Equator Initiative Case Studies
Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities

SERRANIA GUAC CORPORATION
Colombia
Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative.

To mark its 10-year anniversary, the Equator Initiative aims to fill this gap. The following case study is one in a growing series that details the work of Equator Prize winners – vetted and peer-reviewed best practices in community-based environmental conservation and sustainable livelihoods. These cases are intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as models for replication. Case studies are best viewed and understood with reference to *The Power of Local Action: Lessons from 10 Years of the Equator Prize*, a compendium of lessons learned and policy guidance that draws from the case material.

Click on the map to visit the Equator Initiative’s searchable case study database.

Editors
*Editor-in-Chief:* Joseph Corcoran  
*Managing Editor:* Oliver Hughes  
*Contributing Editors:* Dearbhla Keegan, Matthew Konsa, Erin Lewis, Whitney Wilding

Contributing Writers
Edayatu Abieodun Lamptey, Erin Atwell, Toni Blackman, Jonathan Clay, Joseph Corcoran, Larissa Currado, Sarah Gordon, Oliver Hughes, Wen-Juan Jiang, Sonal Kanabar, Dearbhla Keegan, Matthew Konsa, Rachael Lader, Patrick Lee, Erin Lewis, Jona Liebl, Mengning Ma, Mary McGraw, Gabriele Orlandi, Juliana Quaresma, Peter Schecter, Martin Sommerschuh, Whitney Wilding, Luna Wu

Design
Oliver Hughes, Dearbhla Keegan, Matthew Konsa, Amy Korngiebel, Kimberly Koserowski, Erin Lewis, John Mulqueen, Lorena de la Parra, Brandon Payne, Maria José Satizábal G.

Acknowledgements
The Equator Initiative acknowledges with gratitude the Serraniagua Corporation, and in particular the guidance and inputs of César A. Franco Laverde, Director. All photo credits courtesy of Serraniagua Corporation; © Juan David Ramírez (*page 8, Pipreola jucunda*). Maps courtesy of CIA World Factbook and Wikipedia.

Suggested Citation
SERRANIAGUA CORPORATION
Colombia

PROJECT SUMMARY

Serraniagua Corporation works to ensure the connectivity of protected areas throughout Colombia’s Cordillera Occidental mountain range, a key component of the Chocó-Manabí Conservation Corridor. The group connects the conservation corridors of the Tatamá National Park and Serrania de los Paraguas (renowned for their high biodiversity and species endemism) through a series of 60 community-managed and seven state-managed nature reserves, and encourages a high level of participation on the part of local and indigenous communities in environmental planning processes for these areas.

Working through a broad stakeholder base, including cocoa, coffee and sugar producers, ecotourism operators, environmental groups, rural schools, and women’s associations, this dynamic social network is leveraged to protect the biodiversity and ecosystems of the surrounding region in a manner that also respects the livelihood needs of the local population.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Background and Context 4

Key Activities and Innovations 6

Biodiversity Impacts 8

Socioeconomic Impacts 8

Policy Impacts 9

Sustainability 10

Replication 10

Partners 11

KEY FACTS

EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2008

FOUNDED: 1996

LOCATION: El Cairo and surrounding region

BENEFICIARIES: Rural communities, farmers & producers

BIODIVERSITY: Network of 60 community nature reserves
The Serranía de los Paraguas Mountains and the Tatamá National Park in Colombia are two important eco-regions that form part of the Cordillera Occidental mountain range and the Chocó-Manabí Conservation Corridor. The high level of biodiversity, species endemism and connectivity in these regions has made them the focus of significant conservation efforts. The Serranía de los Paraguas is covered with montane rainforest, which serves as an important watershed for surrounding communities. The mountains are home to thirty different nationally endangered animal and plant species, including the gold-ringed tanager (**Bangsia aureocincta**), cauca guan (**Penelope perspicax**) and the spectacled bear (**Tremarctos ornatus**).

