ASOCIACIÓN DE CAPITANES INDÍGENAS DE YAIGOJÉ APAPORIS (ACIYA)
Colombia

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.
PROJECT SUMMARY

An alliance of 21 indigenous communities, Asociación de Capitanes Indígenas del Yaigojé Apaporis (ACIYA, Association of Indigenous Leaders of the Yaigojé Apaporis), has legally established a national park in their traditional territory. The national park is managed in collaboration with the Colombian National Parks System with the aim of protecting forests and indigenous ancestral lands from multinational mining companies. The knowledge and traditional practices of the ethnic groups that make up ACIYA are based on sustainable models of environmental management that guarantee the balance between the human population, the forest, and the many forms of wildlife in the area. With the creation of the national park, ACIYA succeeded both in protecting one million hectares of forest and in reaching an agreement with the state on a model of environmental management for the protected area. Working with the communities, ACIYA carried out a research program organized and led by the traditional elders and involving dozens of young people, who recorded their deep cultural knowledge of the land and their traditional methods for managing it. This information serves as a baseline for the management regime for Yaigojé Apaporis National Natural Park and encourages other programs that promote sustainable management models.

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KEY FACTS

EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2014

FOUNDED: 1993

LOCATION: Vaupés and Amazonas Departments, Colombia

BENEFICIARIES: 21 communities, 1,600 people

AREA OF FOCUS: Protection of indigenous ancestral Amazonian rainforest territories; documentation and implementation of holistic management practices
The Lower Apaporis River Basin

The Colombian Amazon is one of the world's most biodiverse regions. The cultural diversity found in the Lower Apaporis area of the Colombian Amazon mirrors the richness of its biodiversity, with eight indigenous groups living along the course of the river. The Lower Apaporis River flows through Colombia's Amazonas and Vaupés departments, bordering the northwestern part of the Brazilian Amazon. The Lower Apaporis River Basin contains the greatest number of tributaries and receives the highest rainfall of the entire Amazon Basin. In this remote area there is no road access; instead, local communities travel by river. The entire population is indigenous, distributed among 21 communities and in a number of large and isolated ceremonial houses known as malocas, which are located along the lower sections of the Apaporis River.

Although there is one semi-nomadic ethnic group – the Yujup – all other groups are established permanently in their territory. Local communities use slash-and-burn shifting agriculture to develop vegetable gardens in the forest, called chagras, which, along with fishing, hunting, and gathering of forest products, provide all food needed. The chagras, traditionally sown and maintained by women, are periodically renewed to guarantee food security. The main crops grown within the chagra include cassava, bananas, and pineapple, all of which are grown from traditional seed varieties that have been maintained for generations by local women.

The indigenous peoples of the Lower Apaporis River Basin have a rich tradition of shamanism. This form of spirituality, blended with a deep understanding of the tropical forest, gives rise to a unique and holistic model of land management. In accordance with the holistic model of environmental management practiced by the indigenous groups of the region, the Yaigojé Territory contains many natural places held to be sacred due to their fundamental role in preserving its ecological balance. Located in the mountains, savannas, trees, springs, lakes, islands, rocks, and rapids, these sacred places are associated with creation myths, and they imbue every corner of the territory with profound meaning. The energy of all these places interconnects, forming a system that can be activated by the mediation of the shamans, known as Jaguars of Yurupari, during traditional rituals carried out at different times of year. The Jaguars of Yurupari connect with the spiritual energy of the sacred places, restoring natural balance and ensuring social well-being across the great region.
While in the past this traditional knowledge was handed down through the generations and practiced, according to principles of complementarity, by all of the indigenous groups in the northwest Amazon region, today only those living in the Apaporis and lower Caquetá river basins continue this practice almost in its entirety. In 2011, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognized the Cultural Complex of the area as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Hee Ya Keti Oka Traditional Knowledge of the Jaguar Shamans of the Yurupari of the Pirai River, Paraná – Apaporis Basin – 2010).

**Creation of Yaigojé Apaporis Resguardo Indígena and ACIYA**

In 1988, more than one million hectares of indigenous ancestral lands in the lower Apaporis River Basin were legally recognized as the Yaigojé Apaporis Resguardo Indígena (Yaigojé Apaporis Indigenous Reserve). Under Colombian law, indigenous resguardos are territories of collective property that are inalienable; in other words, they are permanent and cannot be mortgaged or sold. The Yaigojé Apaporis Resguardo Indígena includes communities belonging to, among others, the Tanimuka, Letuama, Cabiyari, Yauna, Gente Día, Yújup-Makú, Makuna and Barasana ethnic groups, with a total population of approximately 1,600. Formal recognition of the Resguardo spurred local leaders to press for greater rights and autonomy.

