



Research Brief

Climate and Resource Protection for Indigenous Communities in Mexico

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When I was serving as general counsel for the Mexican Commission of Protected Areas, I traveled with a team of biologists to the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve in the Lacandon tropical rain forest. This region — containing one-fifth of Mexico's biological diversity, including the endangered scarlet macaw, harpy eagle, jaguar, tapir, howler monkeys, and swamp crocodile — represents 50 percent of the remaining tropical rain forest in Mexico.

I was excited as I geared up for my trip, packing snake-proof rubber boots and long-sleeved shirts to protect against mosquitos and spiders. But I was also terrified, as I imagine many lawyers would be, traveling to a remote jungle.

I will never forget the wonder and joy I felt when I saw a bunch of red macaws flying and screaming while our guide steered our boat through the Lacantun River. I had never seen these creatures in the wild. That night, I was certain I heard a jaguar outside my cabin. When I told my colleagues the next morning, they showed me my jaguar, a family of howler monkeys

in a tree above my cabin.

Fast forward to 2011. Now a senior attorney at ELI, I am working in partnership with Natura Mexicana on a project to develop legal tools for climate change adaptation with rural communities — known as *ejidos* — near the reserve. Natura is an NGO led by Julia Carabias, who, after serving as the first secretary of the environment, has spent the last 20 years working with the local communities in the reserve.

The Lacandon region — known for the 1994 indigenous Zapatista rebellion — is one of the poorest in Mexico. Inhabited by various indigenous and *ejido* communities with different governance systems and religious beliefs, it is an area where political and social conflicts over land tenure and natural resource exploitation are having a severe impact over conservation in the reserve. Due to illegal deforestation and land use, its original 1.8 million hectares of forest cover have been reduced by more than 75 percent.

Natura's approach to conservation relies on close partnerships with local communities to de-

velop projects that reflect the economic and social benefits from ecosystem services such as water production and climate regulation. Our joint project has been designed to raise awareness of the imminent threats faced by *ejidos* in light of climate change and to develop tools to respond to those threats.

When we first interviewed 70 people from various *ejidos*, the majority said that they had never heard of climate change. Everyone said the weather is different: they don't know when to work the crops anymore; the heat is so strong they can only work outside half the time as in the past; and that most of the streams running through their lands are gone. But more importantly, they all acknowledged that this was happening because they were burning the fields and destroying the forest. I was impressed and moved by their perception of these very local impacts.

We also learned different words than the ones we usually use to communicate information on climate adaptation measures in a meaningful way. With this in mind, we were able to

design educational materials and conduct workshops that truly communicate in a way that made sense to the communities.

The *ejidos* are now developing community land use programs designed to not only decide what to do with their resources, but how and when. Following approval by their traditional authorities, these programs were adopted by the communities as understandable and legitimate norms and became the most authentic expression I have seen of informed and community-owned decision-making. The *ordenamiento comunitario* programs will also serve as a legal tool for climate adaptation, as they include provisions that require acknowledging and addressing specific climate threats and transforming unsustainable practices into land and resources management systems.

Though many challenges lie ahead, I am grateful for the opportunity to learn so much from these communities that are willing to define and abide by rules they develop and understand, that are relevant to their local needs, and that will result in greater protection of their environment.