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Institutional Strengthening of the Amaraeri Communal Reserve (Madre de Dios River, Peruvian Amazon Basin)

Marc Galvin
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Since 2002, the Peruvian government has allowed the Harakmbut people to conserve and manage natural resources within their ancestral territory. In order to alleviate the difficulties the Harakmbut had in establishing the institutional and operational frame-

work of this protected area, a Partnership Action for Mitigating Syndromes (PAMS) project aiming to strengthen indigenous institutions in the Amaraeri Communal Reserve, has supported training of administrative leaders and forest rangers.



Peru's rapid response to the need for conservation

Within the framework of global efforts to conserve biodiversity, particularly to reduce deforestation of the Amazonian Basin, Peru instituted an ambitious set of regulations in the 1990s. During a short period of 10 years, more than 400 legal norms were adopted, among them the law on Protected Natural Areas in 1997. This law and related specific regulations are based on 3 principles: a) introduction of local participation and private interest in the management models; b) reinforcement of the central role of the state in the conservation agenda; and c) integration of protected areas into the development context. New conservation policies were thus coupled with Peruvian decentralization policies and the willingness to establish a new kind of relationship between local actors and the state. This means new rights and a theoretical reinforcement of the power of local actors, especially the power of indigenous communities.

Indigenous claims

This new participation of indigenous people in conservation is justified by the fact that these populations are known for managing their natural and cultural heritage sustainably (Figure 1). This postulate has been used by many Peruvian indigenous communities during the last 2 decades to claim recognition of their ancestral territories—a claim criticized by conservationists who have doubts about this pro-indigenous discourse. They affirm that these claims, based on the myth of the “Noble Savage,” are primarily a new form of political and historical struggle, and that the process of stewardship could have ecological costs.

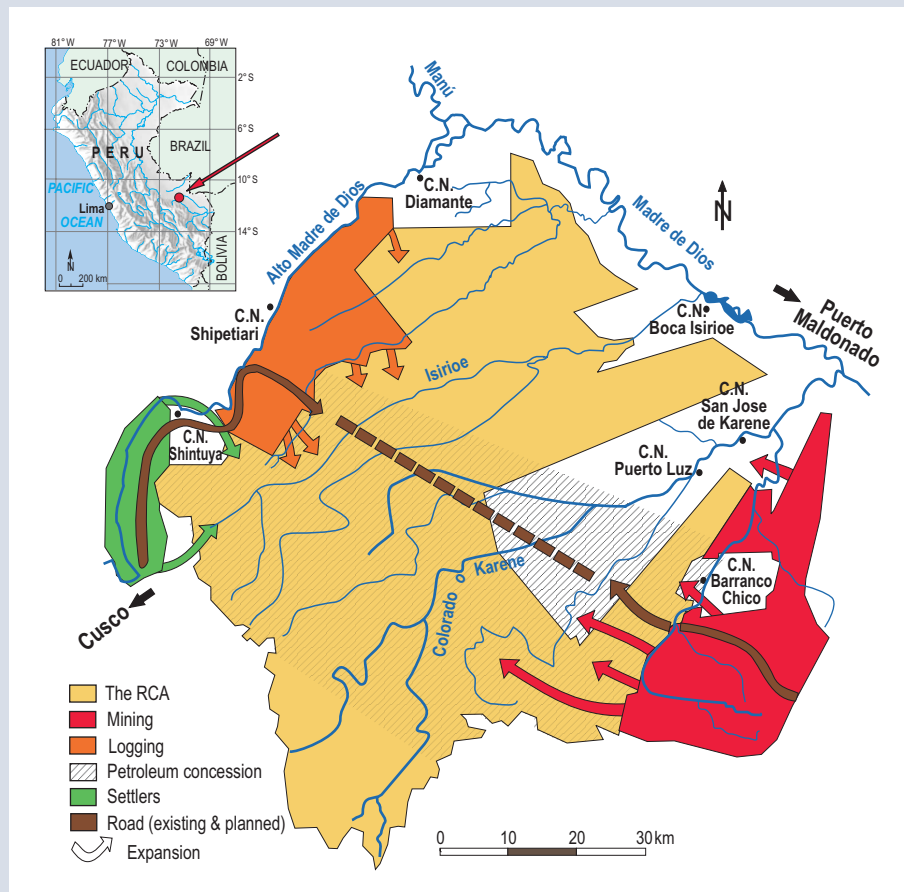
The Amaraeri Communal Reserve (RCA) is a clear example of the use of