In 1993, the traditional authorities in the area formed an Asociación de Autoridades Tradicionales Indígenas (AAIT, Association of Traditional Indigenous Authorities), in accordance with Colombia’s 1991 Constitution and the Transitory Decree Number 1088 of 1993. The Colombian Constitution took pioneering steps to recognize the rights of indigenous peoples, and one of its key principles was the recognition of collective property through the mechanism of the resguardo. Progress has been made toward the full recognition of territorial rights and the autonomy of indigenous governance structures through the 1993 Transitory Decree Number 1088, which took this process one step further by recognizing AITs as ‘public entities with special character,’ thereby enabling AITs across the country to coordinate certain administrative functions with other national governmental bodies. The AITs have powers that go beyond land use and natural resource management. This designation authorizes indigenous communities to put their own measures in place to provide education, basic health services, and economic development, while preserving their cultural integrity. In order to be able to provide these services, the AITs receive government funding.

The traditional authorities of the ethnic groups living in the Apaporis basin named their AIT after the resguardo: the Asociación de Capitanes Indígenas de Yaigojé Apaporis (ACIYA, Association of Indigenous Leaders of the Yaigojé Apaporis). ACIYA’s mission is to protect ancestral lands in the lower Apaporis River Basin and to promote the well-being of indigenous communities in the area.
Key Activities and Innovations

Establishment of Parque Nacional Natural Yaigojé Apaporis

Despite living in a remote corner of the Amazon rainforest, the indigenous communities of the lower Apaporis River Basin have experienced, to some extent, the many pressures associated with western colonization that impacted great parts of the Amazon. Toward the end of the 19th century and into the early 1900s, during the rubber boom, rubber barons enslaved entire indigenous populations through the system of debt-peonage, using them to harvest latex, a highly valued commodity. This had a severe impact on the survival of many communities and their traditional forms of social organization. The rubber boom was followed by the skin and hide trade, which commoditized subsistence sources of meat, endangering animal populations. In the 1990s, the illegal cocaine trade also caused social disintegration and disrupted traditional ways of life further still. Due to the location of the Apaporis river, far from the main tributaries used as access routes by the first colonizers, the indigenous peoples of this region were able to preserve their territories and traditional knowledge of environmental management, allowing them to be self-sufficient while living in harmony with their environment. By the 2000s, however, a new threat to the region and its peoples emerged: gold mining.

In 2007, the Canadian mining firm Cosigo Resources Inc. approached communities in the Lower Apaporis River Basin and discussed their plans to open mines in the area. Company officials allegedly attempted to bribe community leaders in order to win their support and gain access to resguardo lands. However, due to a legal loophole, the bribes were unnecessary. Under Colombian law, resguardo status grants indigenous people ownership rights over the land, but not the subsoil, which belongs to the state. Cosigo Resources therefore only needed state approval to obtain a license to mine the subsoil for gold, not the consent of indigenous leaders.

Cosigo Resources declared their intention to mine a sacred area known as Yuisi, and filed for a mining permit. Yuisi is a series of cascades and rapids on the Lower Apaporis River. It is one of the most sacred sites in the area. According to local elders, “Yuisi is the crib of our way of thinking, of life and power. Everything originated here in thought first; nature, the crops, trees, fruits, people. Everything that exists now, existed here first, in thought.” Local shamans objected to the removal of gold from the area. The gold and other minerals, they claimed, were “lenses” that allowed them to see beyond the immediately visible world, define the causes of problems, and identify the offerings needed for their resolution. If the gold was removed from the area, the shamans claimed, they would lose their power to manage and heal the territory.

Faced with this imminent threat to one of their most sacred sites, the leaders of ACIYA convened an emergency assembly with their members. The assembly decided to request outside advice and help in order to protect their lands. They approached the Gaia Amazonas Foundation, a partner NGO, whose staff explained that the only means of protecting land under Colombian law that would prevent access to the subsoil was to have it declared as a National Natural Park. The shamans and traditional authorities then asked the state to establish a legally recognized Protected Area in their territory, without affecting its status as a resguardo. In 2009, The Ministry of Environment and the Colombian National Parks Authority created the Yaigojé-Apaporis National Natural Park through Resolution 2079. The National Park
overlaps with the resguardo indígena, and so respects the autonomy of the local population and their rights as the ancestral owners of the land. However, two days after the Yaigojé Resguardo was declared a National Park, the Colombian Ministry of Mines granted Cosigo Resources a goldmining permit for the Yuisi area. Cosigo immediately challenged the National Park designation, which impeded their access to Yuisi.

