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FOR PERU'S INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES, A PROTECTED FOREST MEANS INCOME

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Arvildo Uraco Canaquiri is president of the Management Committee of the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve, a sprawling 2 million ha expanse of protected area in the Loreto region of the Peruvian Amazon. Home to numerous native plant and animal species, the Reserve is the focus of a recently launched community-based public-private collaboration that aims to leverage growing demand for Amazon superfruits aguaje and camu camu to enhance sustainability and improve livelihoods for the more than 200 Indigenous communities that call the region home. Uraco, a member of the Yarina community, says the project is helping to advance forest conservation and sustainable growth in the Peruvian Amazon. He spoke with EII Research Associate Ana María González Watson.

I am from the Yarina Native Community. We are approximately 125 families living inside the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve. We were officially recognized in the 1980's, but because we live in a protected area, our right to land titling was limited. So, we organized, mobilizing the entire community around recovering and protecting our natural resources.

I was elected president of the Management Committee for the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve in 2017. It is a big responsibility. The Reserve, which covers three provinces inside the Loreto region, represents a model for managing our shared natural resources. Working through the Management Committee, we organize assemblies where all the communities participate and through which management groups have been formed that are the drivers of regional conservation and sustainable management.

Image available online: view image

Arvildo Uraco in the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve, Loreto, 2019.

Why do I tell you this? Because before, our community did not know what it meant to live in and manage a protected natural area, but little by little we have been learning. Initially, we assumed “conservation” meant we would not be able to take advantage of available resources. We have since learned this is not the case.

If we had not learned to do sustainable management, this reserve would not exist. This is the message I carry when I meet with local organizations or communities that are inside or next to a Protected Natural Area, that the conservation and management of natural resources is the most important thing for local populations. Why? Because it not only makes use of natural resources in a sustainable way, but it also fosters a more collaborative working relationship with local authorities that can provide legal, technical and commercial support. The recent agreement we reached with a Peruvian beverage maker and two exporters on the purchase of sustainably harvested aguaje and camu camu is an example of this.

Local communities have been making use of these wild fruits, which are prized for their nutritional value, for centuries, and little by little we have been selling them at local markets in Iquitos, Nauta and Requena. But we had no experience working with private companies and little understanding of the opportunities such partnerships offered, including expanded market access. That’s something the Management Committee has been able to develop, and it comes at a time when the market for “superfruits” is expanding.

The project is also helping to expand awareness among local communities of the importance of sustainable practices. Previously, when residents harvested aguaje, they cut the entire [female] palm tree down. In 1989, researchers brought from Brazil new methods for harvesting that allowed us to climb the trees to harvest the aguaje fruits using a simple strap. Working with local researchers as part of the superfruits project, we’ve been able to improve on the technique’s safety and effectiveness. Similarly, for camu camu, we’ve worked to improve the timing and techniques for sustainable harvesting to ensure forests are protected.

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New techniques allow aguaje to be harvested without killing the tree, supporting forest sustainability and local incomes. (Image: Regional Government of Loreto)

As demand for these fruits increased and as opportunities opened, many in our community also realized that killing the trees meant losing this important resource and the income it generates, much of which is reinvested back into the community through management and surveillance activities (for which the state does not compensate us) as well as covering the costs of education for our children.

These partnerships are important for another reason, which is that communities know they will secure a fair price selling to a company that has proven its commitment to sustainable management, conservation and improving the quality of life for local communities.

I believe this project has opened opportunities to bring greater economic benefits to the populations of our region. It has already led to higher production (we have gone from harvesting on average around 300 bags per week to over 1000) and I believe it will grab the attention of other public and private institutions interested in forming similar partnerships.

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Aguaje fruits are processed before being shipped for production. (Image: Regional Government of Loreto)

Local authorities and international NGOs stress the importance of natural resource conservation for local communities, but we need to know exactly how we can take advantage of these resources to improve livelihoods, to enhance quality of life and to generate an income.

This is especially important for Indigenous communities that often lack representation. Officials should be actively seeking business opportunities such as this one that will allow local communities to benefit from their natural resources, not just for specific sectors but for entire regions. I believe this is critical,

because a productive region will survive and local communities will thrive if they have access to a market to sell sustainable products to.

This is the message I want to convey to the governments and politicians and to the aid workers who continue to emphasize conservation of our biological diversity and our natural resources in Loreto, which help give life to other countries that no longer have forests like we do.

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