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“Bridging the gap between increasing knowledge and decreasing resources”

Towards Community Forest Management in Agricultural Frontiers: The Case of Quintana Roo, Mexico

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Abstract

Agricultural frontiers are, by nature, hotspots of forest conversion. While an important body of knowledge exists concerning drivers of land use change in agricultural frontiers, little is known about how to position the management of forests as a feasible land use alternative for the local population. Against this backdrop, this study analyses forest management experiences in Quintana Roo, known as an outstanding global example of community forestry. Here, land was granted to newly forming communities (ejidos) throughout the 20th century. Today, ejidos own more than 70 % of forest lands, but only a minority is actively managing their forests.

Methodologically, a mixed, multidisciplinary design was applied. In a historical analysis, the main determinants of the emergence, maintenance or abandonment of community forest ownership and management are described. Then, based on a survey of all 75 community forest owners in the study region, differences are identified between those that currently are managing their forests and those that are not. Finally, in selected in-depth case studies of single communities, the paths towards or away from community forest management have been studied.

Results indicate three critical issues for successful engagement of communities in forest management: land grant design, community agency, and extension systems. In the course of a continuously advancing agricultural frontier, many communities achieved timber extraction rights only when their forests had already been logged several times by private contractors, thus seriously reducing commercially available timber volumes. This fact added to weak state controls and internal problems led many communities to opt for a quick capitalisation of their forests through overharvesting, abandoning forest management afterwards. Ill conceived state policies have further increased the barriers to engaging in sustainable forest management. In practice, community forestry is currently restricted solely to communities with the highest resource endowments, although recently, alliances among smaller communities and local extension workers have allowed for some promising forest management initiatives. It can be concluded that community forestry is a feasible alternative in regions of agricultural frontier, if certain preconditions regarding the structure of legal instruments and an adequate relationship between technical extension bodies and communities are met.

Keywords: Agricultural frontier, community forest management, extension services, Mexico, public policy, silviculture

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