



## Guatecarbon Jurisdictional REDD+ CASE STUDY

This case highlights the experience of the Guatecarbon REDD+ Project in the forest community concessions of Petén, Guatemala, as an example of how best practices can be adopted to avoid deforestation and mitigate climate change, as well as how community land holders of the Maya Biosphere Reserve — who have yet to receive title recognition to their lands and emissions reductions — pioneered their participation in the voluntary carbon market and jurisdictional REDD+ programs.

### I. Summary

The Guatecarbon REDD+ Project, designed and implemented by local communities in the Maya Biosphere Reserve in the Department of Petén, Guatemala, emerged in a context lacking legislation on climate change or a national REDD+ strategy, which created various challenges for community forest communities regarding carbon rights and the sale of carbon credits given that the implementation of the project was to be carried out on state lands.

Despite the obstacles, the model of community forestry defied expectations. Initially, many doubted the communities' ability to manage the forests. Moreover, the lack of legislative frameworks or standards on REDD+, and no clarity on carbon ownership rights made it difficult for the project to take off. Nevertheless, the project has proven to be a resounding success nationally and internationally, not only in forest management, the conservation of carbon sinks, and the generation of emissions reductions, but in laying the foundations for the national strategy and the development of REDD+ policies in Guatemala.

The experience of Guatecarbon, through its success, has highlighted the need and feasibility of adopting best practices in the marketing of carbon credits. The absence of such practices could not only jeopardize the integrity of this project, it could have a concerning ripple effect on communities'

rights to carbon as well as the distribution of benefits coming from the voluntary carbon market and/or jurisdictional REDD+ programs more broadly. Furthermore, the potential applicability and replication of these learnings are key in a context where social integrity issues are impacting the rapidly growing sector worldwide.

II. Project History

The *Asociación De Comunidades Forestales De Petén* (ACOFOP), or Forest Communities Association of Petén, has been working since 1995 for the protection and sustainable management of the Maya Biosphere Reserve, located in Petén, Guatemala. As the Guatecarbon REDD+ Project took shape, ACOFOP would later serve as the representative organization of all the forest concessionary communities that would participate in the program.

From 1995 to 2002, ACOFOP led work alongside the National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP), Guatemala's governing

body for Protected Areas, to acquire 13 community forest concessions covering 490,829 hectares of forest.

In 2006, together with CONAP, ACOFOP and the concession holders promoted the development of the Guatecarbon REDD+ Project, which aimed to promote and incentivize forest protection, as well as to support community development to reduce pressures on the forest through strengthening community forest enterprises and other sources of sustainable income within the concessions.

The total area of the Multiple Use Zone of the Maya Biosphere Reserve is 721,000 hectares, of which nearly 500,000 are part of ACOFOP's community forestry model and represent the Guatecarbon REDD+ Project, as shown in Figure 1.

Six years after its establishment, 2012 was declared as the official start date of the Guatecarbon REDD+ Project. Two years later, it had already generated positive results for Guatemala, reducing 1.2 million tons of CO2 during the period 2012-2014 – verified and validated under the Climate, Community & Biodiversity Standards (CCB) and Verified Carbon Standard (VCS) of Verra – thanks

to the efforts to reduce deforestation and degradation in the project area.

These achievements marked a crucial step in the work carried out by local communities for over 20 years to contribute to emissions reductions, as well as the reduction of deforestation and forest degradation.

Project Benefits

Emissions reductions projected at 6 million tons of CO2 over a period of 10 years, and 37 million tons over 30 years.

Improvement in the quality of life for local communities involved in forest conservation.

