

Ornamental Greens from the Maya Biosphere Reserve: The Rainforest Alliance's Certified Xate Initiative

VILLAGERS IN THE GUATEMALAN COMMUNITY OF Uaxactún subsist primarily on income earned from the collection of non-timber forest products such as fruits, gum, resin and *xate*, an ornamental palm leaf. Their forest home, once a major Mayan city, lies within the confines of the Maya Biosphere Reserve, the largest protected area in Mesoamerica. In addition to hundreds of Mayan ruins, the 5.2 million acre (2.1 million hectare) reserve boasts an astounding diversity of plant and animal life, including nearly 100 species of mammals and 400 species of birds. Its rivers, lakes, swamps and flooding savannahs provide critical habitat for a high percentage of North American migratory birds.

Balancing Conservation and Development

In recent years, land clearing and forest fires have been destroying the forest expanse at an accelerating pace. Which is why the Rainforest Alliance, an international conservation organization, has been working with Uaxactún villagers and others to create an incentive for the protection of their forest home. In addition to certifying Uaxactún for sustainable timber harvesting, the Rainforest Alliance, in collaboration with the community,



In Guatemala, the wild harvesting of *xate* generates about 10,000 jobs, particularly for women from low-income families.

has established guidelines for the sustainable harvest of the *xate* palm (pronounced SHA-tay), also known as chico (*Chamaedorea* spp.). Thirty million *xate* fronds are delivered each year to the United States and Canada for Palm Sunday services. *Xate* exports contribute over a million dollars annually to the Guatemalan economy, and in the Selva Maya, where nearly 50 percent



Highly valued for its ornamental use, *xate* has found a market in Europe and the United States, it is used as greenery in floral arrangements.

of the population has no formal education, wild *xate* harvesting generates about 10,000 jobs, especially for women.

When only a few leaves are removed from the *xate* plant at a time, the fronds are allowed to regenerate. However, the increased demand for *xate* combined with an absence of standards and management practices, has resulted in serious challenges to the sustainability of the plant. Not only have the palms become threatened by overharvesting, but the workers who collect them have been venturing farther into the forest — often collecting other threatened plants and seeds as they go.

Since the establishment of the standards in July 2005, the community of Uaxactún along with nearby Carmelita have sent one shipment of sustainably harvested *xate* per week to Continental Floral Greens of San Antonio, Texas. These shipments represent an income of more than \$100,000 per year for the impoverished communities, more than half of which goes directly to the *xate* collectors.

Earning More by Cutting Less

José Román Carrera, regional forestry coordinator for the Rainforest Alliance, explains that before linking up with Continental Floral Greens, harvesters sold their *xate* to intermediaries for a much lower price. Most of the leaves had defects, so they ended up in the exporters' dumpsters. The Rainforest Alliance has encouraged *xate* collectors to cut only quality leaves and leave more fronds on the palm, which permits faster regeneration. They now sell their leaves for twice as much as they did previously.

For Uaxactún exporting to Continental Floral Greens has meant better living standards for local families. According to Floridalma Ax, a member of the Conservation and Management Organization (OMYC), which manages the community's forest concession in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, women who until recently had no cash income now earn between \$6 and \$7 per day harvesting, selecting and packaging the *xate* for export. "For us, it's an achievement, it is progress." says Ax.



The Rainforest Alliance helped build two central collection and sorting facilities and searched out overseas buyers for sustainably harvested *xate*.



The project's momentum is growing as more communities are harvesting *xate* in a sustainable manner.

The road to certification requires dedication from the community. "Getting certified was a bit difficult," recalls Benedín García, one of the OMYC's founding members. "At the beginning, we felt inconvenienced — we said, 'we're poor, and they want us to make these investments.' But in the long run, we realized that those changes were essential for improving our forest management and addressing the basic needs of our community."

All photos by Luis Miguel Ormeno

"We are quite pleased with the quality of the *xate* we are receiving," said Jim Everett, vice president of Continental Floral Greens, after a recent visit to Uaxactun. He added that ever since his grandfather founded the company, they have wanted to work directly with the *xate* collectors, but the difficulty of coordinating with isolated communities led them to depend on the intermediaries. Rainforest Alliance certification opens up new opportunities for direct sales of high quality, sustainably harvested *xate*.



www.rainforest-alliance.org

The mission of the Rainforest Alliance is to protect ecosystems and the people and wildlife that depend on them by transforming land-use practices, business practices and consumer behavior. Companies, cooperatives and landowners that participate in our programs meet rigorous standards that conserve biodiversity and provide sustainable livelihoods.

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