“conservationist” discourse for indigenous political purposes. In 1986, 3 Harakmbut communities proposed to take control of their ancestral territory located on the upper right bank of the Alto Madre de Dios River (Madre de Dios Department, southeast Peru; see Figure 2). They immediately received strong support from 2 local indigenous organizations, the Federación Nativa del Río Madre de Dios y Afluentes (FENAMAD), and the Harakmbut, Yines y Matsiguenga Committee (COHARYIMA). The RCA was recognized in 2002 after 10 years of negotiations between FENAMAD, COHARYIMA and the Peruvian government. The category of “Communal Reserve,” in which the state keeps ownership of the land, officially allows indige-

FIGURE 1 A tree near Shipetiari, with Mateo Italiano, the shaman of the community. (Photo by authors, 2005)

FIGURE 2 Map of the Amarakaeri Communal Reserve. (Map by FENAMAD redrawn by Ulla Gämperli)



nous communities to manage and develop their resources within a conservation framework. In other words, the communities are “under contract” with the state for the management of natural resources and must integrate conservation discourses and practices to gain control over resource management. In other words, they become the “new rangers” of a protected area.

The Amarakaeri Communal Reserve (RCA): cultural and biological diversity

The RCA has an area of 402,323 ha, mainly covered by forest. It is inhabited by indigenous communities that belong to 3 different ethnic groups: the Harakmbut, Yine and Matsiguenga. Eight communities are involved in the management of the reserve (Shintuya, Shipetiari, Diamante, Boca Isirioe, San Jose del Karene, Puerto Luz, Barranco Chico, Puerto Azul). Each village situated along the river bank hous-

es 15 to 60 families, and there are an estimated 5000 indigenous inhabitants in this area. The Harakmbut communities share language, traditions, myths, knowledge, and a social model.

The RCA is located in one of the world’s 25 “Biodiversity Hot Spots,” according to the World Resource Institute (WRI). The area is part of the Vilcabamba–Amboro Biological Corridor. Although a biodiversity inventory has not been completed yet, it is estimated that there are 99 species of mammals, 526 species of birds, and 18 species of reptiles, of which at least 60 are endangered.

Highland–lowland interactions: a source of increasing conflict

The RCA is located within a highland–lowland area. The mountains reach a height of 2500 m within the RCA, and forests go down to 500 m (*selva baja*). Access to this area is only possible by plane or by using one of the 2 new roads completed in the 1970s that link the Andean Altiplano and tropical forests (Figure 3). It is less than 100 km from the far more densely populated Altiplano outside the RCA at 4000 m (Cusco) to the lowest area in the RCA. This great steepness makes the road difficult during the rainy season. Underdevelopment in this area results from the fact that it has only recently become accessible. This explains why the Harakmbut remained isolated until the middle of the 20th century and why the region is still so rich in biodiversity. The connection between highland and lowland is central in commercial terms for all actors in the RCA. Historically, most transactions have been related to coca produced in the *Ceja de Selva* (900–1800 m), an ecosystem in the RCA, and consumed in the Altiplano by the Quechuas. The daily bus linking these 2 regions plays a greater economic role than ever before.

Since the 1960s the Peruvian government has encouraged the conquest of all the Amazonian territory, giving everyone the chance to own for free a “piece of jungle.” This public policy produced a significant migratory movement of rich and poor from throughout the country, who now constitute an important economic and political class of settlers. Relations

between these new settlers, who live mainly from an extractive economy (wood, gold; see Figure 4), and indigenous people were rapidly characterized by conflict. The fight for control of and access to natural resources has become a core problem. Even if official recognition of numerous protected areas in the region has been spectacular (58% of the surface of the Madre de Dios Department is now under specific protected area status), illegal *madereros* and *mineros* are still entering the RCA unrestrained.