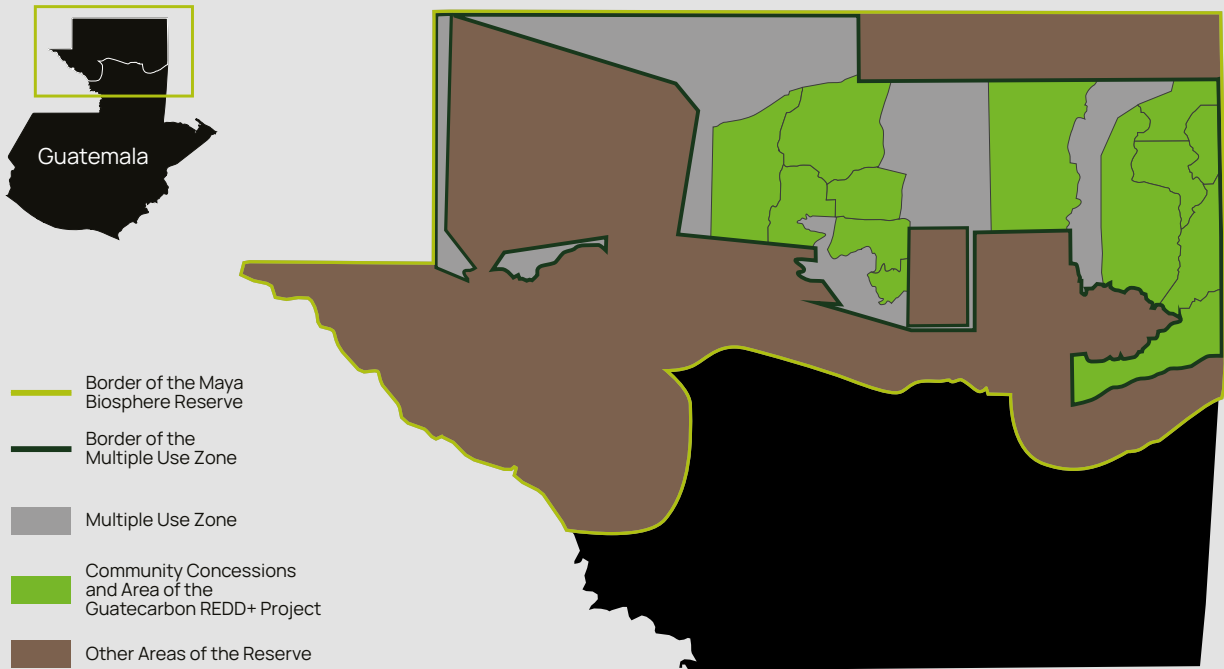
Strengthening community capacities for the prevention and fight against forest fires.

Promotion and development of community-based tourism.

Strengthening the sustainable production of timber and non-timber forest products such as ramón nuts and xate palm.

Investments in the health and education sectors.

Figure 1. Map of the Guatecarbon REDD+ Project



III. Conflict Over the Carbon Credits of the Project: Who Holds the Rights?

The enactment of the Climate Change Law in Guatemala in 2013, specifically article 22, established the first legal framework on “the rights of ownership and negotiation” of carbon as well as the carbon certificates<sup>1</sup> generated by projects in the country’s voluntary forest carbon market, and the new so-called “Jurisdictional Emissions Reductions Program” (or PRE), as part of the semi-regulated market. However, the legislation as written presented a serious limitation for Guatecarbon’s forest communities, particularly in claiming the rights and benefits from carbon transactions, as the law only recognized private owners, legal land holders<sup>2</sup>, and the government itself as the legitimate owners of carbon certificates or credits. The law did not take into account the community consultations conducted to draft the articles related to the topic nor did it properly define the term ‘holder’.

Under the existing legal framework, the local communities of the Guatecarbon REDD+ Project – as concessionaires – were merely titleholders for the management and use of natural resources, while the state retained ownership of the land. Under the new law, by not applying the term ‘holder’ to concession holders, the state maintained rights to the land, and therefore its carbon. Despite the fact that the Government of Guatemala through competent authority transferred the rights to protect, monitor, use, and manage its natural resources for more than 25 years via concessions,

<sup>1</sup> Carbon titles refer to rights to carbon, while certificates are documents providing tangible evidence of actual reductions in carbon emissions, often verified through environmental projects, which aim to reduce or offset emissions.

<sup>2</sup> Under Guatemalan law, carbon ownership belongs to the owner or ‘holder’ (through the various legal entities recognized), which is to say the person with a fair title that allows them to participate in negotiations in the voluntary and regulated carbon market. In the particular case of the ‘holder’, the document certifying legitimate possession must recognize the effective ownership and right to conduct any type of negotiation on carbon emission reduction units and carbon certificates, obtaining the benefits directly and not through the owner, who, where appropriate, assigned that right through a specific legal instrument (National REDD+ Strategy Guatemala 2020).



the concessionaires were unable to become legitimate owners of the rights to its carbon or credits.

