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Carbon-Offset Conservation in the Chocó

by Autumn Spanne

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Environment

On a sweltering June afternoon, Afro-Colombian community leader Aureliano Córdoba led a small expedition into the tropical rainforest of the Chocó, a region that extends hundreds of miles along Colombia's Pacific coast. Córdoba walked the group through the jungle, pointing out how his people were already managing tens of thousands of acres of rainforest threatened by neighboring ranches and logging. The forest teemed with life; birds shrieked and insects droned while small brown *cangrejos*, or forest crabs, scuttled along the exposed roots of towering trees. The group paused to admire a striking yellow and black frog, one of potentially dozens of this forest's endemic inhabitants that have yet to be scientifically identified.

The Chocó rainforest is one of the most biologically diverse places on earth, but an alarming rate of deforestation now threatens the region's unique ecosystems as well as the traditional black and indigenous communities that have been stewards of this land for hundreds of years. In response, residents from a network of about three dozen traditional Afro-Colombian communities, collectively known as Cocomasur, are participating in an innovative conservation program that they hope will both curb deforestation and affirm their legal right to the land.

Córdoba, Cocomasur's legal representative, and the communities are working with a for-profit start-up in Medellín called Anthroctect to develop the Chocó-Darién Conservation Corridor, a 30-year project whereby the Cocomasur communities will sell carbon credits on the international voluntary carbon market in exchange for preserving their forests. Their carbon-offset project is based on the United Nations' model for mitigating climate change, known as Reducing Emissions From Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), and it is set to become one of the first projects of its kind in the world to sell credits for protecting virgin rainforest rather than replanting land that's already been deforested. The communities hope to begin selling carbon credits on the international market later this year, with average annual revenue expected to be close to \$750,000, according to Anthroctect founder and director Brodie Ferguson. They plan to reinvest revenues in an array of activities to protect biodiversity, develop other environmentally sustainable businesses, and improve local governance and infrastructure.

The Cocomasur communities view the project as a rare opportunity to take control of their own economic development while protecting their forest and traditional way of life, after decades of violence and displacement.

Between 1995 and 1998, the municipality of Acandí, where Cocomasur is located, became a flashpoint in the conflict between the left-wing Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and right-wing paramilitary groups battling for control of lands that were the traditional territories of indigenous and Afro-Colombians. Between a quarter and a third of Cocomasur residents fled.

As in other parts of western Colombia at the time, paramilitary organizations began acquiring Afro-descendant lands through force or by offering an attractive price to desperate people who feared the consequences of resisting. Their forests were lucrative drug- and weapon-trafficking corridors to the coasts. Once cleared, they were prime territory for profitable large-scale agriculture and cattle-ranching operations. With dwindling economic alternatives, communities also turned to logging to make ends meet.

As the violence subsided in the early 2000s, some residents who remained in Cocomasur applied for the collective title to their lands, a right conceded to Afro-Colombian communities



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under Colombia's 1991 constitution. In 2005, the Colombian government granted the communities roughly 33,000 acres of their traditional territory, an area significantly smaller than what they had traditionally inhabited.¹ It was nonetheless an important achievement: Collective ownership—on paper, at least—provided an opportunity to start rebuilding their communities with an autonomous local governing council and begin considering new economic development options that, without a legally recognized right to the land, weren't previously possible.

Nevertheless, the effects of violence, political corruption, and environmental degradation have taken a heavy toll on the region's predominantly Afro-Colombian population. Today, evidence of the land grabs are clearly visible in wide, boggy cattle pastures carved out of the flat land between the largest of the Cocomasur villages, Peñaloza, and the edge of the rainforest. Despite Chocó's natural-resource wealth, the poverty rate there exceeds 70%, according to figures compiled by the government's National Planning Department, making it one of the poorest regions of Colombia.² Poor Chocoanos have little access to basic infrastructure and social services, education, employment, and political decision-making. State neglect also leaves many areas of the Chocó vulnerable to control by the FARC and neo-paramilitary groups that evolved after the Colombian government's official demobilization of the country's main paramilitary organization, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), in 2005.

Violence, displacement, and geographic isolation make the Chocó one of the most challenging places in Latin America to do conservation work. That is exactly what attracted Brodie Ferguson to the region. In 2005, Ferguson, then a Stanford University graduate student in anthropology, first visited Colombia to study the effects of conflict and displacement on rural Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities in the Chocó. While doing his dissertation research, he concluded that carbon offsets could be used to help these communities manage their own economic development and protect their cultural values.

Ferguson founded Anthrotect in 2007, piecing together start-up funds from individual investors, the sale of family real estate, and loans from friends and family. In 2009 he met Córdoba and proposed the forest carbon project. They held meetings to gauge the community's interest, and residents were intrigued: Generating income from conservation could eliminate the need to further degrade their forest and create an opportunity to reinvest the profits in other sustainable, community-run businesses.