This situation caused great division among communities in the region, leading several of them to create a new AATI with the support of Cosigo Resources – the Asociación de Comunidades Indígenas del Taraira Vaupéns (ACITAVA, the Association of Indigenous Chiefs of Taraira and Vaupéns). ACITAVA filed a law suit against the establishment of the national park, arguing that there had been inadequate consultation, without acknowledging that the Park had been requested by the indigenous authorities themselves, and that the consultation process had been agreed with them. The fate of the park hung in legal limbo for five years until 2014, when Colombia’s Constitutional Court decided to commission three senior judges to journey to the Apaporis River to listen to testimony from the parties firsthand. At the public hearing held in one of the Yaigojé communities, ACITAVA representatives admitted that their lawsuit against the park was organized and paid for by the Frontier Mining Corporation (a Colombian subsidiary of Consigo Resources Inc.), claimed that they had been misled, and subsequently declared their support for the consolidation of the National Park. The judges of the Constitutional Court dismissed the case (Ruling T-384 A), upheld the legality of the national park, and ordered the government to “evaluate the actions of the Cosigo Frontier Mining Corporation … and, if appropriate, commence the corresponding legal action” (Mendoza et al. 2014).

Parque Nacional Natural Yaigojé Apaporis (Yaigojé Apaporis National Natural Park) is the third largest protected area in Colombia. Its territory overlaps the resguardo indígena of the same name, enhancing the comprehensive protection of the reserve. To facilitate the joint management of the Park by ACIYA and Parques Nacionales (National Parks), Resolution 2079 of 2009 established that the Regimen Especial de Manejo (REM, Special Management Regime) for the area would be implemented in accordance with the knowledge and cultural principles of the ethnic groups that have lived in this region for thousands of years. The agreed objectives for conservation include the protection of the material and intangible values associated with traditional forms of land conservation, use, and management practiced by the indigenous peoples of the area.

**Documenting traditional indigenous knowledge**

ACIYA’s core mission is to preserve the traditional knowledge of the various ethnic groups within its membership. Preservation of indigenous knowledge is central to maintaining identity and social cohesion, and is the foundation that guides the social, economic, and cultural activities of the Association’s communities. In 2012, ACIYA began a community research project focused on the socio-environmental regulation and management of the resguardo, integrating traditional knowledge, concepts, and practices with non-indigenous research methods. 30 young people representing the ethnic diversity of the territory were selected to form research groups to execute the project. Under the guidance of the traditional elders, they documented the methods used to manage their ancestral lands, the network of sacred sites, creation myths, seasonal rituals, and knowledge relating to the management of the forest and its fauna. Essentially, this research provided the basic information to understand the territory, its dynamics, and its land use and stewardship patterns in order to provide the foundation for developing the REM.

The researchers were trained in intercultural research methodologies and technologies for recording and communicating information. The recording of cultural information most often takes place in malocas, where community elders share the ancient stories that are passed down from generation to generation. The young researchers, under the guidance of their elders, create maps and bilingual texts that describe the sacred sites, the territorial boundaries of each ethnic group, places signifying the origin of crops, and areas where hunting and fishing may and may not take place. The finalized maps and documents reflect a sophisticated knowledge that is evident from the communities’ own models of environmental governance and sustainable natural resource use. Research is a powerful tool because it helps communities work with the National Park Authorities to agree the most appropriate use of their ancestral lands, and come up with strategies to address the threats they have identified. By documenting creation myths, sacred sites, ecological/cultural calendars and permitted and taboo areas for use, the maps also demonstrate how indigenous knowledge systems and practices have created and instilled a sustainable, ethical, and comprehensive land use model that has flourished for thousands of years.

These results became the main inputs for producing the REM as well as for updating the Association’s ‘Life Plan’. The ‘Life Plan’ is an instrument for political and governance-related decision-making that permits AATIs to document their vision and objectives for the future based on a diagnosis of their current circumstances. It serves, in a sense, as a plan for organized social, cultural, economic, and environmental action based on ancestral knowledge. The legislation for the creation of the Parque Nacional Natural Yaigojé Apaporis, established that the REM would be developed in accordance with the knowledge and cultural principles of the indigenous communities living in the region. The results of the local research project therefore provide the core of this management model and should ideally guide all environmental management activities conducted within the park.
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Parque Nacional Natural Yaigojé Apaporis is Colombia’s third largest protected area, covering more than one million hectares of Amazonian rainforest in one of the most biodiverse areas on the planet. The park is home to nearly 1,700 vascular plants (33 of which are endemic to Colombia), 443 species of butterfly, 362 bird species, 201 fish species, 81 reptile species, 73 species of amphibian, and dozens of different kinds of mammals, including the vulnerable giant anteater (*Myrmecophaga tridactyla*) and the vulnerable lowland tapir (*Tapirus terrestris*).