The successful verification of the Guatcarbon REDD+ Project in 2017, under the CCB and VCS standards of Verra, generated high expectations among forest communities for receiving benefits from carbon credits. However, the lack of clarity and political will between the state and the community forest concessions regarding the ownership of carbon credits hindered delivery of the expected benefits for more than 19 years.

That recognizes the rights of the communities over the environmental services provided by their forests and, therefore, over the associated carbon credits. The main activities carried out included:

- » Forming the governance committee for the Guatcarbon REDD+ Project, with participation from representatives of the community forest concessions as well as the Costa Rican government, to make decisions about the sale of carbon credits.
- » Actively participating in workshops and in dialogue and engagement opportunities at the territorial level for the development of the *National Strategy for Addressing Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Guatemala*.
- » Preparing the *Evaluation and Management of Environmental and Social Risks and Impacts (SESA)* for the Guatcarbon REDD+ Project with the Government of Guatemala and the World Bank, through risk assessment, identifying mitigation measures, and management tools, including the importance of renewing the community forest concessions for another 25 years, and balancing the distribution of benefits between forest communities and the government.
- » Facilitating and producing technical and legal data on the environmental services generated through the community forest concessions to the Government of Guatemala in order to promote the argument that carbon rights do not depend strictly on land ownership but also on those holding land and the individual or legal entity that implements activities.

- » Reviewing and engaging as ACOFOP with the 'Proposals for the Benefit Distribution Plan' of Guatemala's PRE. This framework allowed ACOFOP to emphasize the community members' rights over the potential carbon credits generated as a condition for the voluntary participation of the Guatcarbon REDD+ Project concessionaires in the Program.
- » Joint engagement with the government in the development of safeguards documents for the PRE, ensuring the inclusion of the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities.
- » Engaging directly as ACOFOP as well as hiring technical and legal experts to analyze carbon rights in Guatemala and under the project. This led to the development of four versions of legal frameworks with CONAP, which were never adopted due to a lack of political will.
- » Engaging and advocating in dialogues with the Ministry of Public Finance and the Congress of the Republic of Guatemala to establish a legal entity in the Decree 20-2020 that would guarantee carbon rights are not tied exclusively to land ownership, but to those implementing forest management—proposals built on the legal and technical work and legislative drafts prepared in partnership with CONAP.

After years of struggle, the perseverance and conviction of forest communities paid off in 2020. Decree 20-2020 from the Congress of the Republic, as part of the signing of Emissions Reduction Payment Agreements (ERPAs) with the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF), marked the inclusion of an "implementer" legal entity as a beneficiary of Guatemala's PRE. This provision recognized, for the first time, the fundamental work of the forest communities in achieving emissions reductions, regardless of their link to land ownership.



In 2020, for the first time, the fundamental work of the forest communities in achieving emissions reductions was recognized, regardless of their link to land ownership.

This achievement represented a crucial step toward climate justice and sets an important precedent for other forest communities around the world.

After over 19 years, these communities achieved legal recognition to receive payments directly linked to the carbon credits generated by their forest conservation efforts.

In 2024, ACOFOP submitted a filing on behalf of the concessionaires to the Government of Guatemala to enable the Guatcarbon REDD+ Project to be eligible to receive benefits under the PRE, presenting the community forest concessionaires now as project "implementers".

This filing was accepted by the PRE and has been registered through a resolution of compliance with the management plan, where the issuance of a carbon emissions reduction certificate is ordered for the credits generated from 2020 to 2024 within the framework of the PRE.

The file has been accepted by the PRE and has been registered through a resolution of compliance with the management plan, which orders the issuance of a carbon emissions reduction certificate for the credits that were generated for the period of 2020.

It is estimated that the disbursement that the concessionaires of this project could receive for the actions carried out in 2020 could exceed 5 million US dollars, with payment for the periods 2021-2022 and 2023-2024 still pending.

#### IV. Governance and Benefit Distribution of the Project

Since its inception in 2006, the Guatcarbon REDD+ Project has prioritized the equitable distribution of benefits among the forest communities involved. Through a participatory and democratic process, mechanisms have been established to ensure that the benefits generated by carbon credits are shared in a fair and transparent manner.