Serraniagua Corporation (Corporación Serraniagua) promotes civil society-managed nature reserves, encouraging the active participation and management of local and indigenous community stakeholders in the ecoregion. The organization is involved in participatory processes to develop environmental management plans for the Serranía de los Paraguas, and its connection to the management plan of the Natural Tatamá National Park. The organization also owns and manages a 700-hectare protected area, the Cerro El Inglés Natural Reserve. It is the largest privately owned reserve in the Cauca Valley, an area with the highest endemism and biodiversity in Serranía de los Paraguas. As part of its connectivity strategy, 12 civil society reserves in the Valle de Cauca and Chocó departments are developing harmonized management plans to ensure habitat connectivity and sustainable livelihoods.

Primary goals of the association are the genuine empowerment of local communities and the effective integration of local stakeholders into decision-making processes. The ultimate objective is community input into the governance of local lands and territory and into policymaking in the area of resource management. The association brings together a diverse base of stakeholders, including producers of cocoa, coffee and sugar, as well as ecotourism ventures, environmental groups, rural schools and women’s associations. This dynamic social network is leveraged to advance a comprehensive communications program that employs community radio, newsletters, environmental murals, educational videos, and community tours. Serraniagua Corporation operates at both the farm and regional levels, employing a zone-based connective strategy for land use planning, social networking (grassroots community mobilization), and the creation of productive agricultural systems that link local producers into equitable market supply-chains.

**Conservation and agro-ecosystems in the Andes**

Conservation and sustainable livelihoods work takes place in the corridors of the Andes where the predominant ecosystems are high Andean forests, Andean forests (on the eastern slope), sub-Andean forests and secondary forests. The Tatamá Paraguas corridor contains the greatest wealth of threatened and endemic species in the continental Pacific region of Colombia. Several of these species are the focus of Serraniagua Corporation conservation efforts. The organization is also active in a number of agro-ecosystems, notably including cocoa and coffee, fruit orchards, and timber forest landscapes that contain palm fruit, plantains, avocados, and borojó. Coffee agro-ecosystems often contain shade trees like guamo and carbonero, which are staple foods in the regional diet.

**Bridging policy and practice**

The association was founded in 1996 to fill a number of political and socioeconomic voids. The organization was initiated by communities within the Serranía de los Paraguas mountain corridor, but benefited from the support of environmental conservation NGOs and corpoecuencias, state organizations with public and private involvement in watershed protection. One of the primary project catalysts was that local communities had extremely limited opportunities to participate in the development of land-use policies. As a result, there was little local ownership of government policies on the ground and a good deal of distance between prevailing policy frameworks and the realities of resource management activities at the
grassroots. Other gaps which the association formed to address were a lack of awareness on the state of local biodiversity and ecosystems – specifically, the growing threats and drivers of biodiversity loss – and a lack of documentation on zoning. To address these issues, the organization set out to help land owners improve their spatial awareness and understanding of the territory (and connectivity between adjacent areas) and to better equip communities with the tools needed to form alliances, lobby government and participate in decision-making processes.

Community protected area network

Serraniagua Corporation uses a connectivity strategy to link community protected areas, local landowners, surrounding municipalities, and areas protected within Tatamá National Park. The strategy aspires to the protection and conservation of species within the important wildlife corridor by creating and promoting sustainable production networks in the agricultural sector, in municipal plans, in park administration, and in community-based enterprises. The association aims to combine respect for local culture and with a strong conservation ethic. Culture and conservation are linked through the promotion of traditional and customary resource management practices and land management systems.

The association has successfully fostered a rare link between community practitioners (farmers and producers), local and national government authorities, and the biodiversity science community. This multi-stakeholder model enables equitable territorial planning, which in turn produces a strategic vision that is informed by sound science and research, is guided by the needs of the local population, and which helps to extend the policy objectives of government authorities. Serraniagua Corporation emphasizes accurate data collection and the application of cartographic tools, economic needs assessments, and biological surveys in the management of the Serrania de los Paraguas region. These tools are the foundation of land-use planning and coordination activities.

Serraniagua Corporation is guided by four overarching objectives, namely: i) safeguard biodiversity in strategic ecosystems by expanding protected areas and sustainably managing the agro-forestry systems that connect Tatamá Natural National Park with the Paraguas Mountains; ii) implement sustainable production models with farmers in the region; iii) secure support from a number of different stakeholders; and iv) increase protected areas for endemic and threatened species.