In the meantime, the Peruvian authorities continue largely to sustain claims that natural resources should be exploited to promote regional development. The regional government plans to construct a road crossing the RCA to facilitate the extraction of wood. In February 2005, the administration of the RCA discovered that the central government granted an oil concession to an international company, allowing subterranean exploration in the RCA. This has increased pressure and tension among the native inhabitants.

A plan of action

The establishment of the RCA project is the result of cooperation between different actors started in 1990. The process has been controlled by FENAMAD, but some foreign NGOs have collaborated, such as WWF International. It is not certain that all Harakmbut people are aware of what is to be established and are contributing to realization of the project. As a result, the general strategy elaborated by representatives of the local people and NGOs is a mix between a traditional model of management and a modern economic one. This strategy is based on the dual concepts of:

1. Protection of access to the territory in order to prevent unsustainable activities and maintain equilibrium between the forest and the fauna;
2. Enhancement of the quality of life for communities, through adequate management of flora and fauna, based on traditional subsistence modes and new sustainable economic activities.

Today, the communities have strengthened their rights on their territory as well

FIGURE 3 Along the road to Shintuya, between the Andes and the Amazonian basin. (Photo by authors, 2005)



as their duties. This is a cultural, economical and political challenge. Four main points have been identified with regard to the RCA's development:

1. Empowerment of indigenous organizations;
2. Elaboration of natural resource management tools to allow sustainable exploitation of wood;

FIGURE 4 Woodcutting near the Madre de Dios River. (Photo by authors, 2005)





FIGURE 5 GPS training of future Park Guards. (Photo by FENAMAD, 2004)

3. Establishment of a control and vigilance system, in particular through a team of rangers;
4. Development of sustainable economic alternatives such as ecotourism and valorization of medicinal plants.

However, the RCA is not yet operational. It faces primarily 2 types of problems. On the one hand, economic pressure related to extractive activities (gold, wood, oil) is greater than ever, even inside the protected area. On the other hand, the RCA faces internal problems in finalizing its institutional framework. The Management Committee of the reserve (including representatives of the communities, the state, and indigenous organizations) took 3 full years to be set up. This delayed validation of the Management Plan, which is indispensable for obtaining official recognition of the Instituto Nacional de Recursos Naturales (INRENA), the central administration in charge of conservation. The Management Plan was endorsed in early 2005.

In addition, and in spite of an unsuccessful attempt to create an indigenous ecotourism business in 2001, the reserve has not yet produced direct benefits for the communities. This is also true for activities related to medicinal plants, which have not materialized until now. Families living in the area are frustrated

“GPS is essential to locate the frontiers of community ownership and the reserve. It is difficult to know if a tree is inside or outside the protected area. In fact, GPS will allow us to observe infringements but also to record the habits of the fauna in the territory and the location of exceptional trees. This will enable us to protect them more effectively.” (William, a future ranger from San Isirio, at the December 2004 workshop)

and impatient. The creation of an alternative economy with positive benefits for the communities is a difficult but central challenge.

Current urgent action in the field of governance

International cooperation has played a key role in the development of protected areas in Peru. In 2002, the Global Environmental Fund (GEF, managed by the World Bank) agreed to finance the institutional and organizational development of the RCA, with a project controlled by the United Nations Development Program–Peru, for about US\$ 1 million. Other collaborations have been launched with international NGOs such as WWF International, IUCN, and IBIS (DK). In 2004 a partnership was signed with the NCCR North–South to establish a PAMS aimed at reinforcing the administrative and managerial skills of RCA leaders and helping to gain recognition of forest rangers and establish their function in law.

