven by the colonists (ladinos), there are no soil conservation practices. This promotes their rapid degradation and erosion within the nucleus area of the RBRP.

5.4 ADVANCE OF THE AGRICULTURE FRONTIER:

- The advance of the agricultural frontier, the livestock expansion and the spontaneous colonization represents serious problems to the RBRP, mainly at its southern and occidental limits, and at the banks of the Wampu, Sico, Paulaya rivers and other smaller ones.
- At the advance of the agricultural frontier and the change of land use, a relationship of commercial partnership exists between the small farmer and the great cattleman, who has financial solvency. Because no property records exist at the Reserve, the small farmer is often financed by the cattleman. He then goes into the forest, cuts the trees down and plants annual crops. After a one or two year period, the small farmer sells or gives away his "rights of the property" to the cattleman and, once again moves even deeper into the forest. This type of practices also exist with military men and politics, and it has recently shown up with foreigners, especially at the coastal zone.

5.5 LOSS OF IMPORTANT NATURAL RESOURCES:

- The southern and occidental zone of the RBRP is subject to massive extractions of precious wood such as Caoba (*Swietenia macrophylla*). A forest management plan or an efficient control does not exist in the Reserve. The timber extracted supplies wood to the markets in the inner part of the country, the Bay Islands and the foreign markets of some of the Caribbean islands and the northern zone of Nicaragua. However, most of the fallen timber is burned. This shows the lack of alternatives for an appropriate use and management of the forest.
- The *Liquidambar styraciflua* and the *Palma Roystonea donlapiana* are representatives of over-exploited species, especially at the peripheral zones of the Reserve, to make use of the liquidambar oil and the construction of buildings with palms.
- Hunting and the extraction of wild animals for commercial reasons is currently being practiced without any control at all. It is mainly performed by groups outside from the RBRP. Some entrepreneurs promote hunting within the RBRP, masking the expeditions as ecotourism packages. As an example of this, species such as the Guara Roja (*Ara Macao*), the jaguar (*Felis onca*), the Tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*) and the crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*) are no longer seen within the limits of the RBRP nor at the margins of the most important rivers.
- The introduction of exotic species represent a threat for the native species. Tilapia (*Tilapia nilotica*) has been introduced in the coastal lakes. This represents a potential impact to the ictic fauna of the zone. A deep and serious study about this impact must be carried out.

- Traditional industrial fishing, of shrimp dragging, within the limits of the RBRP's protection zone, threatens the survival of the marine turtles "*Dermochelys coriacea*", *Caretta caretta*, *Eretmochelys imbricata*, *Chelonia mydas*. This threat to the marine turtles is getting worse due to the extraction of the eggs and the commercialization the shell of hawksbill turtle.

5.6 LOSS OF IMPORTANT CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES:

- Inhabitants in and out of the Reserve dedicate themselves to the extraction of archeological pieces to sell them to tourists and collectionists. The low value given to these resources can be easily perceived by means of the Government, since none of the 200 identified archeological sites is receiving any type of protection or management. The Honduran Anthropology and History Institute (IHAIH) has planned a survey of these sites for the year 1996. The purpose of this is to make an evaluation of their condition and state and be able to generate policies in that respect.
- At the coastal strip there are remains of Spanish and English weapons from the period of the conquest. These have not been valued by the local population nor by the State. Those resources are in a high risk of deterioration.
- The zone's relative isolation and the presence of the different ethnic groups of the area have turned into an element of increasing attraction for researchers and tourists. Nowadays there is no plan or strategy to control (tourism) nor take advantage of these initiatives (investigation) so they can, in an orderly way, contribute with valuable information for the management of the RBRP.
- The transculturization process has accelerated, in spite of the existence of local movements tending to consolidate and protect the culture and the traditional language of the ethnic groups, due mainly to immigration of ladino groups and an uncontrolled increase of tourism. IHAIH, through the Cultural Rescue project, supported by PNUD, is working on the cultural and organizational strengthening of these groups.

5.7 SOCIAL CONFLICTS

- No social conflicts apparently exist among the same ethnic groups within the Reserve. PNUD develops in a joint way with the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia a "Cultural Rescue" project which pretends to strengthen, among other objectives, the relationship and the organization among the different ethnic groups: Garífuna, Pech, Tawahka and Miskitos.
- There are conflicts between the ethnics and the ladinos (campesinos), specially at the margins of the RBRP. Those conflicts rise from the colonization and pressure by the use of the natural resources. Some cases exist, specifically at the southern part of the Reserve in Olancho and at West in Sico/Paulaya, where the settlers are fully armed, as a result of warlike conflicts which existed in the region during the decade of the 80s.

VI EXISTING SITUATIONS WHICH MAY THREATEN THE INTEGRITY OF THE BIOSPHERE RESERVE

6.1 LEGAL ASPECTS

- *Presidential decree about the Agricultural Reform in Valle de Sico/Paulaya.* The existence of a Presidential Decree of the Honduran Government (still unpublished) declaring Valle Sico-Paulaya, western limit of the Reserve, as an area subject to Land Reform. This information in absence of an effective and coordinated plan from the Government and without a cadastral record of the zone.

