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Voluntary conservation from the grassroots: Effectiveness of private landowner reserves in integrating conservation and well-being

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Although communities and communally-owned lands are increasingly recognized as key elements in conservation strategies, the contributions to conservation of one large and diverse group of individuals is still so poorly known that they are considered an invisible majority: private rural landowners. Drawing on a grassroots initiative centered on networks of landowner reserves that emerged 25 years ago in Colombia, we conducted a comparative analysis of 210 reserve owners with 3 different levels of reliance on forest-farm livelihoods: 1) Those solely reliant on their land for income/subsistence, 2) Those who are partially reliant, and 3) Those who are entirely independent of their land for their income. Our research responds to the following questions: 1) Are there significant differences in the livelihood strategies and in the proportion of land allocated to conservation between these different types of reserve owners? 2) Which landowner's characteristics and livelihood strategies promote the greatest conservation effectiveness?

Socio-economic indicators, land use allocation, production systems and sustainable management practices implemented were obtained by in-depth, person-to-person semi-structured interviews to define different livelihood strategies among different types of landowners. Conservation effectiveness was evaluated following three criteria (ecological attributes, long term viability of the ecosystem, and management capacity) developed by experts on private conservation strategies in collaboration with reserve owners in Latin America. Variables used to assess ecological attributes were maintenance or increase in area under protection, and ecosystem condition. Long-term viability was assessed based on reduction of threats and impacts to the ecosystem. Finally, management capacity for conservation included variables such as land use planning, resource availability, interaction with other stakeholders, rule compliance, and perceived benefits. Responses were measured on a Likert scale and used to calculate a weighted index for each one of the three criteria. Self-reported responses were crosschecked by in person visits and documents such as management plans and reserve registration files.

Preliminary results show that reserves of all types contribute to maintain and increase forest cover and enhance ecosystem condition. Reserve owners seem to actively manage and adapt their livelihoods and conservation strategies in response to external pressures, effectively reducing negative impacts and addressing threats. They also have created informal institutional structures that promote conservation and community well-being. To date more than 700 reserves owners associated to 14 local networks strive for integration of forest conservation and forest-farm livelihoods on their properties. Embracing an Indigenous worldview that also considers fundamental human needs, these networks suggest an alternative pathway to shared prosperity. Reserve owners have been working together for the protection of ecosystem services, to promote environmental education and community development, and to influence the design of and implementation of environmental policies at different levels. Although these "Civil Society Reserves" are officially considered part of the Colombian National System of Protected Areas, our research is one of the first to examine their conservation effectiveness. Our findings contribute to the emerging literature on the role of rural landowners in conservation and highlight the challenges and opportunities for their participation to conserve and sustainably manage forests at diverse scales.