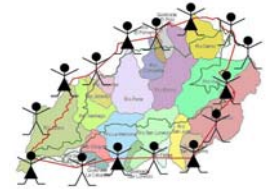




CASE STUDY

COMMUNITY-LED WATERSHED PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT

OLANCHITO, HONDURAS



BACKGROUND

Honduras is one of the Central American countries that has suffered the most severe reductions in available fresh water. Rampant deforestation and destruction of river ecosystems have caused soil erosion, contamination and water scarcity. Increasingly polluted and diminishing water supplies compromise health and food security, and undermine economic growth.

The aim of this project is to protect freshwater resources in and around Pico Bonito National Park, comprised of 265,000 acres which house 19 major watersheds, supplying drinking water to more than 500,000 people in surrounding communities and nearby cities. The park's buffer zone has also attracted displaced persons from many other areas of the country over the past few decades, and over 200 communities live in poverty within the buffer zone.

The Association of Water Boards of the Southern Buffer Zone of Pico Bonito National Park in Honduras (AJAASSPIB) is an alliance of community administrative water boards united for the purpose of ensuring access to clean water by strengthening local governance, establishing efficient potable water systems, and protecting the health and integrity of microwatersheds.



AJAASSPIB is the result of five years of capacity building for local organizational leadership, made possible by the Pico Bonito National Park Foundation (FUPNAPIB) with financial support from EcoLogic and the European Union through COSPE and COOPI. The community water boards are able to properly manage potable

water systems, with organized administration and efficient implementation of chlorination techniques. The cost of potable water systems are covered by charging minimal user fees to support infrastructure maintenance and improvements and protection of the water catchments areas.

Key Accomplishments

- Locally-managed protection of 14 microwatersheds
- Protection of over 12,500 ha within vital watersheds
- Reforestation of 30 ha with native species
- Successful establishment of 28 agroforestry plots
- Increased awareness amongst community members of the value of water and the importance of maintaining watersheds to ensure their water supply

AJAASSPIB's area of influence covers 31 percent of the National Park comprising 33,500 ha, of which 7,500 ha reside in the park center with untouched primary forest.

APPROACH

The work of AJAASSPIB began in August 2003 with the organization of a single community water board, which led to the formation of 26 more community water boards by means of successful replication. These boards have managed to protect 14 microwatersheds, establishing efficient water systems that improve forest cover in order to maintain water quantity and improve water quality and then deliver the water to each home.

The community water boards have been strengthened through an informal education process with community leadership, learning exchanges with national and international organizations, and the development of an environmental consciousness within the communities, placing a higher value on water and the need to protect it.

The communities are engaged in reforestation of the riverbanks of the rivers that supply their water. This is part of a strategy to increase and ensure the availability of water and to solicit payment for ecosystem services from municipalities and, to some extent, downstream communities.

Today this model is being replicated in the Northern Sector of Pico Bonito National Park, through learning exchanges with the Alliance of Municipalities of the Center of Atlántida (MAMUCA). Various organizations from the area are interested in further exchanges and adopting best practices established by AJAASSPIB.

RESULTS

AJAASSPIB has successfully brought together 27 Administrative Water Boards with a common goal, and there is an active Executive Board whose efforts have increased environmental consciousness and valuation of water resources in the communities that are part of the organization.

Under AJAASSPIB's leadership, the communities have ensured protection of 14 microwatersheds in the area, covering 5,125 ha. The water systems currently have 1,713 subscribers, benefitting 11,171 people. The communities have also reforested 30 ha with native species, and 28 agroforestry plots have been established. To date, 1,161 fuel-efficient stoves have been installed, which reduce firewood consumption by 60 percent and significantly reduce the amount of smoke inhaled by women and children in the home.

CONCLUSIONS

Today, the community water boards and AJAASSPIB work together to establish infrastructure for the provision of water; build capacity at a technical, administrative and organizational level; manage system user accounts; protect microwatersheds; and increase education and awareness amongst water system subscribers.

An institutional development process such as that of AJAASSPIB is only successful with the proper coordination of stakeholders. The people that form the community water boards are volunteers that are interested in the benefit to the community and not their own interests or to seek personal gain. Thus, it was necessary to strengthen the organizational structure of AJAASSPIB so that the water boards were also effective and successful. A key factor in organizational capacity building and ensuring the success at the level of the water boards was the exchange of learning experiences and best practices between the participating water boards.

One of the key aspects for the credibility of an organization like AJAASSPIB is the ability to surrender control of account management to the communities. This not only builds a trusting relationship with the communities, but also endows the water boards with a sense of ownership and responsibility that enhances their investment and involvement. It was also important for AJAASSPIB to seek legalization in order to raise its own funds, but it was necessary to first build the capacity for self-sufficiency of the organization itself.

Community involvement is necessary for creating

meaningful, long-lasting change, and a community water system will not be effective if the families being served do not assign value to their water and are not willing or prepared to pay for its delivery. To that end, community education and outreach played a vital role in raising awareness of the value of water and the need to maintain water resources over time. The increase in environmental consciousness contributed to the willingness of community members to voluntarily pay for the services supplied by the water system, which in turn increases their personal investment in the future of such a system. To further ensure the long-term maintenance of the water system, community youth should be involved in the organization and management of the water systems, preparing the future's community leaders and water board members to continue the system's success.

The advantage of the approach used here is that EcoLogic was able to strengthen water security and improve community health and nutrition, while at the same time creating meaningful, long-lasting change through community involvement and local governance. Furthermore, it is important that those involved in such projects appreciate the value of their natural resources in order to obtain a long-term commitment and investment from participating stakeholders.

PARTNERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

Asociación de Juntas Administradoras de Agua Sector Sur Parque Nacional Pico Bonito (AJAASSPIB); EcoLogic Development Fund; Fundación Parque Nacional Pico Bonito (FUPNAPIB); Tides Foundation; Tinker Foundation; United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

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