“The villages of the world have the right to inform themselves, to participate in every decision that concerns their common destiny. The world’s leaders have a duty and a responsibility to listen to community voices and to the groups that safeguard the environment.”

César A. Franco Laverde, Director, Serraniagua Corporation
Founded in 1996, Serraniagua Corporation connects the conservation corridors of Tatamá National Park and Serrania de los Paraguas through a series of 60 community-managed and seven state-managed nature reserves. The organization maintains a vision of sustainable development that improves the quality of life for local inhabitants while also respecting and protecting regional biodiversity. The community-based network evolved in response to a need for greater stakeholder input into natural resource governance and more detailed documentation of local biodiversity. Bringing together both rural and urban populations, Serraniagua Corporation carries out participatory land management planning and has pioneered an effective and inclusive community-based nature reserve model.

The association oversees a diverse base of stakeholders, which includes producers of cocoa, coffee and sugar, as well as ecotourism ventures, environmental groups, rural schools and women’s associations. This dynamic social network is leveraged to protect the biodiversity and ecosystems of the surrounding region in a manner that also respects the livelihood needs of the local population. A comprehensive communications program employs community radio, newsletters, environmental murals, educational videos, and community tours. Two important partners in their work are the Colombian Network of Associations of Civil Society Nature Reserves (which brings together more than 600 civil society reserves across the country) and the Association of Producers of San Jose del Palmar (a community-based organization of cocoa, palm, avocado and banana producers that aims to protect natural forests and watersheds).

Protected area network

Serraniagua Corporation brings together community-based and private protected areas to promote biodiversity conservation and the protection of threatened species in the region. Protection of the Serrania de los Paraguas wildlife corridors requires connectivity, which has necessitated the involvement of community, public (state) and private land owners, as well as a number of different producer and resource user groups. The association coordinates activities between these stakeholders, developing landscape level conservation plans that connect public protected areas (such as municipal watersheds), community protected areas, and national protected areas (such as Tatamá National Park-Serrania de los Paraguas). Importantly, Serraniagua Corporation is also the proprietor of Cerro El Inglés, a natural reserve that conserves the majority of threatened and endemic species within the conservation corridor. Building out from this ‘conservation epicenter’, the association has formed a core area of natural reserves in the region that include 60 private reserves which represent more than 2,250 hectares across five municipalities and two departments.

Agriculture, tailored production plans and seed exchanges

The conservation corridor where the Corporation operates covers a sizable area of different ecosystems, altitudinal ranges and land uses. Serraniagua Corporation promotes harmony between these ecosystems and production landscapes to ensure the conservation of local culture, native farm species and biodiversity. The Corporation promotes a range of landscape management tools, including biological conservation corridors, living fences, the enrichment and diversification of coffee plantations, strategic reforestation with indigenous tree species, the operation of community tree nurseries, organic fruit orchards, and more. Farmers working with the organization develop individual production plans through agro-forestry systems where different species of plants are grown and coexist. Secondary crops are added to production landscapes dominated by cocoa and coffee cultivation. In cocoa landscapes, the most common secondary crops include palm of chontaduro, borójó, avocados, and bananas, while in coffee landscapes the most common secondary crops include guamo, fruit trees, plantains, and walnut and cedar trees. Some members of the Serraniagua Corporation also work in apiculture and honey production. The organization
facilitates learning exchanges between communities, where farmers exchange seeds that form the basis of local agricultural diversity and food security.

**Environmental research and education**

Serraniagua Corporation works with local universities to carry out research on ecosystem functioning, biodiversity and health, and on individual species living within the Cerro El Inglés reserve. Long-term agreements are in place with these educational institutions to ensure ongoing support with research, environmental assessments, and biological monitoring. The association carries out environmental education programs with schools throughout the region. A program called Herederos del Planeta (“Heirs of the Planet”) targets children and youth and aims to ensure the strong foundation of a conservation ethic in future generations. The Herederos del Planeta group has grown into a national movement that forms part of the RED Colombiana de Reservas Naturales, a Colombian network of community-based natural reserves. In partnership with two regional radio stations (El Cairo Estereo and Palmar Estereo), Serraniagua Corporation oversees environmental education programming and instructional shows that promote conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources in the region. On average, the organization transmits more than 260 programs per year. Included in the programming are reports on the progress of existing projects and plans for new initiatives. Bulletins and promotional videos are also developed and distributed on an ongoing basis to improve public awareness on its programming.

