



Guna Yala, Panama

Introduction

The CCRI assessment in Panama was carried out with two different groups of indigenous peoples: the Guna and the Embera. The assessment was a bottom-up process which included workshops, informal conversations, and the exchange of experiences and opinions.

With the Guna, a two-day workshop took place on Ustupu island, in the Guna Yala Indigenous Region. People from various Guna communities participated, most of whom live on small, scattered islands. It was attended by a diverse range of community members including the 'Saglas' (community chiefs), the administrative chief, members of the Guna women's committee, and members of a local NGO.

The main types of ecosystem in the region are tropical rainforests, mangroves and coastal marine ecosystems. The region is highly biodiverse, having, for instance, more than 150 species of mammal. [1] The Guna people depend primarily upon the mainland forests and mangroves near the islands, which provide, among other things, food, medicine and materials to build



Guna woman making molas with children, Guna Yala CCRI, Panama.
Ronnie Hall/CIC

their houses. In addition, the sea constitutes an important source of animal protein.

The situation of the Gunas is quite unique. They enjoy what is probably one of the highest degrees of self-governance and autonomy among the indigenous peoples of Latin America. After the Tule Revolution, in February 1925, the Panamanian government agreed to establish the Guna Yala Indigenous Region. [2] Within this region they are in charge of the management of their own territories on the basis of their customary law and traditional rights. [3] They have a well-organised and structured political body and decision-making process. Political decisions are taken within the communities in assemblies and then

the Saglas speak on behalf of their community. There is also a Guna General Congress, which plays the role of 'government'.

Regarding the Embera, there was a meeting with members of the Ipetí-Embera community, attended by, among others, the local authorities such as the Cacique and the Secretary. This community is settled in the Chepo district, and they moved there after they were displaced by the building of a hydroelectric plant in the Alto Bayano area of Panama. This community lives in the so-called collective lands, outside of the Embera-Wounaan Indigenous Region, which was established in 1983.



The Embera traditionally live in inland areas, usually along or nearby rivers and rich in forests. Corn, sugar cane, rice, yucca, banana and pineapple are some of the most common species cultivated. They also hunt and fish in the rivers to obtain animal proteins. From the forest that surrounds them they extract materials to build their traditional houses, called 'tambo', and medicines. As the cacique, or chief, Jeremia explained, "forests are our pharmacies and sustenance".

At the community level, the Cacique is the voice of and represents the community and is elected through voting. In addition, there are two different General Congresses, one that represents the communities living within the Embera-Wounnan Region, and another for those communities living in the collective lands outside of their Indigenous region. Like the Gunas, the Embera in the indigenous region are in charge of making the decisions that affect their territories on the basis of their customary laws and traditions within the Embera-Wounnan Region. The collective lands do not legally belong to the Embera and are considered as 'national lands', being regulated by national laws.

For both Gunas and Embera, the role of women in the community is very important. Generally, they take care of the house and family, being key in the transmission of traditional knowledge to the children. They often help with the transport of products from the forests. By selling traditional clothes (such as embroidered cloths or 'Molas' in the

level. However, this has changed, and they are now much more involved in political and decision-making processes. In fact, some women have already been elected as Saglas and Caciques.

Regarding indigenous people's rights in Panama, the country has a wide range of legal and political instruments. For instance, the Panamanian Constitution has several articles (ie 5, 90 and 124) that address the need to respect and promote the culture, traditions, languages and participation of indigenous peoples in political processes. [4] However, it is important to note that the need for free, prior and informed consent is not explicitly embraced in full by the Panamanian legislation, and while the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) has been acknowledged, the government has not yet ratified the

ILO Convention 169.



Embera painting of mother and child. Coraina de la Plaza/CIC

Guna communities) and handicrafts (such as baskets and figures carved in wood) many women contribute to the family and community economy. Previously, their political role was mainly to influence the men's votes and decisions at the household



Community Conservation Resilience in Guna Yala

As the Saglas and other community members explained, “humans are part of nature and not its owners”, and the Gunas have a strong connection with the ecosystems and forests that surround them.

One of the key ways in which the Gunas have protected their forests is by having sacred areas, which are mainly primary forest, combined with rotating agriculture or ‘Nainu’, usually in the lowland areas. There are different types of Nainu but the main characteristic is to plant useful trees together with other vegetable species. In the Guna culture it is common to plant and harvest species such as yucca, bananas, corn, sugar cane, pineapple and yam. This system of combining edible and medicinal species with other native species in a rotational manner helps to conserve biodiversity and the soil.

During the workshop, all attendants were able to express their views about the main threats to Guna habitat and resources, and the resilience embedded in their practices. They voiced particular concern about cultural erosion, mainly among young people. This process was identified as being very disruptive in the application of traditional knowledge to ecosystem management, production methods

and subsistence activities.

This threat is partly external, because of Western influence in the surroundings areas and within the Guna Yala Region. In addition to this, when young people want to pursue higher education, they have to leave the community. When they return they are often disinclined to live according to the Guna traditional way. But it is also an internal threat because families have placed less emphasis on teaching Guna culture to the children. The key consequences of this cultural erosion are the gradual loss of knowledge about the forests and traditional agriculture, and the advent of consumerism, creating waste and garbage.

In addition, recent studies have shown that the sea level has risen during recent years. [5] During informal conversations members of the community also said how

changes in the wind and rain patterns have been observed as well. In 2015, the rainy season—which should have started in May—didn’t begin until the third week of July. Members of the community said that this lack of rain has ruined the cornfields.