In 2023, prior to submitting the application for eligibility under Guatemala's PRE, a

process of awareness raising of the project and the PRE was carried out with each and every concessionaire covered under the Guatcarbon REDD+ Project, who are the holders of the emissions reductions rights.

Among the meetings held over the course of this process, two were of great significance. During the first of these, seven basic agreements were reached, one of which was an agreement to provide non-monetary benefits under the project.

In the second meeting, a governance body was formed for the project, now under the framework of the PRE, consisting of all the holders, which would be responsible for making decisions on the distribution of benefits. It was also agreed that some of the benefits could be monetary, such as a payroll payment for day laborers, where the amount would be transferred to the beneficiary (holder) who would be responsible for making the corresponding payments. Finally, all participants unanimously agreed to guarantee an equitable distribution of benefits, regardless of the size of the forest concessions.

These agreements were formalized in a notarized agreement—signed by all the participants in the project—and serve as the foundation for the implementation of the project.

#### Requirements to Participate

In 2023, the criteria for participating in the benefits of the Guatcarbon REDD+ Project was established. The forest communities associated with ACOFOP who wished to participate had to meet the following requirements:

- **Ownership:** Be the holder of a community forest concession (implementer).
- **Voluntariness:** Express a clear interest in participating in the project.
- **Acceptance of Agreements:** Accept the agreements established in the notarized agreement.





Composed of all the holders of community concessions and the Board of Directors of ACOFOP, the Governance Body of the Guatecarbon REDD+ Project makes strategic decisions for the project and oversees the management of the funds. It is one of three bodies within the project, designed to ensure transparency and equity in the distribution of benefits.

### Governance

The Guatecarbon REDD+ Project has a robust and participatory governance system, designed to ensure transparency and equity in the distribution of benefits.

This system is based on three main bodies:

- **Governance Body:** Composed of all the holders of the emissions reductions, this body makes strategic decisions for the project and oversees the management of the funds. The holders are those who have implemented emissions reductions activities and hold the necessary legal permits.
- **Benefit Distribution Committee:** Responsible for verifying that the processes for purchasing and distributing benefits are carried out according to the decisions made by the governance body.
- **Fund Manager:** The Association of Forest Communities of Petén (ACOFOP) was designated as the fund manager for the project, responsible for financial management and overseeing the established processes.

### Participation Mechanisms and Decision-Making

To ensure participation from all holders, the following mechanisms have been established:

- **Notarized Agreements:** Notarized agreements have been signed, in which the holders express their willingness to participate in the project and accept the established agreements.

- **Special Mandates:** The holders have granted special mandates to ACOFOP to represent them in project-related activities.
- **Governance Body:** All important decisions are made collectively by the governance body, ensuring transparency and equity.

### Transparency and Accountability

The financial management of the project is subject to rigorous controls and audits. All documents supporting the ownership of the emissions reductions, the agreements between the rightsholders and ACOFOP, as well as the financial reports, are available for review.

The rightsholders of emissions reductions and beneficiaries of the Guatecarbon REDD+ Project have agreed, by consensus, to distribute 100% of the benefits that correspond to them internally across the components of the project to achieve the goals of reducing deforestation and generating sustainable development. The benefits will be distributed as follows: 64.5% to communities (through the concessionaires), 22.5% to the territories (through CONAP), and 13% for the financial and administrative management (through ACOFOP).

The Guatecarbon REDD+ Project has also made a series of arrangements since 2011 regarding the distribution of non-monetary benefits. The project's executing unit makes purchases of goods and services that will be necessary to reduce deforestation based on an operational plan (purchase of equipment and uniforms, fire equipment, spare parts, machinery, etc.), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Benefit Distribution Across Project Components

Component	Activities	%
Community	Protection: Forest protection activities, such as monitoring and surveillance, forest fire prevention and control, joint patrols, etc.	64.50%
	Social: support for social benefits such as education, health, water, sanitation, etc.	
	Production: Support for small and medium-sized forest enterprises, forest management, equipment, sawmills, transportation, marketing, value-added products, etc.	
Territory	Checkpoints	22.50%
	Patrols	
	Legal management: legal representation of the government for cases of land invasion, illegal activities, management before courts, etc.	
Financial administrative management	Management (executing unit)	13%
	Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification (MRV)	
	Administrative management	
Total		100%



The Guatecarbon REDD+ Project seeks to strengthen the sustainable production of timber and non-timber forest products such as ramón nuts and xate palm (pictured).





