



Mérida Declaration

A Call for Public Policies that Foster and Protect Traditional Maya Agricultural Practices in Mexico

Background

The Yucatán Peninsula contains globally significant cultural and biological diversity and is a leader in the development of management and governance strategies that reconcile the maintenance of biodiversity and livelihoods.

The Yucatán Peninsula is home to at least 8,000 species of plants and animals, including more than 2,000 species of insects, 1,100 species of vertebrates, 1,100 species of algae, and 1,400 vascular plant species. This diverse flora and fauna is found in tropical dry to evergreen forests, mangroves, seasonally inundated forests, coastal wetlands and dunes. The region also includes a complex network of underground freshwater systems, and surrounding coastal and marine habitats.

For more than 3,000 years the Maya people have been an integral part of a dynamic living landscape across the region. The Maya civilization developed advanced writing, profound cosmological and mathematical knowledge, and continues to display a remarkable and deep integration with the tropical forest and its sustained management.

The complex interaction between tropical diversity and the Maya has fostered a rich biocultural heritage. The Maya domesticated their forest landscape, and have co-created the biodiversity in Yucatán Peninsula over millennia. Importantly, the Maya have developed and maintained expert knowledge of regeneration dynamics of tropical forests and of the critical role of soil, water availability, and fire that sustains the Maya forest landscape.

The Milpa—a diverse agroforestry poly-cultivation system—characterizes Maya resource management to this day. Largely misunderstood when seen from the development perspective, the Milpa is a significant socio-ecological adaptation to the natural environment of the Mesoamerican tropics that remains highly relevant today.

With a Milpa cultivation phase of about four years, and growing a selection of crops from a basketful of around 100 plants, the sequence builds naturally to selected perennials. Within eight years it becomes a productive forest garden of nurtured trees that are reserved and used for a minimum of another eight years, producing a diverse mosaic landscape of plant and animal products important to everyday life.

Today, the merging of scientific and traditional local knowledge generates new sources of valuable data and information. This collaboration depends on indigenous and non-indigenous landholders, local informal and formal institutions, academics, municipal, state and federal governments, and local and international non-governmental organizations. These partnerships have led to successful conservation and sustainable management of biodiversity.

Recommendations

The 750 participants from more than 40 countries who attended the meeting of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation (herein ATBC) held in Mérida from 10-14 July, 2017, organized under the main theme of 'Ecological and Social Dimensions of Tropical Biodiversity Conservation', collectively call for sustained public policies that foster and protect Maya agricultural and conservation practices in the Yucatán Peninsula.

ATBC highlights the highly successful conservation initiatives developed in the Yucatán Peninsula and supports the current public policies that are fostering the protection of the large biocultural diversity in the region.

ATBC strongly encourages governments to support the design and operationalization of public policies that foster and protect traditional Maya agricultural practices, such as the Milpa cycle that reconciles the conservation of identities, livelihoods, and agrobiodiversity.

ATBC recognizes that the ancient Milpa-forest garden cycle has sustained a large human population in the Yucatán Peninsula for millennia and has fostered dynamically managed forest mosaics to ensure maintenance of ecosystem services—also known as nature's contributions to people.

ATBC recommends continuation of policies that protect Maya practices, and foster sustainable agriculture based on traditional low-input approaches. We discourage industrial monoculture agricultural practices—particularly the heavy use of toxic agro-chemicals, which threaten ecological health through their negative impacts on soil, groundwater and air quality. Industrial agriculture is a threat to jobs, culture, traditional knowledge and the well-being of the Maya.

Summary

The Mérida Declaration strongly commends current landscape conservation initiatives in the Yucatán Peninsula, and endorses the careful management of the Milpa forest-garden cycle system in the region. The Milpa is a vital living example of sustainable tropical landscape management that also provides food sovereignty for local human communities. In our Mérida Declaration, we collectively raise our concerns about the planned expansion of industrial agriculture into the Yucatán over coming years. In our collective scientific view, such agricultural expansion into the Yucatán will almost certainly result in negative cultural, economic and environmental consequences for the Maya people and all human inhabitants in the region.

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