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“Development on the margin”

## Reconciling Conservation and Local Sustainable Development: Case Studies from Los Tuxtlas Biosphere Reserve, Veracruz, Mexico

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### Abstract

The Los Tuxtlas Biosphere Reserve located in the eastern Mexican State of Veracruz is a geologically and ecologically diverse area, associated with steep altitudinal gradients (from sea-level to 1.720 m a.s.l), the presence of ca. 300 inactive volcanoes and maritime influences from the Gulf of Mexico. It is one of the five areas in Mexico with highest rates of endemism.

Despite being located between two important poles of economical activity, the harbour of Veracruz to the north and the conurbation of Coatzacoalcos-Minatitlán, the centre of the Mexican oil industry to the south, it remains an economically marginal region, which has undergone enormous socio-ecological changes in the last 60 years. Among other important drivers has been the decision of the state to redistribute land to local indigenous as well as immigrated landless peasants to found agricultural communities in the spirit of the agrarian reform inspired by the Mexican Revolution. Together with the development of private cattle ranching, this has since led to the loss of ca.85 % of the original forest cover, but has failed to significantly raise the living standards of most of the local population.

Since the 1980s conservation efforts have led to the area being designated UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, a protected area concept, which in particular since the 1990s seeks to reconcile the multiple use of natural resources with conservation goals, while fostering the increasing participation of the local population in conservation management.

Three case studies based on qualitative empirical social research methods are presented. These illustrate: 1) the current local implementation of a national programme for the payment of ecosystem services towards climate mitigation; 2) existing efforts to foster ecotourism and how this may impact the perception of the biosphere reserve, and 3) the contribution of coffee plantations to the local economy. Based on the lessons learnt from these cases studies, we reflect upon existing efforts and challenges in fostering synergies between local sustainable development and conservation in an economically marginal area, characterised by high levels of out-migration and unemployment.

**Keywords:** Biosphere Reserve, coffee cultivation, conservation, ecotourism, Los Tuxtlas Region, payment of ecosystem services, sustainable development