ASOCIACIÓN DE MUJERES WAORANI DE LA AMAZONIA ECUATORIANA (AMWAE)
Ecuador

Equator Initiative Case Studies
Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities
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. The Equator Initiative aims to fill that gap.

The Equator Prize 2014 was awarded to 35 outstanding local community and indigenous peoples initiatives working to meet climate and development challenges through the conservation and sustainable use of nature. Selected from 1,234 nomination from across 121 countries, the winners were recognized for their achievements at a prize ceremony held in conjunction with the UN Secretary General’s Climate Summit and the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in New York City. Special emphasis was placed on forest and ecosystem restoration, food security and agriculture, and water and ocean management. The following case study is one in a growing series that describes vetted and peer-reviewed best practices 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.
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PROJECT SUMMARY

Developed in response to the uncontrolled poaching of wildlife in the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve, Asociación de Mujeres Waorani de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana (AMWAE, or in English, Association of Waorani Women of the Ecuadorian Amazon) is promoting organic cacao cultivation as a wildlife protection measure and a pathway to local sustainable development. The association has created a land management plan that emphasizes zero deforestation, organic cacao certification as a primary economic development strategy, and the management of subsistence hunting activities to protect threatened and vulnerable wildlife species. Community cacao is processed into organic-certified chocolate, creating local access to new markets and more lucrative revenue streams. The association has been so successful at reorienting the local economy that the bushmeat market, which fueled wildlife poaching across the region, has been closed down. Women lead both organic farming and business management activities. Organic cacao cultivation is complemented by activities in fish farming, fruit tree cultivation, and the operation of tree nurseries, which support both food security and reforestation needs. Revenues from the cacao business have been invested into local education, health, and infrastructure projects.

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KEY FACTS

EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2014
FOUNDED: 2005
LOCATION: Napo, Orellana, and Pastaza Provinces in the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve
BENEFICIARIES: 2,500 people
AREA OF FOCUS: Maintenance of Waorani culture, protection of the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve, and promotion of sustainable economic development
The Waorani People

The Asociación de Mujeres Waorani de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana (AMWAE, or in English, Association of Waorani Women of the Ecuadorian Amazon) is a women’s indigenous group that promotes sustainable economic development initiatives and preservation of Waorani culture. The Waorani are native Amerindians whose ancestral homeland lies between the Curaray and Napo rivers deep in the Ecuadorian rainforest, in an area now known as the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve. Once roaming over two million hectares, the Waorani are presently confined to 600,000 hectares, predominantly inside the Yasuní National Park. The Waorani are a so-called ‘initial contact’ community and were completely unknown to the western world until the 1950s.

The Waorani are semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers. They supplement hunting and gathering with a form of shifting agriculture called chakras. A chakra is a diverse forest garden planted with cassava, bananas, timber species, palms, and medicinal plants. Waorani men are skilled hunters and Waorani women are talented artisans. The Waorani live in multi-family longhouses constructed of wood and thatch, with village sizes generally smaller than 100 people. The total population of the tribe is estimated to be 2,500. The Waorani language is a linguistic isolate that is unrelated to any other language. Two closely related tribes, the Tagaeri and Taromenane, have rejected the modern world and continue to live in voluntary isolation deep inside the 700,000 hectare Tagaeri-Taromenane Intangible Zone.

Construction of the Pompeya Sur-Iro Road

In 1992, the Maxus Ecuador petroleum company built a 150 kilometre road deep into the heart of the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve. The road brought devastating consequences to the biosphere reserve and to the Waorani people who depend on this land for their livelihoods, producing habitat fragmentation and providing oil companies and illegal loggers with access to the Waorani ancestral homeland. The road also served as a vector for the introduction of western diseases – diseases for which the Waorani have no immunological resistance. Most significantly, the road thrust the Waorani into the modern market economy, irrevocably changing their way of life.
Oil company workers and illegal loggers began trading clothes, boats, medicine, food, and other goods with the Waorani in exchange for use of indigenous lands inside and outside the biosphere reserve. This welfarism created an uneasy system of dependency for some members of the tribe. Three Waorani communities gave up their semi-nomadic way of life to create permanent settlements by the road. The road provided access to the town of Pompeya, five kilometres outside the biosphere reserve, which contains modern grocery stores and alcohol. With easier access to food, some Waorani gave up tending their chakras. A few Waorani men abandoned their traditional hunter-gatherer lives and took jobs as salaried employees of the oil companies.