Community concession holders patrol their forests and manage threats to deforestation using drone technology.

## V. An Important Step, but There's Still a Long Way to Go

Although this achievement represents significant progress, ACOFOP is aware that there is still much to be done. Decree 20-2020 paved the way for forest communities and, in general, Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in Guatemala to be the legitimate owners of carbon rights or certificates, as 'implementors'. This created an opportunity in the country and generated legal precedents in the field of forest carbon.

Decree 20-2020 authorizes the signing of the ERPA and simultaneously creates a structure for the functioning of the PRE, which includes the legitimization of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities as implementers. Therefore, the next step in the fight for carbon rights will be to seek clarification of Decree 20-2020 to avoid confusing the ERPA timeline with the PRE timeline and/or contextualize Article 22 of the Climate Change Law to clarify the meaning and rights of a 'landholder' who implements activities.

For this reason, ACOFOP continues to promote dialogue with authorities and strategic partners to ensure that the rights gained are maintained, so that, in the end, a proposal for a potential permanent law or regulation is established that definitively recognizes the fundamental role of forest communities in the fight against climate change.

The struggle for climate justice and the recognition of forest community rights is an ongoing battle. The story of ACOFOP and the Guatecarbon REDD+ Project is an inspiring example of how perseverance, organization, and collective action can bring about positive changes. Their fight serves relevant communities in other contexts who can learn from this successful experience to obtain fair treatment in carbon markets.

## VI. Lessons Learned from the Project

The Guatecarbon case offers valuable lessons on the importance of community participation, building fair legal frameworks, and persevering in the fight for carbon credit rights. Below are some of the most relevant lessons:

### 1. The Importance of Community Participation and Local Governance

**Community Empowerment:** Forest communities have demonstrated that, when organized and empowered, they can influence national decision-making and defend their rights.

**Participatory Governance:** The creation of a governance body and a benefits distribution committee allows for transparent and equitable management of resources.

**Building Trust:** The dialogue and negotiation process fostered by ACOFOP strengthened trust between the communities, the government, and other involved stakeholders.

### 2. The Need for Clear and Just Legal Frameworks

**Adaptation of Legislation:** The initial law posed limits on recognizing communities' rights. However, through the communities' political strategy and effective work, the legislation was modified to include the "implementer" entity.

**Equity and Justice:** It is crucial for laws to recognize the rights of local communities and ensure a fair distribution of the benefits derived from sustainable natural resource management.

### 3. The Importance of Collaboration and Strategic Partnerships

**Partnerships with Civil Society Organizations:** Collaboration with ACOFOP was key to strengthening the communities' capacity and achieving the set objectives.

**Dialogue with the Government:** Ongoing dialogue with the government allowed for the identification of opportunities and challenges, while building consensus around solutions.