“Aside from a profound respect for all forms of life, our organization understands that biodiversity is linked to cultural diversity, where traditions of land management, food security, and genetic diversity reside. And so, the only way to guarantee biodiversity is to guarantee the cultures that guard it, the people who understand that we cannot impose on the planet a singular logic that markets what is not tradable or replaceable.”

César A. Franco Laverde, Director, Serraniagua Corporation
Biodiversity Impacts

The association maintains a strong commitment to biological monitoring, documentation of biodiversity, and land use planning based on these studies. As a partnership of community managed nature reserves, the association has registered 343 species of birds, 56 species of mammals, 79 species of amphibians, 20 species of reptiles, three species of snails, 24 species of insects and 646 species of plants. Over 500 community sites have received direct technical assistance on biological monitoring tools. These trainings regularly include learning tours, reforestation and conservation workshops, and agricultural conferences. Biodiversity conservation and ecosystem management have also been mainstreamed into school curriculums by way of a partnership the association has cultivated with fifteen rural schools.

Serraniagua Corporation has created a biodiversity database for the region, filling an important void in available mechanisms to identify priority species and conservation interventions. Collected data is used to identify future conservation targets and land use plans. As a result of information gathered through the biodiversity database, the region was named an Important Bird Area (IBA). Collected data has also helped to drive expansion of (and coordination between) the 60 participating protected areas. More knowledge and information on the state of key resources and species has translated to more effective and balanced land management strategies.

Monitoring of biodiversity impacts is done through species registration. The group has steadily expanded its conservation corridors and the number of officially designated protected areas. Since its inception, Serraniagua Corporation has integrated more than 3,000 hectares of community nature reserves into the Tatamá-Paraguas regional network of private natural reserves. Cerro El Inglés, the group’s proprietary natural reserve has itself expanded by 500 hectares. At least ten new plant species and two new amphibian species have been found within the reserve and its associated areas. Ten endemic or threatened species are currently under protection within the reserve.

Among the many key species protected in the region are a number of birds, including: Empress Brilliant (*Heliodoxa imperatrix*); Purple-throated Woodstar (*Calliphlox mitchelli*); Gold-ringed Tanager (*Bangsia aureocincta*); Munchique Wood-Wren (*Hericorhina negreti*); Black-and-gold Tanager (*Bangsia melanochlamys*); Velvet-purple Coronet (*Boissonneaua jardini*); Multicolored Tanager (*Chlorochrysa nitidissima*); Fulvous-dotted Treerunner (*Margarornis stellatus*); Purplish-manted Tanager (*Iridosornis porphyrocephalus*); Club-winged Manakin (*Machaeropterus deliciosus*); Indigo Flowerpiercer (*Diglossa indigotica*); Glistening-green Tanager (*Chlorochrysa phoenicotis*); Black-chinned Mountain-Tanager (*Anisognathus notabilis*); Gray-and-gold Tanager (*Tangara palmeri*); Tanager Finch (*Oreothraupis arremonops*); Crested Ant-Tanager (*Habia cristata*); and Beautiful Jay (*Cyanolyca pulchra*).

