
Guatemala: communities take care of forests

The communal forest of Totonicapan is located at an altitude of about 3,000 metres a.s.l at the mountain chain Sierra Madre del Sur in western Guatemala. The lowest side of the mountains used to be covered by native oak tree forests. Nowadays they have been substituted by pine trees. However, in the highest parts there still exist thick forests of white pine (*Pinus ayacahuite*) and fir (*Abies guatemalensis*) accompanied by a great variety of tropical forest species resistant to the cold.

It is the indigenous community of Quiches that has conserved the forest since ancestral times. Facing the increasing destruction of woodlands started in the 70's, the Quiches reorganized themselves and in 1990 created an organization called "UleuChe'Ja", that in their language means "Land, Water and Forest". This democratically managed organization of the indigenous people of Totonicapan has developed a traditional system of use and conservation of the forest, based upon communal property of natural resources. The scarcity of water is a major environmental constraint for their livelihood there. So the role of the forest in the conservation of hydrological resources is of vital importance. The sustainable use of natural resources practised by the Quiches, that obtain from the forest firewood, plants for alimentary and medicinal uses and bushmeat, has permitted them to live in the harsh environment of the high mountain. Their region is one of the most populated -with about 300 inhabitants per km²- while at the same time one of the most rich in biodiversity in the whole country. Meanwhile, the surrounding areas are suffering an accelerated process of loss of native forests and desertification. The Quiches' organization and their relationship with the forest has made the difference.

Source: Elmer Lopez, Forest Campaign, Greenpeace Central America.