Cars and trucks owned by the petroleum companies provided transportation to the Waorani, greatly facilitating their mobility within the biosphere reserve as well as their access to the town of Pompeya. Waorani men soon learned that they could earn good wages selling bushmeat at an illicit market in Pompeya. Bushmeat was seen as a luxury good in regional towns like Tena and El Coca and commanded premium prices, particularly among locals whose ancestors grew up in the forests and nostalgically thought of the meat as a healthy reminder of their childhood. Guns soon replaced traditional Waorani hunting implements such as spears and blowguns, making Waorani hunters more effective and lethal. By the early 2000s, populations of animals within the Yasuni Biosphere Reserve were in decline and many Waorani who relied upon subsistence hunting to provide their families with protein had a difficult time finding game. Gloria Irumenga, a Waorani woman from the village of Guiyero, said of the situation, “The animals are disappearing. Hunters now have to travel three hours to hunt.”

“We needed to reassert our custodianship of the land, but we had to come up with a creative way of doing it that would restore natural harmony and give us economic stability at the same time.”

Manuela Omari, former AMWAЕ president
In response to the deleterious effects of the commercial bushmeat trade on Waorani daily life, a group of Waorani women founded the Asociación de Mujeres Waorani de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana in 2005. The women founders of the group decided that they needed to find alternative sources of income in order to halt the bushmeat trade. In 2010, TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, partnered with AMWAE to implement an initiative called, ‘Strengthening biodiversity conservation and management in Waorani Territory: creating sustainable economic alternatives for diminishing wildlife trade.’ The initiative sought to put an end to illegal commercial hunting of bushmeat in the Waorani ancestral domain by working with the Waorani to identify alternative sources of income. Since that time, AMWAE has developed diverse livelihood strategies that serve as an alternative to the sale of bushmeat including cacao production, marketing of chambira palm handicrafts, and sale of tree seedlings for reforestation. These initiatives, identified and developed by Waorani women, bring additional income into the community, support conservation of the region’s biodiversity, and enhance cultural traditions.

Cultivation of fine aroma cacao

Presented with a range of income-generating ideas, the Waorani women decided that cacao (Theobroma cacao) cultivation offered the most profitable, culturally-appropriate, and ecologically-sensitive option for their communities. The women decided to offer cacao plant saplings to families that pledged to stop supplying bushmeat to the Pompeya market. In addition, families participating in the cacao initiative agreed to keep a log of their subsistence hunting and voluntarily abstain from hunting white-lipped peccaries (Tayassu pecari) and collared peccaries (Pecari tajacu) for three years to allow populations of the animals to recover.

In 2010, the women began planting high quality, fine aroma varieties of cacao in abandoned chakras and previously deforested areas – generally less than two hectares in size – near their settlements. Cacao production is helping communities to reclaim degraded lands and does not replace or eliminate subsistence food crops. From the inception of this initiative, TRAFFIC and other partners supported the Waorani women by providing training in organic agriculture and good agricultural practices for cacao production. Today, 300 Waorani in 10 communities are cultivating 30 hectares of cacao.

In 2013, three years after the inception of the cacao initiative, the first cacao fruits were harvested. After harvest, the beans are fermented in greenhouses and dried on site before being shipped to BIOS, an Ecuadorian company that produces fine chocolates in the capital, Quito. At BIOS, the cacao beans are used to make milk chocolate and dark chocolate bars that are sold under the brand name ‘WAO Chocolate’. In 2014, AMWAE applied for and received organic certification for WAO
Chocolate through ECOCERT, enabling them to access a lucrative, niche market. Profits from WAO chocolate sales support AMWAE and its conservation initiatives in the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve.

