Title **To view the original PDF of this World Birdwatch article,** click here. Mexico?s protected areas often include human settlements, with a great diversity of cultures and traditions of land management and natural resource use. The people who use these ecosystems also play an important part in maintaining them. For Pronatura, BirdLife?s Mexican Affiliate, it is essential to have a variety of strategies to make the most of traditional knowledge and technology, and to complement them with good conservation science and development practice. Currently Pronatura and its six regional organisations have just eight Important Bird Area (IBA)-Local Conservation Groups (LCGs), with three more being developed. Neither Pronatura Sur nor Pronatura Península de Yucatán (PPY) has a formal LCG network, but all their conservation work involves the active participation of the people who own or manage natural resources in their communities or private lands. ?Working with local conservation groups is not just a branch of our work, but the cross-cutting axis of most of our activities?, explains Rosa María Vidal, Executive Director of Pronatura Sur. ?As we say, ?our priority is the people who have nature as a priority?.? Similarly, PPY works with different social groups to promote the sustainable use and management of natural resources. ?Most of the more valuable land in terms of biodiversity is in the hands of rural communities and *ejidos*?, says María Andrade, Executive Director of PPY. *Ejidos* are the communally-held lands of a village, with a traditional system of use rights and tenure. ?To the extent that communities receive a tangible benefit for conserving them, *ejidos* are predisposed to be preserved and used in a sustainable way.? Pronatura Sur has campaigned hard to defend the rights of protected area communities to continue to extract natural resources, and has developed agreements and management practices which ensure these harvests are sustainable. The *ejido* Tierra y Libertad is part of the buffer zone of the La Sepultura Biosphere Reserve IBA, in the Sierra Madre de Chiapas. In the late 1990s, the *ejido* assembly applied to the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAP) for a licence to carry out logging in the pine-oak forest. A ten-year licence was granted, but suspended after only one year when checks by SEMARNAP revealed ?irregularities? in compliance. Despite this setback, groups of *ejidatarios* who were determined to find a way of continuing to use the community-owned forests came up with a system of self-regulation. Developed with the support of Pronatura Sur, this enabled Tierra y Libertad to get a new licence for forest use. Working with the directors of the Biosphere Reserve, Pronatura Sur and the community produced a plan for low-impact logging in areas of high biodiversity and ecological value, based on systematic monitoring of harvestable trees in harvesting areas. It was the first time that this system, originally developed by Pronatura for the tropical forests of the Yucatan Peninsula, had been implemented in temperate forests. A community-run technical office has been set up at Tierra y Libertad, which integrates the management of timber extraction, *palma camedor* cultivation (see box), and production of organic shade-grown coffee. Pronatura Sur has participated in meetings of the *ejido?s* advisory council, where they noted the high level of commitment to the protection of the watershed and ecosystem services, informed by the experience people have acquired during the various projects. Pronatura Sur supported the establishment of a state-wide organisation of forest users, including 42 *ejidos* and some private landowners. This organisation was able to defeat a proposed ban on logging in the state of Chiapas, by proving that the forestry practiced by the *ejidos* is sustainable and technically well-managed. Pronatura Península de Yucatán has been working for 20 years on projects focused on conservation and sustainable use of natural resources in eight protected areas. The groups they work with are very diverse, including young people, adults and old people, indigenous Maya and settlers, *ejidos*, cooperatives, women?s group and others who have defined their own need for training in activities that both provide steady incomes, and conserve their natural resources for future generations. Next to oil exploitation in the state of Campeche, tourism makes the biggest contribution to the Yucatan Peninsula?s economy. But conventional tourism, with its infrastructure of roads and urban development and its demand for energy, has led to deforestation, habitat fragmentation, pollution and overexploitation of natural resources. For the last ten years, PPY has been developing a more sustainable form of tourism, by training people living in protected areas to become nature guides. The community of Celestún is one of two in the Ria Celestún Biosphere Reserve IBA, which contains large areas of the best-preserved coastal wetlands in the western Yucatan Peninsula, with over 300 resident and migratory bird species. Celestún is famous for its flamingos and other waterfowl, and every year receives more than 40,000 tourists. In the late 1980s, groups of fishermen began offering tours to see flamingos. By 1998, there were seven such groups. But the majority lacked the skills to sustain their businesses. During 1997, PPY analysed tourist activity and found that there was a demand for trained bilingual guides. In response, they co-developed a teaching methodology, ?English with a specific purpose?. Students lived and studied together for two or three

months in a secluded environment. The courses, designed for rural adults with a basic education, consisted of 500-700 hours of practical experience in conversational English, local natural history and nature interpretation. The original training methodology proved too expensive and too onerous for people not used to sustained periods of study. PPY has devised a new version, which after basic training leads on to specialised courses to obtain government certification, and guidelines on research projects and bird monitoring. The training programme has been replicated at two other protected areas. Bird guides trained at Celestún acted as instructors on courses at Calakmul, in southern Campeche state. One-fifth of Calakmul?s 23,000 inhabitants live within the boundaries of the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve IBA and Balamkú State Reserve, and more than half in the buffer zone. Together totalling more than 1,200,000 ha of forest in very good conservation condition, the Calakmul reserves form the most important area for land birds in south-eastern Mexico. The forests are a key part of the hydrological system for the whole Yucatan Peninsula, helping maintain the water supply for five million people. BirdLife International has identified the ?Maya Forest? of Calakmul as one of its Forests of Hope. The mix of cultures at Calakmul makes patterns of natural resource use very complex. The region has a mosaic of indigenous ethnic groups, plus settlers from 23 other states. With partner organisations such as the National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR), PPY has begun a process of integrated natural resources planning at the community level, in priority areas for biodiversity conservation. Although most projects lack long-term funding, PPY develops programmes to maintain their activities for at least three years; Pronatua Sur aims for at least ten years. After this, the communities should be empowered to continue with conservation and sustainable use activities by themselves **Case Study** Pronatura Sur works with local people to ensure that harvesting non-timber forest products does not damage the unique biodiversity of the Sierra Madre de Chiapas. *Palma camedor* (?parlour palm?, *Chamaedorea* spp.), an ornamental plant with a lucrative international market, once played an important role in local livelihoods. But over-exploitation and mismanagement have reduced natural stocks, compounded by conversion of the plant?s humid montane forest habitat to coffee plantations. *Palma camedor* is a shade-adapted plant that can be readily propagated in nurseries and reintroduced to natural forest. Pronatura Sur is working with people from five *ejidos* to restore the palm to its former place in the local economy. The project covers a total of 15,000 ha in the El Triunfo IBA, and over 5000 ha in La Sepultura IBA. The project could not go ahead until the general assembly of each *ejido* had granted the rights for the land to be used. A participatory management plan for the palm was developed, and Pronatura has trained ?brigade leaders? to collect monitoring data. Pronatura technicians check the quality of data, and contribute ideas on management and marketing strategies. With Pronatura?s support, the five community-based palm organisations, plus two others interested in palm management, have created a regional body to give them greater weight in negotiating land concessions, and advocating changes in the law favourable to palm farming. Working with the communities, Pronatara has developed a technical diploma programme covering palm nurseries, administration, marketing, commercial issues and monitoring. The courses are delivered by the ?palm managers? of the communities.
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