Socioeconomic Impacts

The primary beneficiaries of this project include campesinos and their families, those living within the conservation corridor, private owners of the natural reserves, eco-agricultural farmers, producers’ associations, community environmental education groups, and, indirectly, those living on indigenous reservations in the region. The positive socioeconomic impacts have been varied and widespread. The association has been at the forefront of creating a market in the region for organic agriculture, providing local farmers with a reliable and steady source of income and an outlet for their produce. The association has also catalyzed a number of sustainable production groups – producer federations and cooperatives – including in the areas of cacao, coffee, sugar and ecotourism. These networks provide otherwise economically marginalized farmers with collective bargaining power and market access benefits that were previously unattainable. Out of these producer federations and cooperatives have emerged a number of ‘environmental defenders’; local leaders who, above and beyond championing environmental conservation and proper stewardship of local resources, have been able to successfully advocate for technical assistance and the provision of social services.
Serraniagua Corporation is not only an environmental network, but a social network that aims to improve communication and collaboration between land owners, eco-agricultural farmers and sustainable producer groups. Average family and producer group incomes have improved by an average of 25 percent from Serraniagua Corporation activities. But while many of the benefits from the initiative fall in the category of more traditional socioeconomic gains – greater household incomes, more jobs, improved market access, etc. – an even greater number of the benefits are non-monetary and include the strengthening of the social fabric (which makes collective action possible), a sense of pride and belonging for farmers and those working in agricultural production sectors, community empowerment, and the kind of capacity development that comes from peer-to-peer learning and exchange. Three new community associations have been formed since the project began. Serraniagua Corporation itself employees fifteen individuals, and has created more than 100 indirect jobs through its programming and activities. The president of the board is a woman, as are a significant percentage of the operational team. Gender equality, the empowerment of women's groups and the promotion of the rights of local communities are central preoccupations of the initiative.

Among the more notable socioeconomic impacts has been official recognition of 60 civil society (community) nature reserves, as well as management plan that outlines conservation and sustainable production activities and interventions within the geographical area this network covers. Within the greater management area, more than 500 project sites have received direct rural technical assistance, where local community members participate in learning tours, capacity building and training, agricultural conferences and workshops, and environmental and reforestation training.

Through this on-site training – and by way of other programming – the association has actively (and successfully) promoted organic agriculture, fostered receptive markets for organic products, and created production federations in cocoa, coffee and sugar.

**POLICY IMPACTS**

Serraniagua Corporation has contributed to the formulation of a regional territorial regulation plan for 2000-2010 as well as a 2000-2002 development plan for the municipality of El Cairo. The group also contributed to the participatory environmental management plan of the Serrania de los Paraguas. The association has been an active participant in contributor to the debate on new protected area legislation in Colombia, both through the first protected areas congress of Colombia and the eighth Inter-American private land conservation congress in 2008.

The association is a founding member of the La RED Colombia Verde and occupies the presidency of its board. In addition to this post, the organization participates in Mesa Local Noste del Sistema Departamental de areas protegidas del Valle de Cauca (The Local Committee on Protected Areas for El Valle de Cauca) and oversees the Technical Secretariat of the local system of protected areas in San José de Palmar—Chocó. Serraniagua Corporation provides technical support to surrounding municipalities and assists in the formulation of the management plans within these areas.
SUSTAINABILITY

Long term social and organizational sustainability are defining features of Serraniagua Corporation. The association maintains an official headquarters – which oversees projects and program activities – has a dedicated, permanent staff, and works with sustainable production groups on long term business plans. The group is also in the process of creating an endowment that will ensure the sustainability of its projects. Since 1996, the scope of the association’s operations has expanded. In its first two years, the association was focused geographically on the regional river basin and programmatically on protected areas, natural reserves, territorial mapping, and environmental planning. Since that time, Serraniagua Corporation has transitioned rather organically into the areas of social services and social networking, namely through the establishment of producer networks. Campesinos and their families lacked resources and capacity, leading to an emphasis on sustainable production methods and networking. It was through this evolution that a conservation organization became infused with an emphasis on sustainable production.

Serraniagua Corporation emphasizes the role of building local capacity in establishing public consensus and, in turn, catalyzing collective action. Capacity building is a fundamental component of the association’s long-term strategy. Investments into local capacity building have paid dividends for community solidarity, the sense of community ownership of project activities, and participatory management. Particular investment has been made in youth programs as a way of educating and empowering the next generation of conservationists and organic farmers. Local producers of coffee, corn, cocoa and brown sugar have been empowered to connect with one another and improve their collective purchasing, bargaining and marketing power.

The association maintains a connective conservation strategy that prioritizes environmental, social and economic sustainability. Equitable and sustainable production systems for local producers are central to this strategy and all association operations. The association aims to build and foster an identity among its members and target population of communal interests and communal success and achievement. This group ethos has slowly supplanted individual profit motives, replacing it with a spirit of collaboration that has strengthened social cohesion and the sustainability of conservation interventions in the region.

