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“Development on the margin”

Neotropical Palm Products - Underutilised Resources for Marginal Lands

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Abstract

Tropical rain forests are known for their extraordinary biodiversity, but also for their generally poor long-term prospects as productive agricultural land. Deforestation usually leads to a rapid loss of soil fertility and rain forests are mostly agricultural “marginal lands”. Palms often provide important NTFPS in natural rain forests, with economically important palm species often highly abundant and productive.

We analysed over 200 scientific publications and internet resources in order to obtain a comprehensive picture of the extent, structure and potential of trade in palm products in north-western South America. The study is part of the project “Palm Harvest Impacts in Tropical Forests”, funded by FP7. We found trade taking place mostly at local and regional levels. Trade volumes of some palm products regionally traded (palm thatch, aguaje fruit) are very high, and larger than that of any exported native palm product. A wide range of different palm products are locally or regionally the most important sources of cash income for families and/or communities. Trade volumes inadequately reflects their socio-economic importance.

Palms can provide very high per-hectar yields both in natural and managed stands. However, most palm products are still obtained by destructive harvest. There is a massive and on-going qualitative and quantitative erosion of palm stands.

Palm products for the local, regional and national markets from natural, managed or cultivated palm stands with sustainable management could be drivers of the regional economies in low-land regions with poor, shallow and swampy ground. Poor management, poor governance, insecurity of land tenure and unequal sharing of profits currently inhibit the development of sustainable and economically viable markets for palm products.

Keywords: Palm products, rain forest, sustainability