The contribution of Parque Nacional Natural Yaigojé Apaporis to conservation is immense; it contains 18 ecosystems, of which seven are not represented in any other protected area, and six others that are insufficiently represented in existing protected areas. Regionally, it acts as a linchpin in a mosaic of indigenous *resguardos* and protected areas in the upper Amazon Basin. The forests in this complex of conserved lands sequester enormous amounts of carbon, playing an important role in climate regulation. They also contribute to the maintenance of ecological processes and hydrological functioning in the Amazon Basin.

Gold mining operations along the lower Apaporis River would have created habitat fragmentation, river siltation, and water pollution. Such an outcome would have endangered all 21 indigenous communities whose culture is based on Yuïsi’s sacred sites, and who rely upon the river for drinking water, bathing, fishing, and transportation. Furthermore, the lower Apaporis River contains a number of waterfalls and rapids which act as geographic barriers, impeding the dispersal of various aquatic and semi-aquatic species. Consequently, gold mining operations would also have adversely impacted the isolated populations of aquatic mammals in this area, including two species of freshwater dolphin (*Inia geoffrensis* and *Sotalia fluviatilis*), the endemic speckled caiman (*Caiman sclerops apaporiensis*), the endangered giant otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*), and the vulnerable Amazonian manatee (*Trichechus inunguis*).

SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

*Investments in local infrastructure*

ACIYA has devoted a significant amount of time and resources toward the creation of a decentralized, autonomous education system for the children in its communities. The organization has designed its own education programs and constructed a number of community schools to ensure that children are not separated from their families, their communities, or their culture. Community members collectively determine the philosophical, political, administrative, and pedagogical approaches used in the schools. The entire curriculum for each school is informed by the ACIYA General Education Plan, which is based on the Life Plan and takes the particularities of each ethnic group into account. Such an approach ensures that students learn about their cultural traditions and in their own languages, in addition to basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics.

ACIYA has likewise invested effort and resources in the construction of paths and bridges, which has improved the ease and safety of travel...
knowledge of soils, plants, seed varieties, and other land management practices provide invaluable inputs for the Régimen Especial de Manejo. This research has raised the profile of women’s roles within the Association and empowered women to engage in ongoing discussions relating to land use planning and design of the REM for Parque Nacional Natural Yaigojé Apaporis.

POLICY IMPACTS

ACIYA has significantly influenced policies relating to indigenous people in Colombia. ACIYA’s arduous fight to secure their ancestral lands, first as a resguardo indígena and then as a national park, has set an important legal precedent. Even though the creation of a national park is not viable in every indigenous territory – nor is this the ideal solution in many cases – it is important that other indigenous groups whose lands are threatened by mining companies now have a procedural template for protecting their lands, through agreeing arrangements for prior consultation, endogenous research on the cultural knowledge supporting the appropriate management of their territories, or applying for national park status. However, the Colombian government, as the owner of the subsoil, continues to encourage mining as a key element of the national economic strategy, and to back private-sector organizations for their efficiency in managing these activities, without an adequate strategic plan. Therefore, due to the consequences of both legal and illegal mining operations, the stage is set for further environmental and social conflicts in indigenous territories.

Parque Nacional Natural Yaigojé Apaporis is significant because it is the first national park in Colombia to implement an environmental management regime based on holistic, indigenous knowledge systems for land management. The use of ancestral knowledge in the running of the park has far-reaching repercussions for protected area policies, both within the country and worldwide.

Additionally, ACIYA demonstrates that Associations of Traditional Indigenous Authorities can act as service providers for their communities, in close cooperation and at par with government authorities. The 1991 Colombian constitution created the policy framework for the creation of AATIs as legally recognized public entities “of a special nature”, with administrative autonomy. By law, AATIs are able to enter into legal contracts, undertake commercial activities, and provide services to address education, health, and housing needs in partnership with national, municipal, and local governments. This unique policy framework has created a situation where AATIs can evolve to act as the primary drivers of local development, sustainable land management, and environmental conservation. There are currently 42 AATIs across the Colombian Amazon working to address the basic needs of the communities they serve, in a way that responds to their particular cultural characteristics. ACIYA’s example has the potential to serve as a policy model for indigenous self-governance throughout Colombia and across the Latin American region.