REPLICATION

Serraniagua Corporation is celebrated regionally and nationally as a model of successful community-based conservation. The association has been invited to participate in various regional forums for information exchange and peer-to-peer transfer of best practice, including the Inter-American Conservation Congress. Additionally, it has served as a progenitor organization, spawning other community-based activities and grassroots collaborative efforts. The organization has developed and implements a communications strategy that includes community radio, newsletters, street art and murals, interest groups meetings, web-based campaigns and more. It holds annual General Assembly meetings for its national assembly of regional organizations, as well as for its various social, environmental and production networks across the conservation corridor.

The replication of best practices has been carried out primarily through two national networks: RED Colombiana de Reservas Naturales, through which organizations and associated groups share experiences on issues of conservation and sustainable production, and La RED Colombia Verde, which brings together community-based organizations and sustainable producers. RED Colombiana de Reservas Naturales holds an annual assembly where members can discuss lessons learned from implemented initiatives and where the successes and challenges experienced by landowners, production groups and organic farmers within the reserve can be shared. Serraniagua Corporation is a noted leader in this space and is the
current chairman of the board of this group. La RED Colombia Verde carries out workshops and ‘learning days’ that allow for the exchange of experiences and learning with different associated groups within the eco-region.

PARTNERS

Serraniagua Corporation is a consortium of smaller, community-based organizations within the Chocó and Valle regions. There is substantial overlap with an umbrella organization called, Herederos de Planeta, an inter-generational group that focuses on producer federations, cooperatives and sustainable production groups. Serraniagua Corporation and Herederos de Planeta work together with municipalities and town associations to provide technical assistance to campesinos, to small producers associations, and to cooperatives within the Valle and Chocó.

The organization maintains an alliance with the Tatamá National Park administration and with regional corporations. Serraniagua is also a part of the RED Columbiana de Reservas Naturales. Other partners include:

- Asociación RED Colombiana de Reservas Naturales de la Sociedad Civil: conservation and sustainable production on public and private land.
- National coordination of Herederos del Planeta, construction of social and organizational tissue.
- GREEN NETWORK de Colombia: Columbian network of amicable, community-based sustainable producers: facilitates production initiatives and sustainable markets
- Fondo Para La Acción Ambiental y la Niñez: (Youth Fund for Environmental Action) initiates public calls for youth and environment projects
- Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF)
- CVC: Corporación Autonoma Regional Del Valle de Cauca y Codechocó: regional environmental authorities who promote conservation initiatives within their areas of influence
- The municipality of San José Del Palmar
- Alliance for Conservation in Latin America

Between 2003 and 2005, Serraniagua Corporation implemented a Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) project titled Development and Implementation of Private Nature Reserves in Serranía de los Paraguas. The aim was to promote a network of private reserves in the Tatamá-Paraguas Conservation Corridor, and included preparing needs assessments and management plans for twelve private reserves. The grant also supported small sustainable agriculture projects aimed at maintaining forest cover to promote connectivity between private reserves and the development of a marketing plan to promote eco-friendly products made by farmers involved with the project. The total size of this grant was USD 152,945.

“With a shared ethic of respect for the planet, we can create common solutions and lead by example in showing how to coexist with nature”

César A. Franco Laverde, Director, Serraniagua Corporation
FURTHER REFERENCE

- Serraniagua Corporation Photo Story (Vimeo) vimeo.com/15965410
- ‘Serraniagua, motor de conservación’ (Vimeo) vimeo.com/25426546
- Video page of Corporación Serraniagua (Vimeo) vimeo.com/serraniagua
- Corporación Serraniagua website: serraniagua.org.co
- Corporación Serraniagua Facebook page: facebook.com/serraniagua

Click the thumbnails below to read more case studies like this:

Equator Initiative
Environment and Energy Group
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
304 East 45th Street, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10017
Tel: +1 646 781-4023
www.equatorinitiative.org

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the UN’s global development network, advocating for change and connecting countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life.

The Equator Initiative brings together the United Nations, governments, civil society, businesses and grassroots organizations to recognize and advance local sustainable development solutions for people, nature and resilient communities.

©2012 by Equator Initiative
All rights reserved