6.2 ADMINISTRATIVE ASPECTS

- *Absence of an integrating work frame.* The absence of an integrating work frame and coordination of the local organizations, as well as lack of support from the international organizations hinders an effective administration of the Reserve.
- *Delegate responsibilities on the RBRP by means of the State.* The possible delegation of responsibilities of the management of the Reserve by COHDEFOR, to be co-managed by various non-governmental organizations, without the existence of an Integral Management Plan poses a potential threat for an effective administration.

6.3 SOCIAL ASPECTS

- *Current colonization fronts.* The existence of a strong colonization front at the South of the RBRP, within the buffer area of the Reserve. This situation could foment the advance of the agricultural frontier within this Reserve, and the future Biosphere Reserve Tawahka, threatening the future of the biological corridor which would be formed by these Reserves and the Bosawas Reserve in Nicaragua.
- *Lack of alternatives for sustainable use and low incentives for the traditional production of ethnic groups.* The lack of alternatives for sustainable use constitutes itself a problem for the ladinos (campesinos) who have migrated to the zone, since its only way for production spins around the traditional practice of slash-and-burn. Likewise, there is a lack of incentives and acknowledgement to the traditional production practiced by the ethnic groups present in the region, especially at the coastal zone.

6.4 TECHNICAL ASPECTS

- *Lack of a follow-up plan.* The lack of a governmental follow-up plan for the management of the Reserve, limited political support to carry on this follow-up and administration, plus the continuous change of the workers responsible for the RBRP or assigned there, directly affects negatively its conservation and management.

- **Lack of an Integral Management Plan by RBRP.** The lack of an adequate integral plan and the lack of decision of the Government has caused uncertainty to the ethnics. Regarding the management of the areas as indigenous reserve zones. This also engenders expectations and speculations to the ladino population who are pressing on the Reserve with the advance of the agricultural frontier. Lastly, the uncertainty of the ethnics, along with the speculation of the ladino population, are the conditions that the groups with economical power take advantage of, to appropriate new lands in the zone.

VII. URGENT ADOPTING MEASURES

- 7.1 To include the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve within the UNESCO'S Thretened World Heritage Sites, in order to search for the appropriate mechanisms to achieve the technical and financial support necessary for the execution of the urgent measures suggested.
- 7.2 To form a Working Commission which permits the formulation of an Interinstitutional Action Plan, looking for joint and effective work within the different institutions, the consensus withing the parts involved and delimiting the responsibilities of each one of the institutions and organizations acting in the RBRP.
- 7.3 To carry out a register of the lands and owners at the margins of the RBRP. A cadastral register and the identification of their owners, by the Instituto Nacional Agrario (INA) and COHDEFOR. This would be very important for the management of the RBRP.
- 7.4 Delimit and appoint the RBRP, especially in the critical areas are those subject to invasion and colonization at this moment. Develop a communication programme in the RBRP region and its influence zone, and generate a movement of public opinion about the threats and opportunities of the RBRP.
- 7.5 To establish control posts with public security agents in the critical zones, to stop the invasions. Furthermore, advancement should be made towards a socio-environmental commitment about joint management with the groups who finally establish themselves in those areas.
- 7.6 To carry out a study to evaluate the possibilities which permits putting into practice a relocation or transferring system of the families found in the critical zones of the Reserve (nucleous area), considering the fomentation of production alternatives feasible in the lands susceptible to be used by these groups and distributing productive lands outside the Reserve in a more equitable way, in order to favour the families that were relocated.
- 7.7 To establish an administrative frame of the RBRP to achieve an effective integration and articulation of non-governmental organizations, governmental and local communities under a sole Management Plan. That frame could operate through the signature of agreements establishing the responsibilities of each executing organization. The establishment of a joint management programme is quite urgent.

- 7.8 To elaborate an environmental auditorship (AA) of the activities been developed and an environmental impact study (EIA) of the activities planned to be developed in Valle Sico-Paulaya and at the influence area of the RBRP, within the frame of the presidential decree
- 7.9 To elaborate a Management Plan for the Reserve, including zonification according to the biophysical, cultural, administrative and touristic characteristics, integrating the ethnics and other important actors to the planification and execution.
- 7.10 To foment and facilitate the organization of the RBRP communities as a form of low cost institutional presence, in order to arrange the use of RBRP's natural resources. The mechanisms for joint management will be defined by those directly involved with the RBRP, through the Working Commission, emphasizing those aspects which allow the verification of accomplishment of agreements on join management.
- 7.11 To foment the sustainable use of the resources of the zone, through the formulation of a Management Plan and its regulations, with defined sub-programmes, emphasizing the tourism activities in a way such that the income generated by this activity will contribute to the development of the communities and to the conservation of biodiversity and existing cultural resources.

VIII. ANEXES

8.1 General map of the RBRP area.

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