Lastly, formal protection of the more than one million hectares of forests in Yaigojé Apaporis supports Colombia’s international commitments to Reducing Emissions due to Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), the World Bank’s Forest Carbon Partnership Facility, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

GENDER IMPACTS

Indigenous women in the lower Apaporis River Basin have traditionally been responsible for food security and child and maternal health within their families. In preparation for the development of the Régimen Especial de Manejo for Parque Nacional Natural Yaigojé Apaporis, therefore, ACIYA also assembled teams of young women researchers and tasked them with documenting women’s land-management knowledge. The research focused primarily on procedures for the creation and tending of chaoras, with a particular emphasis on women’s knowledge of tending crops, zoning soils according to their suitability for different food crops, and inventories of seed varieties and the stories of their origins. Preservation of older women’s knowledge of seed varieties to improve yields and increase resistance to pests and adaptability to climate change is particularly important to food security in the area.

Through interviews, storytelling, and group meetings, older women and young researchers create illustrated notebooks documenting the maintenance of the chaoras and the use of medicinal and food plants. ACIYA hopes that, as well as contributing to the development of the REM, these materials can be reproduced and supplied to community schools in order to help preserve women’s knowledge, which is a local knowledge that has been passed down orally from generation to generation from time immemorial. Documentation of women’s
SUSTAINABILITY

ACIYA’s two primary goals, protection of ancestral lands and preservation of traditional knowledge, are the cornerstones of the long-term sustainability of the organization and the vitality of indigenous communities living alongside the Apaporis River. Formal designation of the Yaigojé Apaporis resguardo as a national park helps safeguard ACIYA communities from having their natural resources usurped by mining companies. Documentation of indigenous knowledge of the territory and land use and management practices, as the fundamental basis for the Park’s Régimen Especial de Manejo, validates local indigenous knowledge, laying the foundations for cultural self-determination both now and in the future. Full and transparent participation of all 21 communities bolsters the initiative’s social sustainability and strengthens the traditional leaders’ mission to address the most urgent priorities according to community need. Finally, the training and education received by the young men and women who take part in the research programs is laying a firm foundation for the future leadership of ACIYA.

The progress that ACIYA has made since it was founded over twenty years ago is commendable, but the organization still requires technical support and additional funding to consolidate its impressive results. The considerable length of time that it has taken the ACIYA to achieve this positive impact reveals the difficulty of sustaining initiatives that require more time to develop than the three years that many donors’ funding cycles typically allow.

REPLICATION

The research methodology for incorporating traditional knowledge into the management of natural resources and sacred sites used by ACIYA was piloted by the Asociación de Capitanes y Autoridades Tradicionales Indígenas del río Pirá Paraná (ACAIP, Association of Chiefs and Traditional Authorities of the River Pirá Paraná). ACIYA has since successfully replicated this experience, and similar methodologies have been used by other indigenous organizations in the Colombian Amazon: Asociación de Capitanes Indígenas del Mirití Amazonas (ACIMA, Association of Indigenous Chiefs of the Mirití Amazonas) and Asociación de Autoridades Tradicionales Indígenas de la Zona del Río Tiquie (AATIZOT, Association of Traditional Indigenous Authorities of the River Tiquie Area). The successful use of this integrated approach to natural resource management in diverse indigenous communities throughout the Colombian Amazon indicates that it is highly replicable and can serve as a model for other indigenous groups throughout Colombia. In this respect, ACIYA actively works to share and promote their work with other indigenous groups in Colombia and elsewhere in South America.
PARTNERS

• The Gaia Amazonas Foundation has supported the communities of the Apaporis since the 1990s, and has provided technical support and advice for the creation of the AATIA, the establishment of the resguardo, the decentralization of education services, and the creation of the national park. It is currently advising ACIYA and ACITAVA as they work to further develop the research program.

• The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation provides funding for the research programs aimed at informing the Régimen Especial de Manejo for Parque Nacional Natural Yaigojé Apaporis.

• Sistema Nacional de Parques Nacionales Naturales (Colombia’s National Parks Authority) is ACIYA’s most important government partner and provides the group with technical and logistical support for carrying out certain programs. Additional governmental partners include the Government of the Amazonas Department and the Colombian Departmental Secretaries of Education and Health.
FURTHER REFERENCE

- Parque Nacional Natural Yaigojé Apaporis (Yaigojé Apaporis National Natural Park) Website. Available online [here](#).
- Gaia Amazonas Website. Available online [here](#).
- Mendoza, Gabriel (Reporting Judge), Pinilla, Nilson (Judge), PALACIO, Jorge Iván (Judge), and Sachica, Martha (Clerk). Ruling T-384 A, June 17, 2014.