

The Tropical Forest Group interviews Elsa Esquivel Bazán. Ms. Bazán works for Ambio, a non-profit group based in Chiapas Mexico that implements the Scolel Te project.

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TFG. How did you become involved with the work of Scolel Te?

EEB. Initially the project was aimed directly at benefiting family units, by managing and protecting salaries for groups of women, etc. The project then expanded to accomplish different things, and so it diversified in order to include different professions. In this way we have been including different people, be it for specific periods of time or by means of collaborations with institutions as we have done with the researchers from ECOSUR.

TFG. Ambio comes up with individual tree planting plans with farmers and landowners. Then Ambio monitors over time tree growth. If the plan is being met, the farmer gets paid based on a carbon value. Is that about right?

EEB. The project's objective is to allow the participants to develop forestry projects that are of interest to them. So that these projects may be incorporated into Scolel Te, the participants must comply with some minimum requirements. Since Ambio's role is only to make recommendations so that the systems work well, if the farmers do good work and comply with the objectives of the program, they will receive payment based on carbon credit. In this way, it is the participants themselves who have the most interest in ensuring that the system works. The amount that is paid to the participants is based on the technical specifications, drawn from field data, of each forest and agro-forest system.

TFG. How much does a farmer get paid on average for participating in Scolel Te?

EEB. Payments to participants are based on the type of forest system and the surface area (in hectares) that the participant wants to utilize for the project. For example, in participating coffee plantations the farmers receive a total of 224 dollars per hectare. In other systems they receive 570 dollars per hectare.

TFG. What are the common tree species planted?

EEB. The most common trees planted in the tropical regions are cedar and mahogany, while in the temperate regions various species of pine are the most common. In recent years Ambio has recommended the planting of native species in order to reduce the incidence of blights and in preserve certain tree species that provide high-quality wood but which are dwindling.

TFG. What is your most memorable experience in your work on this project?

EEB. In general it would be the whole process of developing the project, since Scolel Te is really the first program of its kind. Being a pioneer in this area has allowed us to make adjustments as we go along in response to what is necessary. The project has been developing step by step and the most important factor is that it has always sought to benefit the communities, groups, and others who participate.

TFG. What part of Scolel Te are you most proud of?

EEB. Apart from what we have mentioned above, it would be seeing to it that people value their work. In other words, the payments that they receive are not a gift, but rather are based on carbon credits. If the farmers know and understand this, the project as a whole benefits since it means participants are aware of their responsibilities as well as of the benefits. Above all, this leads to a shift in their perspective with regard to the use of natural resources.

TFG. In general, how has Scolel Te impacted the lives of the local people?

EEB. This varies depending on the perspectives of each of the participating groups or communities. Perhaps the biggest impact has been with regard to the issue of organization, given that in some cases the project has helped to improve, maintain, or at least raise awareness as to the importance community organizing. Another impact has been to teach the value of the resources available in each community, and to encourage those communities to think, in relation to those resources, about future generations. One of Ambio's objectives is to nurture communities that respect forests, something which unfortunately is not very common in Chiapas. Nevertheless, we have seen advancements in this process. We hope that our work affects not only this generation but also helps inculcates an interest in the environment in future generations as well.

TFG. What do you think is the most common misconception about carbon sequestration projects like Scolel Te?

EEB. We would say that the basic concept of sequestering carbon and the sale of an environmental service are the most difficult to understand. Although more and more participants have a clear understanding of how the project works, we have not yet achieved that 100% of the farmers understand it completely.

TFG. How can someone reading this at home help contribute to the success of the Scolel Te project?

EEB. First, they can become aware of, and take responsibility for, their greenhouse gas emissions, since this is a problem to which we all contribute. Another could be to assist in spreading the word about our project or others like it in places where there is interest, not only in contributing to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, but also in supporting communities, groups and farmers interested in bettering or preserving their forest resources. Last but not least, people could buy carbon credits and know that they are also supporting a project that benefit local communities

TFG. What are the oldest trees growing as a result of Scolel Te? And do you know the total number of trees planted?

EEB. The oldest trees are 9 years old. We maintain a database in which we have a record of the number of trees planted each year by each farmer, and of their survival rate. We estimate that 200 thousand of the planted trees have survived.

TFG. What makes the work of Scolel Te stand out from other kinds of conservation projects? Are there any philosophies that Ambio and Scolel Te have found helpful in terms of making your project a success?

EEB. In contrast with other projects the principle objective of Scolel Te has always been to take the opinions of the participants into account. The interests and compromises involved in participation are based on their own living plans and as such are not imposed upon them from the outside. One aspect that is important to emphasize is the flexibility allowed in participating in the project. This allows participants with differing ideological stances as well as different working conditions to all take part. The continuity of the program is maintained through a focus on that which is needed in the field rather than on political or institutional questions. In general, Ambio has been characterized by working individually with different communities, and by dealing honestly and in a clear and direct manner with the various participants with whom it is involved. This has allowed the project to develop in the best way possible.

TFG. Thank you Elsa and congratulations on the 200,000 successes of your work.