Ferguson assembled a team of employees and volunteers, both from and outside the community, and began to organize meetings in every Cocomasur village. They trained locals to lead workshops explaining the concepts of climate change and carbon offsets, and continue to convene meetings to update residents and invite people to present their own ideas on how to reinvest the shared revenues—"Collective rights, collective benefits" is Cocomasur's motto.

About half of Anthrotect's 37 employees are from Cocomasur communities, working as full- and part-time administrators, forest technicians, monitors who patrol for illegal logging, workshop facilitators who teach other community members about climate change, and even cooks who take turns preparing meals for workers. The idea is to have diverse ways for people to contribute their skills and share a sense of ownership, said Everildys Córdoba, the project's community coordinator.

Most employees receive technical training, which makes the positions even more desirable in Cocomasur, where there are few employment options. And people are excited about the project jobs, said Córdoba, because they realize they are working for a common cause: improving their quality of life and protecting their traditions.

"To see the happiness on the faces of every member of the community when the opportunity for employment arrived is something inexplicable," Córdoba said. "Our [role] in the project doesn't matter. We all support, participate, work, and benefit from the work that we're doing."

Among those who are already seeing benefits from the project is Derlys Becerra, who was raised in Peñaloza but left to continue her education; the village school only went up to fifth grade. She was hired by Anthrotect and trained to lead community workshops about climate change.

"This project is nothing new for our community," said Becerra with a smile, referring to the fact that the people of Cocomasur had always lived close to the land and practiced traditional forest management. "But I didn't know that conserving [our forest] is helping with climate change."

Anthrotect's community-focused approach to REDD is far from the norm. Carbon offsetting has earned a bad reputation in many parts of Latin America, where its social and economic implications for local- communities are often an after-thought. In 2010, Global Forest Coalition (GFC), which comprises international NGOs and indigenous groups that advocate for the rights of forest peoples, released a report documenting negative social and environmental impacts associated with carbon markets in Colombia and elsewhere in South America.³

The report noted that carbon traders—some working for NGOs and some acting on their own behalf—have in the past several years approached indigenous, campesino, and Afro-Colombian communities with contracts to "sell oxygen" on the international market. In response, Colombia's environment ministry issued statements alerting communities to possible scams.

"These 'carbon cowboys,' " the GFC report stated, "are offering projects in exchange for the signing of contracts that hand over the right to make decisions about the territory and the corresponding heritage and resources, and/or negotiating on behalf of the communities with a view to managing the funds derived from any carbon-trading ventures."

Similar incidents have been reported throughout Latin America. In many cases, communities

receive little information about how REDD works and how it may restrict their ability to carry out wood harvesting and other traditional livelihood activities. Critics also raise questions about how revenues are distributed, especially when a project involves cash payments to individuals or families, without a larger plan for community reinvestment. Others criticize a lack of community involvement in the development and implementation of REDD projects.

"While it seems like an interesting proposal to fix economic value on preservation, there are many human rights and social justice concerns," said Jacob Kopas, a Bogotá-based attorney who works with the nonprofit Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense. Kopas pointed out, however, that carbon offsets are not the only types of projects that raise such concerns. He said big conservation and sustainable-development projects managed by NGOs and development agencies also have a record of failing to gain the required prior consent and meaningful involvement of communities, especially in places with a weak state presence and a legacy of discrimination.

Kopas noted that REDD is evolving, and community benefits are figuring more into project design. Once the legal framework of REDD has been finalized through the UN, he predicted, there will be an explosion of REDD start-ups. The question, he said, is how many will truly include the communities most affected.

While Ferguson acknowledges that offsets are not a perfect solution, he contends there is far more potential in Anthrotect's model for REDD than in the predominant alternative: the leasing of Afro-Colombian lands to big banana, palm oil, and timber companies for a modest royalty. These companies tend to deplete natural resources without offering any say in project management or opportunities for meaningful community investment. But Ferguson also knows that the prospect of quick revenue is compelling to poor communities with few economic options.

"What we have to do is combine a collective REDD project with a collective vision for long-term autonomy—sustainable agriculture, reforestation, something that's consistent with this overall sustainable-development model but provides some profit in the short and medium term," said Ferguson, speaking from his Medellín office in June 2011 after a series of community meetings in Cocomasur.

Ferguson hopes the Chocó-Darién Conservation Corridor will become a model for inclusivity and integration of traditional land management.

"Mainstream society and government have yet to recognize the forest for its true value and have long rejected the value of forest-dependent communities, their knowledge, traditional values, and way of life," he said. "Our approach is about showing that there is an alternative."