Sustainable management of chambira palm

A parallel, promising source of alternative income identified by the Asociación de Mujeres Waorani de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana is the chambira palm (*Astrocaryum chambira*). Chambira palm is native to the Amazon rainforest and its leaves produce strong, pliable fibers that Waorani women use to fashion into baskets, bags, hammocks, mats, and other handicrafts. Waorani women have made intricate items from chambira leaves for centuries, so the commercialization of this skill is a way to maintain tribal culture and identity.

With assistance from NGOs and scientists, AMWAE members created sustainable management standards for chambira palm based on traditional harvesting practices. A management plan was specifically created for the species that prevents felling of the palms and promotes reforestation of degraded areas using the species. Harvest guidelines specify cutting techniques that provide sustainable off-take while stimulating new growth of leaves. Due to the Waorani’s rich history of storytelling and limited formal education, NGOs and scientists have encouraged ‘experiential learning’ activities that facilitate horizontal transmission of traditional knowledge. Guidelines for harvesting the palm were also documented in comics to facilitate rapid dissemination in the community. These harvest guidelines are certified as environmentally sustainable and social responsible by the FairWild certification scheme.

Waorani women currently produce a wide range of chambira products that are available for sale in two Waorani-run stores as well as through the internet. In addition to the chambira handicrafts, Waorani women also produce colorful jewelry made from rainforest seeds. Men likewise have begun to sell spears, blowguns, headdresses, and other products through the stores.

**Halting the commercial bushmeat trade**

As income from the sale of handicrafts increased, hunters were incentivized to comply with hunting restrictions, leading to decreased pressure on native wildlife in Waorani lands. As the Waorani successfully decreased the supply of bushmeat travelling to Pompeya, NGOs and academics pressured the Ecuadorian government to address the demand-sidedimensions of the bushmeat trade. Under Ecuadorian law, indigenous people are permitted to hunt bushmeat for subsistence purposes, but commercialization of bushmeat is forbidden. For nearly two decades, local and national governmental authorities had turned a blind eye to the bushmeat trade emanating from the Yasuni Biosphere Reserve. In 2011 and 2012, the Ecuadorian Ministry of Environment finally acted, raiding several bushmeat markets in the Amazonian region and publically burning the seized contraband. Local and provincial authorities also assisted in identifying and closing restaurants in the area that were selling bushmeat. Promotion of ‘Yasuni friendly’ menus and educational programs alerting buyers to the environmental harm that the bushmeat trade produces have also produced positive impacts. Today, the bushmeat trade from the Yasuni Biosphere Reserve continues, clandestinely, but due to the efforts of AMWAE and its partners, the trade is much diminished.
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Protecting the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve

Yasuní National Park, covering nearly one million hectares, was established in 1979. The park and its surrounding territories, accounting for a total of 1.7 million hectares, were designated a UNESCO biosphere reserve in 1989. The Yasuní Biosphere Reserve is one of the most biologically diverse areas on the planet. It is the epicenter of amphibian, bird, mammal, and vascular plant diversity in the Western Hemisphere. The reserve is home to 120 species of reptiles, 150 amphibian species, 200 species of mammals, more than 250 species of fish, 600 species of birds, and more than 4,000 species of vascular plants. A single hectare of forest in the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve contains almost as many tree species as are found in the entire United States and Canada combined.

By 2007, researchers estimated that 13 tons of bushmeat were being sold at the Pompeya market annually. Four species – the lowland paca (*Cuniculus paca*), the collared peccary, the white-lipped peccary, and the silvery woolly monkey (*Lagothrix poeppigi*) – accounted for nearly 80 percent of the total biomass. The silvery woolly monkey and the white-lipped peccary are listed as vulnerable by the IUCN. Other vulnerable species sold at the market included the yellow-spotted sideneck turtle (*Podocnemis unifilis*), the South American yellowfoot tortoise (*Chelonoidis denticulata*), and the lowland tapir (*Tapirus terrestris*). Carcasses of nine endangered long-haired spider monkeys (*Ateles belzebuth*) were also sold at the market between 2005 and 2007.