The testimony of Mario Palacios, a member of the Usbud community, illustrated these concerns very well: *“My father is still alive and is 97 years old. We usually sit down early in the morning for a while to talk about the changes and what he has observed since he was young. He is very concerned about the changes in the wind, rain, forests and the fact that young people don’t want to work the land any more. He is very concerned about what the future might bring and the negative consequences of all these changes.”*



Participants in CCRI workshop including Sagla (island community spokesperson) on the left. Coraina de la Plaza/CIC



Community Conservation Resilience in Ipetí-Embera

The Embera also have a very strong connection with nature, mainly with forests and rivers. They make a very selective use of natural resources avoiding big alterations to the environment. Traditionally, when they cut down any tree, they do it for food, medicines or to build their traditional canoes, and the areas are usually left for at least two years to recover. They consider the land sacred because it provides them with many things and thus, they know the relevance of taking care of it. Rivers also play a vital role for the Embera and they often navigate them in their traditional canoes, which are used for transport, trading and contact with other neighbouring communities. [6]

During the assessment, the members of the Ipetí -Embera

community identified the high rate of deforestation in their area as the main threat. They explained that this is both an external and an internal threat. It is internal because some families from the community have deforested their own plots or lands for different reasons such as the commercialisation of wood and cattle; this is however, quite low when compare to the total deforested area. It is also external because in the Ipetí-Embera collective lands, they experience problems with the 'colonos' (settlers). In this case, the 'colonos' are people, usually peasants, who come from elsewhere and illegally occupy a plot of land. They clear that plot and if possible, they sell the wood. Once is the land has been cleared, they use it for cattle ranching and/or sell it to landlords,

and then the same process starts all over again in a new plot.

They say that this deforestation has caused the disappearance of some traditional native species that they used to use, for instance, to build their traditional houses and as medicine. They explained how they now have to travel much longer distances to obtain those species that, not long ago, could be found nearby. They also expressed concern about water availability and changes in the rain patterns. For instance, this year the river did not grow as much as it used to do due to lower levels of rain. The Embera said that before the clouds would get 'trapped' by the forests and then it rained, and now they often see how those rain clouds pass the area by.

Preliminary Conclusions and Recommendations: Guna

The members of the Ipetí-Embera community are well aware of the importance of reversing deforestation rates in order to improve forest health and biodiversity, and the relevance of this for water cycles and keeping their traditions and identity alive.

The main solution that they proposed is very practical and straightforward: to continue developing reforestation projects with native and traditional species and to implement new ones. Some members of the community have already started this type of projects on their own and also in collaboration with other organisations such as the Smithsonian Research Institute.

The members of the community said the success of this initiative will depend on conducting workshops and capacity building to involve and motivate the whole community. It is also important that these processes always take place in collaboration with the community, respecting their traditional decision-making processes as well as their views. They also recommended fluid communication from and with GFC and constant work with the community.

To overcome the threat posed by the deforestation caused by the 'colonos', they also proposed to try to reach out to them and involve them in the workshops and capacity building activities. The goal is to show them the benefits of having

healthy forests and the risks of clearing and then abandoning the lands. However, this might be a bit more delicate because it will probably imply negotiations about lands rights and as they explained, their vision and relationship with nature are different to those of the 'colonos'.

The biological and cultural impacts of the reforestation with native species is quite clear. Through this initiative, they will not only restore forests but also their associated biodiversity, species that are part of the Embera culture and more generally contribute to water cycles, decreasing soil erosion and increasing forest cover in the area



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Solar power panel provides island power, Guna Yala, Panama. Ronnie Hall/CIC



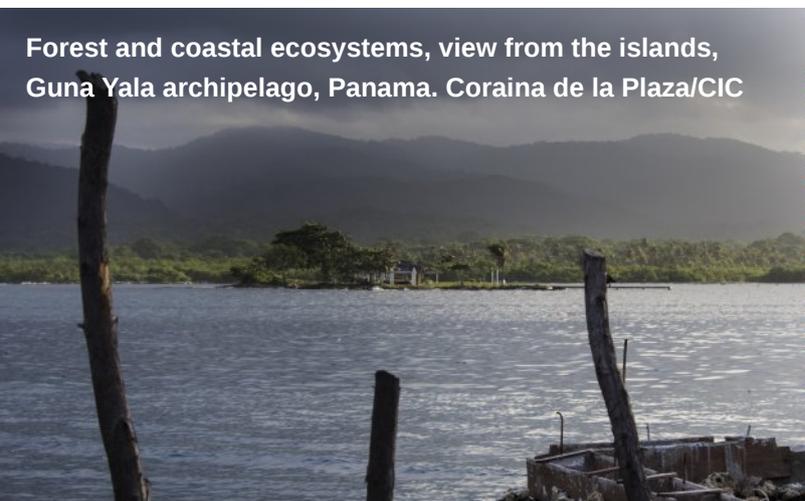
Testimony

The women emphasised how much everything has changed. Hermecia Kantule explained that when she was young, women had to wake up early and start knitting their Molas (women's traditional clothes [7]). Afterwards, they would prepare breakfast and take care of the house. Sometimes they would help bring back products from the forests with the men. Women are key for the transmission of traditional knowledge since they spend more time with the children. Her mother taught her to identify different useful species, but children are not learning these things now. She supported the idea of creating a space where children can learn and revive traditional knowledge and Guna culture.



Coraina de la Plaza/CIC

Forest and coastal ecosystems, view from the islands, Guna Yala archipelago, Panama. Coraina de la Plaza/CIC



Fisherfolk working in Guna Yala indigenous comarca, Panama. Ronnie Hall/CIC

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