Earlier this year, the Chocó-Darién Conservation Corridor received gold-level certification from the Climate, Community and Biodiversity Alliance, founded in 2003 by several major environmental NGOs, including the Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, and the Rainforest Alliance, to place more emphasis on biodiversity and socio-economic benefits in forest protection.

In Cocomasur, employees receive salaries, but the project plan does not provide cash payouts to individuals or families. Instead, Anthrotect will share 50% of net revenues from carbon-credit sales with communities to reinvest in other conservation projects, sustainable businesses, and local infrastructure and services.

The plan is for Cocomasur to eventually take over management of the project, and that will require developing capacity and expertise among Anthrotect employees and community leaders. Over the next three to four years, Anthrotect will also work with Cocomasur to consider additional projects and finance the most promising with carbon revenues supplemented by public and private funding. Part of the funding will support aspiring entrepreneurs from the communities.

According to Everildys Córdoba, every community has a different idea of how to reinvest the revenues. The village of Tibirre imagines a community-owned artisanal mining operation that uses more traditional, environmentally friendly extraction techniques. Playona, situated next to a nesting ground for the endangered leatherback sea turtle, wants to strengthen local turtle research, education, and conservation. Others hope to improve social services: start a health clinic, implement solid-waste-management projects to avoid contaminating their river, and construct parks and sporting areas for youth.

One priority for the communities is to organize a local logging cooperative. Cocomasur has permits to harvest commercially valuable wood on less than 2% of its territory. It's a chance to design the kind of logging operation that's rare in the Chocó: a sustainable, community-run enterprise that lets Cocomasur negotiate directly with buyers and get a fairer price without having to work through middlemen who often control distribution and, in many cases, have connections to armed groups.

Ferguson predicts that working simultaneously on infrastructure, employment opportunities, and sustainability will improve local governance and help communities be less vulnerable to armed groups. That's something he hopes Anthrotect will be able to replicate beyond Cocomasur in the other Afro-Colombian territories, which together hold over 12 million acres of collective lands.

But the ongoing conflict poses a significant challenge to expanding Anthrotect's model. Things are relatively calm in Cocomasur at the moment, but as in the rest of Chocó and the neighboring provinces, circumstances can change rapidly, and armed groups are quick to identify new financial opportunities.

Experts from the U.S.-based human rights organization Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), who have closely followed how the internal armed conflict unfolded in Chocó, say the economic interests of illegal armed groups have diversified since the main paramilitary group, the Elmer Cárdenas bloc of the AUC, demobilized in Chocó. Rival remnant paramilitary groups and guerrillas have been pushed into areas where they are on top of one another,

battling over territory not just in remote areas but increasingly in larger towns like Quibdó, the capital of Chocó.

Although Chocó has historically suffered periods of acute conflict and violence, it has never experienced this layering of all the groups at once, according to Gimena Sánchez, WOLA's senior associate for the Andean region. This has led to repeated displacements in some parts of the region. Elsewhere, armed groups restrict the movements of entire communities.

The result, Sánchez said, is that all economic activities surrounding the access routes for drugs and arms—including extraction of natural resources—are potential sources of income for illegal armed groups. Residents are frequently extorted and forced to pay security "taxes," or a portion of what they harvest, to these groups. Such illegal economic activities are enabled by the corruption of civilian, military, and other authorities.

Any economic enterprise in the region is likely to have some dealings with armed groups, said Kopas, because of their hold over distribution of goods and power to force communities to accept their terms.

"If you have bananas being controlled in this way, they'll pick up on carbon credits real fast. If you don't have state control, whatever local presence is there is completely co-opted by armed actors," he said. "If [Anthroctect] can figure out a good set of models and do it in Chocó, they can pretty much do it anywhere in Latin America."

Ferguson is well aware of the influence that the FARC and paramilitary groups continue to exert in the area, with the use of curfews, occasional work stoppages, and pressure to support particular political candidates. His hope is that transparency and careful management and auditing of funds through a third-party NGO—the Colombian Fund for Environmental Action—will minimize opportunities for armed groups to intercept project revenues and other funds.

Despite the obstacles, Cocomasur residents believe they are embarking on something that will improve quality of life and spur economic development, on their own terms. They want legitimacy—to protect what remains of their traditional territory and to use it sustainably in a way that benefits the entire community.

"The Chocó-Darién Conservation Corridor isn't the [entire] solution," said Everildys Córdoba, "but it's the platform for Cocomasur, because with the resources from the sale of carbon credits, we can take actions to achieve a greater awareness of our collective identity and land rights."

Autumn Spanne is an independent journalist who writes about climate change, biodiversity, and environmental justice. She has an M.S. from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism.

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For more on this topic read: **[Reducing Emissions From Deforestation and Forest Degradation \(REDD\)](#)**.

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