By the early 2000s, the bushmeat trade was posing a significant threat to Waorani subsistence and the Yasuní ecosystem. Hunting pressure disrupted predator-prey relationships. Jaguars (*Panthera onca*), once common in the biosphere reserve, were driven far into the forest, away from roadsides that had been depleted of prey. Populations of pacas, peccaries, and other mammals that play an important role as tropical seed dispersal were decimated, causing subtle changes in forest composition. Illegal hunting also caused localized extinctions of populations of black caimans (*Melanosuchus niger*) and long-haired spider monkeys. In light of these developments, AMWAE’s actions to curtail the bushmeat trade have had a significant, positive environmental impact in one of the world’s most biodiverse areas. Halting the bushmeat trade has allowed populations of animals to recover, and is particularly important for the long term viability of vulnerable and endangered species.

Supporting reforestation efforts

In an effort to promote reforestation in the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve and lands abutting the protected area, AMWAE has encouraged its members to grow *chuncho* (*Cedrelinga cateniformis*) saplings in chakras and other existing forest openings. *Chuncho* is a native species capable of growing 50 metres in height and 12 metres in diameter. It is also a valuable timber species. AMWAE members collect *chuncho* saplings in the forest understory, replant them in chakras, and later sell them to government agencies, oil companies, and farmers for reforestation projects. The sale of saplings provides AMWAE members with supplementary income. In addition to its desirability as a timber species, research has shown *chuncho* to be a potentially important contributor to the fight against climate change because the species exhibits an above-average capacity for carbon sequestration. AMWAE’s promotion of native non-timber forest products such as cacao and chambira palm also contributes to maintenance of forest cover in the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve.

SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

Livelihood diversification

Prior to the initiation of the AMWAE livelihood diversification projects, most Waorani women were unable to earn an income and had little influence over the allocation of their household budget. Today, women from more than 100 families are earning income from the production of cacao, handicrafts, and *chuncho* seedlings. Cacao producing families...
are paid US$1.25 per pound for their crop, a premium of US$0.45 per pound over the average market price. AMWAE projects that when all of the cacao plants reach maturity, the community could earn as much as US$60,000 per year from the sale of fine chocolates.

Handicraft artisans retain 70 percent of the sale price of their goods from the AMWAE stores, with the remaining 30 percent dedicated to a communal fund and the administration of the store. Women can use the AMWAE handicraft stores as bank accounts, withdrawing funds from the store as needed to pay for family expenses. Waorani women are using the profits from the various livelihood initiatives to purchase educational supplies for their children, to buy clothing, and to pay for health care and other living expenses. Women now earn on average US$20 to US$30 a month, with some women earning more than US$50 per month. This is a significant increase for women who previously had possessed no independent source of income.

AMWAE plans to use the growing communal fund to support community improvements. Projects under consideration include a health clinic, a community ecotourism project, a solar energy installation, internet access and other communications technologies, and a museum to honor and preserve Waorani knowledge and culture.

**Enhancing food security**

One of AMWAE’s central concerns is ensuring tribal food security. By halting the bushmeat trade, AMWAE has removed a major threat to the primary source of protein in the Waorani diet. To lessen pressure on wild game and diversify food sources, several communities have turned to fish farming, using the native pacu (Piaractus brachypomus). The revitalization of chakras is another key development in ensuring Waorani food independence. AMWAE members have reclaimed abandoned chakras and planted new chakras on recently deforested patches of land. These newly planted chakras exhibit great diversity; in addition to traditional crops such as cassava, yams, guavas, and bananas, they include medicinal plants, citrus crops, avocados, custard apples, and cash crops such as cacao and chuncho. The medicinal plants bolster local health care whereas the food crops help AMWAE members fight malnutrition and vitamin C deficiency, two serious health issues found in many Waorani children. Recent exposure to highly processed western foods rich in saturated fats and sugars has caused a number of health problems in the Waorani community, including cardiovascular disease, obesity, and diabetes. Reclamation of a traditional Waorani diet based on game, fish, and forest plants is therefore vital to Waorani independence, identity, and health.

