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Trees That Grow in Mexico

Scolec Te means “trees that grow” in two indigenous languages in Chiapas, Mexico. Scolec Te is also an exceptional community-based conservation project in Mexico with 200,000 trees sucking up carbon dioxide. Farmers get paid for planting and maintaining the trees while rock stars and race car drivers offset climate change emissions from their guitar amps and tailpipes.

Scolec Te started out as the brainchild of Dr. Richard Tipper, a Scot who now is at the Edinburgh Center for Carbon Management (ECCM). As a graduate student working in Chiapas, Tipper planted the seeds for a project that today dots the once-troubled landscape with hundreds of plots of locally grown and managed trees. Scolec Te is now run and administered locally by Ambio, a non-profit group from a modest office in San Cristobal, Chiapas. The project has helped hundreds of small holder farmers in 43 communities make a modest income by conserving a key global ecosystem service.

The Scolec Te project is an example of how sustainable forestry practices can be a win-win-win situation.

The first winners are local farmers. They’re the backbone of Scolec Te, each one responsible for the hard work of replanting and growing trees. And if the trees grow, they get paid for the carbon that is stored and sequestered. In the rural areas where most planting occurs, the poverty rate can exceed 50% of the population. The several hundred dollars some farmers receive from “trees that grow” is an important supplement to their incomes and livelihoods.

The second winners are the carbon offset purchasers. Formula 1, the race car association, has purchased Scolec Te credits since 1997 to offset emissions from car races. Formula 1’s contribution to Scolec Te is a model of philanthropy; the investment has been substantial, steady (around \$100,000 per year) and without tons of fanfare. Rock ‘n roll bands Cold Play and Pink Floyd have also purchased credits. These investors may have felt guilt about their successes. But at least they’re doing something about it. And if they met some of the Lacandon Indians and other rural carbon producers, they would feel even better.

The third winners are all of us. Whether you live in Iceland, Tasmania, or on Pennsylvania Avenue, global climate change is happening. Reducing carbon dioxide in

the atmosphere by planting trees is a good deed. It fights climate change, empowers local tree growers, and helps conserve the biological diversity of Mexico.

Scolec Te and other sequestration projects are not without controversy. A variety of small but vocal groups like FERN, SinksWatch, and the Corner House oppose all types of forest sequestration projects. They are a largely unreasonable lot, even though they claim to support indigenous people's struggles. TFG hasn't seen any folks from these groups help people grow trees anywhere . . . It's hard work. Imagine swinging a machete for the whole day in Mexico.

Larger environmental groups that had been opposed to carbon-funded forest projects may be changing their minds. WWF, which stated in 2000, "WWF does not believe the anticipated trade-offs between climate and forest protection are ethically, socially or environmentally acceptable," is rumored to be working on a new policy that is more favorable to forest conservation projects. But it still opposes carbon funds from the Kyoto Protocol to restore forests. Greenpeace, which for years has claimed that the addition of saving and planting trees to the Kyoto Protocol would be a major "loophole," is also taking a fresh look. The powerful international Climate Action Network (CAN) continues to oppose forestry credits in Europe's carbon markets. CAN recently reiterated their disapproval of international forestry projects for Europe's carbon trading system, despite an impassioned plea by 2005 Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai to open Europe's carbon markets up to forestry projects in developing countries. (A future TFG article will examine the critics and critiques of sequestration projects in more detail).

Most of these critics often imply that sequestration projects trammel local concerns, generate no real greenhouse gas benefits, are difficult to monitor, impermanent, and displace rather than eliminate emissions. The same groups often point to the worst sequestration projects to support their claims. One particularly controversial project is known as 'Plantar,' a Eucalyptus plantation in Brazil. These groups rarely distinguish between projects that make positive differences (such as Scolec Te) and the few egregious examples of how not to plant trees.

Will tree planting stop climate change? No way. Fossil fuel emissions are the pink elephants seated at the dining table. Critics of forest-based climate change mitigation are right. Carbon credits spent on forestry mean fewer investments in renewable energy. But the Kyoto Protocol was never intended to deal just with industrial emissions. The Kyoto Protocol is premised on the ability to trade carbon credits and the importance of conserving and restoring all important terrestrial carbon stores.

TFG is giving 20% of the donations it receives in April 2006 to Scolec Te so that they might expand into new communities and expand their great work.

How Scolel Te Works

New carbon producers (as the participants are called) normally hear about Scolel Te from friends or neighbors. They usually start by contacting Ambio, the local office for Scolel Te. Participants then draw up a work plan, called a “Plan Vivo” (or “living plans”). These Plan Vivo agreements outline where trees will be managed, what types, in which years, and how much carbon sequestration is expected. Plan Vivos that pass the evaluations (which include other factors) are registered, and an agreement for the supply of a specific amount of carbon is signed.

Farmers must demonstrate their own commitment and get the project started without any funds. Once they are up and running, the three staff members at Ambio provide technical support and preliminary financing. These small upfront funds allow farmers to spend time and resources maintaining small plots of forests.

And as the trees grow, carbon is stored. Over time, projects are monitored and checked by Ambio staff. Trees are measured and counted. Carbon producers who demonstrate they have sequestered their carbon receive a series of payments directly from Ambio. Later, carbon certificates are issued to purchasers, and each ton of carbon is carefully accounted for and recorded.