
PINCHOT INSTITUTE FOR CONSERVATION

The Ecomadera Project: Market-Based Biodiversity Conservation in Ecuador

Poverty and deforestation go hand-in-hand in Ecuador's Cristobol Colon region. As the local communities in this area face dire circumstances and intense economic hardships, many are forced to find relief by exploiting the one commodity they have left: their forestland. By cutting these trees or converting the land to agriculture, the communities are able to earn a subsistence living, but it comes at the cost of a precious natural resource. It is a vicious cycle for these rural communities, and The Ecomadera Project seeks to stop it through an innovative approach that combines economic development and forest conservation. Since 2002, The Pinchot Institute and its partners have been working in Cristobol Colon to educate local residents on the economic benefits of forest conservation, teach them the raw skills needed to create high-end wood products, build the infrastructure necessary to bring those items to market, and create a locally-owned woodworking business that returns profits to the community. Specifically, the Ecomadera Project helps create strong market incentives for forest and biodiversity conservation by offering significantly higher prices for wood harvested sustainably than the existing markets pay for forest exploitation. Through new strategies pioneered in this program, there is now a significant price incentive (currently 60% higher than the open market) associated with products created using sustainable wood. By creating high-value finished products from sustainably managed trees, these communities can earn more money than they would if they simply clear-cut their land or converted it to agriculture.

The market for sustainable, locally-owned wood products in Ecuador is rapidly expanding. Recently the Ecomadera staff met with representatives from Taylor Guitars who are very interested in both the conservation aspects of the project and the availability of Ecomadera's high quality, sustainably-harvested wood. While in Ecuador, these buyers visited a group of Shuar communities in Pastaza Province in the Oriente. This group of Shuar communities owns about 100,000 hectares of primary forest that has a very high occurrence of mahogany and platamiceum wood, species that are of great interest to Taylor Guitars. Ultimately, The Ecomadera partners look forward to solidifying this relationship and providing the people of Cristobol Colon with a substantive business opportunity.

The next phase of the Ecomadera Project will be implemented in the coming year. Now that the community-owned business is successfully creating products like doors, flooring and window frames, a professional showroom is needed. This place will allow Ecuadorian architects, contractors, and homeowners to experience Ecomadera's products in a public setting. Building this installation in the Kallari Café in Quito, Ecuador will place Ecomadera flooring and cabinetry in one of the most prominent locations in the country, a location with high traffic of both Ecuadorians and international tourists. We plan to place brochures and photo albums of our work there, have contact sheets for those interested, and hold periodic open houses at the café inviting architects and builders to discuss new Ecomadera products.

For more information on Ecomadera and other Pinchot Institute projects, please visit our website at www.pinchot.org.

Sawing wood, loading the kiln, and making wood flooring in Ecuador (below).