**POLICY IMPACTS**

Ecuadorian law prohibits commercial hunting of bushmeat, but permits subsistence hunting of wild game by indigenous communities. Despite this law, Ecuadorian authorities had turned a blind eye to the bushmeat trade in the area surrounding Yasuni Biosphere Reserve for more than a decade. AMWAE’s efforts to stop Waorani men from supplying the bushmeat trade, in concert with lobbying by NGOs such as TRAFFIC and the Wildlife Conservation Society, convinced the Ecuadorian government to close the bushmeat market in Pompeya and ban the sale of wild meat at restaurants in the region. Without AMWAE’s grassroots efforts, it is doubtful the government would have enforced its existing regulations.

AMWAE’s efforts to halt illegal logging in the Yasuni Biosphere Reserve, sustainably manage diverse forest gardens, and provide communities with chuncho seedlings for reforestation projects are all small but significant efforts to protect one of the most biodiverse areas of the planet. As such, the organization is contributing to Ecuador’s National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans, which prioritizes sustainable forest management in the Amazonian region. At the international scale, AMWAE’s activities contribute to Ecuador’s efforts to comply with REDD+, the Convention on Biological Diversity’s Aichi Biodiversity Targets 4, 14, and 18 (covering sustainable production systems; maintenance of ecosystem services for women, indigenous people, and local communities; and revitalization of traditional knowledge in conservation and sustainable use of diversity, respectively), and goal 15 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which focuses on sustainable management of forests and halting biodiversity loss. In recent years, AMWAE representatives have attended several national and international events relating to forestry and indigenous rights. The organization aspires to be a more active participant in helping to shape policy relating to indigenous Amazonian peoples in the future.

**GENDER IMPACTS**

The Asociación de Mujeres Waorani de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana is a women’s initiative, designed by Waorani women primary for the benefit of Waorani women. AMWAE’s livelihood diversification strategy has provided income for Waorani women, empowering them to become independent economic actors at the household and tribal level. The result has been an increase in investments in healthcare and education, for the betterment of the entire tribe. By earning independent sources of income, AMWAE members have also increased their political power, enabling them to engage in family politics and as well as external politics concerning the future of the Waorani people. Prior to the establishment of AMWAE, Waorani women’s participation in tribal matters was limited. By providing Waorani women with incomes and leadership training, AMWAE has given its members the necessary tools to become political actors and opened new political spheres wherein Waorani women are able to network, leverage power, and articulate their demands.

As an organization, AMWAE champions the unique roles that woman play as mothers, artisans, and guardians of ancestral knowledge. In particular, AMWAE stresses the key role that women play in the daily enactment of Sumak Kwasay, the indigenous philosophy of ‘living well.’ Living well is possible only if humans live in harmony with themselves, other humans, and nature, while respectfully recognizing the interdependence of humans and nature. AMWAE promotes handicraft-making among its members not only as an income-generating activity, but also as a means to maintain Waorani customs, knowledge, and skills. Other activities that AMWAE has undertaken to preserve Waorani culture include the production of audio-visual materials and the publication of Los Saberes Waorani (Traditional Waorani Knowledge), a book which documents Waorani ethnobotany.
SUSTAINABILITY

Petroleum exploration, illegal logging, and increasing encroachment into the Amazon by non-indigenous people pose the greatest long-term threats to the Waorani. The welfarism practiced by the petroleum industry is a particularly dire threat to the economic and cultural sustainability of the Waorani people. In its decade of existence, AMWAE has made great strides to insure the economic self-sufficiency of the Waorani people and limit tribal economic dependence on external agents in the private and public sectors. However, external funding is still required to sustain the cacao and handicrafts initiatives as well as to identify further options for livelihood diversification.