Linking partnership research and participatory development

The decision to work with FENAMAD was directly related to scientific research in the field of governance of biodiversity conducted in the Joint Area of Case Studies South America (JACS SAM) of the NCCR North–South. Studies focus on the participation of indigenous people in collective action to resolve tensions between conservation and development in Amazonian protected areas. The RCA is of special interest in this respect: it is one of the first protected areas (*Reserva comunal*) in Peru with indigenous control and management. Enough financial support has been received to translate intention into reality. It is a fascinating challenge for local people, and a symbolic process for all indigenous people in Peru. The research team also covers 3 other reserves in Bolivia (*Reserva Pilon Lajas & Parque Tunari*), and Brazil (*Acre department*) in order to be able to compare these processes.

At the beginning, the decision to support FENAMAD responded to something

specific, especially interest in testing the results of doctoral research on traditional ecological knowledge. The first PAMS proposal was directly concerned with the valuing of traditional knowledge—specifically, improvement of traditional transmission of this knowledge—in order to reinforce aspects of the Harakmbut cultural framework. But as a result of FENAMAD's needs, the PAMS was given a more pragmatic objective—strengthening of local institutions in the RCA.

Two activities to strengthen indigenous institutional capacity

The first objective—capacity building for leaders—was realized through a course given to future indigenous administrators of the RCA. The course covered accounting and administrative management. The second objective was related to capacity building for forest rangers, who are expected to play a very important role in reducing the pressure of illegal resource extraction. Rangers are designated by the community assembly to represent their communities in the project. They will also be contracted for 3 years with GEF–UNPD financial support, but without any subsequent financial guarantee. Thus, it is hoped that newly gained institutional skills will guarantee the success and local ownership of the management system over the long term. The second activity consisted of training rangers in using GPS (Figure 5). Four instruments were acquired by the project for the community. Today, the actors involved in conservation of the Amazon forest cannot do without using this tool.

Generally, the results expected by the PAMS have been achieved. The RCA and FENAMAD leaders have been trained in legal accounting and administrative matters. Eight forest rangers have been trained in GPS, and they are about to be recognized by INRENA. Much more than a capacity building operation, this workshop was an opportunity for FENAMAD to mobilize the communities around the RCA project.

New opportunities and challenges ahead

The PAMS has opened new opportunities to advance collaboration between the

NCCR North–South (particularly JACS SAM) and FENAMAD. In 2005, two new PhDs (South) and a Master's (North) will be initiated in the RCA. This research is related to issues of great importance for local people, such as deforestation, management of soils, and the revival of shamanic institutions. An interesting conclusion of this academic experience is that FENAMAD has asked to make scientific collaboration with the Individual Project 8 (IP8) of the NCCR North–South official. They have posed specific questions. Annual meetings for the 4 next years have been planned to discuss the results of NCCR research with local people and invited experts. These meetings should also make it possible to correct potentially inappropriate practices of RCA managers and NCCR researchers, from a social learning perspective.

Even if partnership between the NCCR North–South and FENAMAD is strengthening, it is worrying to note the level of dependency on foreign support in most protected areas in countries in the South. The future of the Amarakaeri Reserve—and, by extension, the quality of life of local people—depends on a smooth transition from strong external financial support to establishment of new, sustainable activities that could enable self-management and self-funding for conservation of this fragile territory. The success of the RCA in future is an open question, the answer to which depends on a set of financial, institutional, and political factors. It is evident that the RCA is an extraordinary field for enhancing understanding of what is going on in the Amazon, and the PAMS project is a perfect tool for marrying scientific interest and concrete action. The IP8 JACS SAM researchers working on governance of biodiversity will continue to analyze new forms of participation in several protected areas, to gain more general knowledge about the future of community-based management of natural resources in the Amazon Basin. The challenge is to build a strong enough network between academics and local people, in order to share research findings and information on the needs of the communities on a regular basis.

“The PAMS allowed us to visit all the communities in order to organize the workshops. Thus we were able to re-ignite interest in the reserve at a moment when the project was running out of steam in some places. The community assemblies could choose their rangers. This has been an important positive side effect.” (Jaime Malaga of FENAMAD)

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