### 4. Perseverance and Resilience

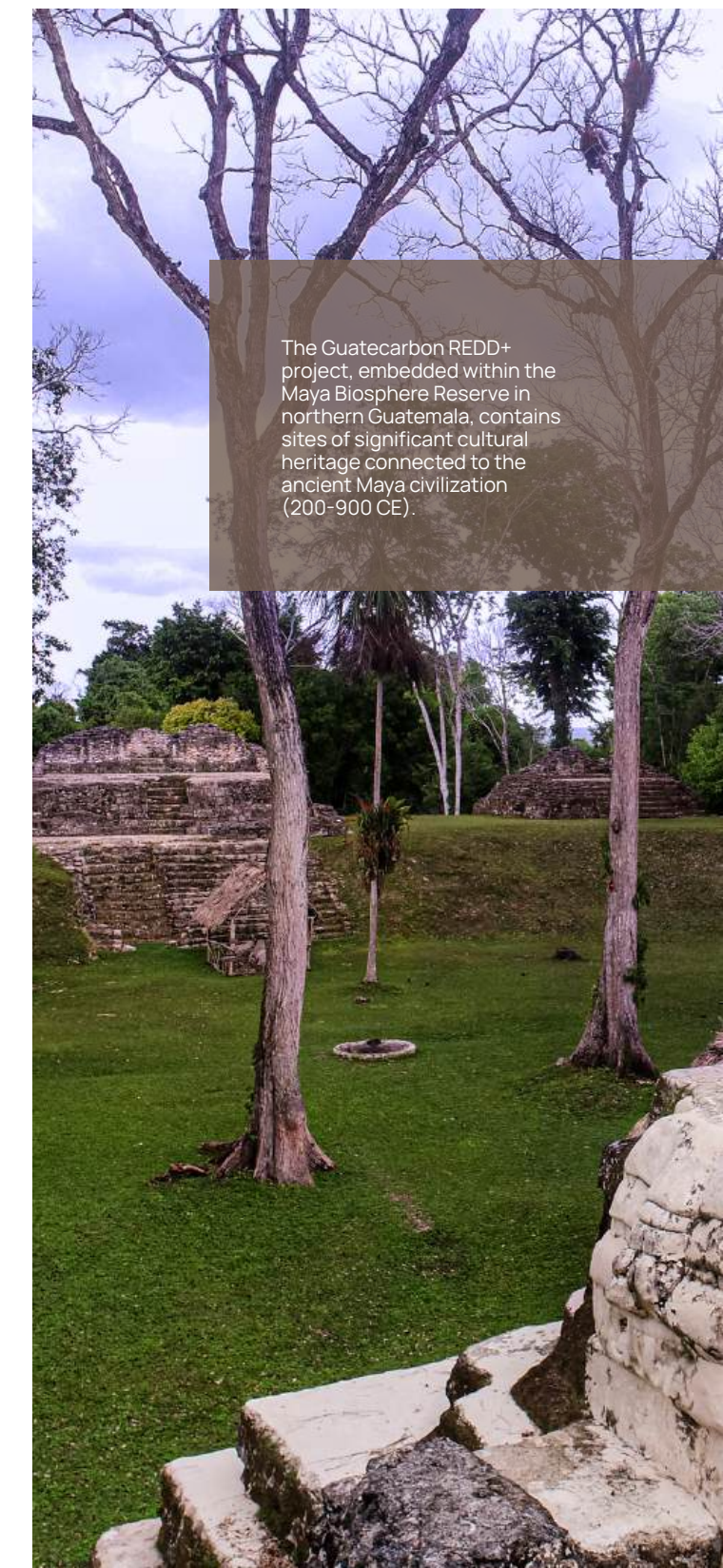
**Long-Term Effort:** The process of recognizing forest communities' rights was long and complex, requiring significant perseverance and determination.

**Adaptation:** Communities and their representatives had to adapt to different contexts and challenges throughout the process.

### 5. The Importance of Evaluation and Monitoring

**Monitoring Outcomes:** Establishing mechanisms to assess the impact of the implemented actions is critical to ensuring that the benefits reach the communities effectively.

**Continuous Learning:** The results achieved in Guatecarbon can serve as lessons for other similar projects in the region and globally.



The Guatecarbon REDD+ project, embedded within the Maya Biosphere Reserve in northern Guatemala, contains sites of significant cultural heritage connected to the ancient Maya civilization (200-900 CE).





Thirteen community forests—covering 490,829 hectares—make up the Guatecarbon community forestry model and REDD+ Project.

---

“Guatecarbon Jurisdictional REDD+ Case Study”  
Published June 09, 2025 ©  
by Asociación de  
Comunidades Forestales  
de Petén (ACOFOP) and  
Rainforest Foundation US  
(RFUS) is licensed under CC  
BY-NC-ND 4.0. To view a copy  
of this license, visit: [https://  
creativecommons.org/  
licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

The contents of this  
report may be reproduced  
and distributed for non-  
commercial purposes if  
prior notice is given to the  
copyright holders and the  
source and authors are  
duly acknowledged.

The publication is freely  
available online at the  
websites of ACOFOP  
and RFUS.

All images © ACOFOP.



3a. avenida y 4a. calle, zona 2,  
Santa Elena, Flores, Petén  
Guatemala  
Tel: +502 7926 3572  
[acofop.org](http://acofop.org)



50 Court St. Suite 712  
Brooklyn, NY 11201  
USA  
Tel: +1 212 431 9098  
[rainforestfoundation.org](http://rainforestfoundation.org)