To date, the economic activities undertaken by AMWAE have been environmentally sustainable and culturally appropriate. However, increased daily contact with the Western world is slowly destabilizing Waorani culture. Culture is never static, however it is important to ensure that the Waorani people are able to self-determine the degree to which they maintain elements of their traditional culture and/or accept elements of Western culture. In order to ensure the Waorani have this choice, strengthening tribal institutions will be a critical component of future work. Education and capacity building amongst the younger generation are also key to insuring the tribe’s future sustainability. One of the most pressing needs is the development of leaders who will be able to negotiate with private businesses and state authorities to press for Waorani rights and self-determination.

REPLICATION

By promoting culturally-appropriate economic alternatives to commercial bushmeat hunting, AMWAE has successfully halted the bushmeat trade while simultaneously fortifying Waorani culture and autonomy. The initial success of the project will require sustained support to ensure its momentum. However, the strategy of combining community-based economic development to address bushmeat supply with state- and NGO-backed enforcement efforts to address bushmeat demand shows promise for broader replication in Amazonia, and potentially, other regions of the globe. AMWAE’s experience with linking sales of fine chocolate to forest conservation also provides an economic development model for other forest-dependent communities. This is particularly true for communities that produce non-timber forest products that can be manufactured into high value products aimed at niche markets in the food and cosmetics industries. To date, AMWAE representatives have visited select Ecuadorian indigenous communities in the Amazon and in the mountainous Sierra region to share their experiences of defending their culture and diversifying their livelihoods. The group hopes to expand their influence and reach in the future.

PARTNERS

International and Non-governmental partners

Initial funding for the establishment of AMWAE was provided by USAID, through its Biodiversity Conservation in Indigenous Communities (CAIMAN) project. TRAFFIC and IUCN implemented the ‘Strengthening biodiversity conservation and management in Waorani Territory: creating sustainable economic alternatives for diminishing wildlife trade’ project, in partnership with Fundación Natura, an Ecuadorian NGO. Between 2010 and 2014, the project was financially supported by the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation, the Andean Community (through its BIOCAN Programme), and the Flemish Funds for Tropical Forests. The Wildlife Conservation Society has provided AMWAE with financial and technical support, ranging from research on the bushmeat trade to funding for a workshop on traditional medicine to plan for an intercultural health program in the Waorani territory. The Global Greengrants Funds gave AMWAE funds to convene a community assembly to discuss responses to governmental plans to auction portions of their ancestral territory for oil exploration. Trainings in strengthening AMWAE’s organization capacity were financed by the United Nations Development Fund for Women. The Center for Economic and Social Rights, based in Quito, has also helped AMWAE
in further developing its organizational capacity. The ‘Sustainable management and community use of *palma de chambira* (*Astrocaryum chambira*) in Waorani communities’ project (2009-2011) was financed by the Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund (MDG-F) and the UNDP-implemented GEF Small Grants Programme (SGP). An additional GEF SGP project, ‘Forests, chambira and replication of good practices and handicrafts for Women in Napo and Pastaza: a contribution to the construction of *Akillak Sacha* biocorridor’, was completed in 2015.

**Government partners**

Ecuador’s Ministry of Environment played a key role in halting the commercial bushmeat trade from the Yasuni Biosphere Reserve. Agents from the ministry raided the bushmeat market in Pompeya and forced the closure of many restaurants that were selling bushmeat in the region. The Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion has strengthened AMWAE’s commercial ventures by providing training in store management and product promotion, and by providing transportation to craft fairs.
FURTHER REFERENCE

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UNDP partners with people at all levels of society to help build nations that can withstand crisis, and drive and sustain the kind of growth that improves the quality of life for everyone. On the ground in over 170 countries and territories, we offer global perspective and local insight to help empower lives and build resilient nations.

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.

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