

## **TCD Practitioner Grant Report: Charcoal production in the Calakmul municipality and Calakmul Biosphere Reserve (CBR) of southeastern Mexico.**

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### **Abstract**

In conjunction with El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (ECOSUR), I participated in a practitioner experience meant to relate the findings of my Master's research on charcoal production in the Calakmul municipality and Calakmul Biosphere Reserve (CBR) of southeastern Mexico. One week was spent delivering spoken and poster presentations and engaging in community events in the ejidos where I had worked the previous summer. My experience was broken down into three categories, all of which included the gift of a laminated poster detailing my results for a popular audience: visits to Zoh-Laguna, visits to El Refugio, and reserve-sponsored peaking engagements in Xpujil. The ejidal leaders and reserve provided me with useful forums in which to relay my information, though the implications of my research were not always supportive of their actions during the time of my research. I received useful feedback both from past participants and individuals concerned with the current progression of the charcoal market.

### **Research Background**

My Master's research investigated the linkages between natural hazards, markets and livelihood change in two communities in Calakmul through the lens of charcoal production. I spent three months interviewing charcoal producers and visiting their production sites in the ejidos of Zoh-Laguna and El Refugio. My results indicate that the hurricane might have led to a rise in production, while shifting markets at large in Mexico most likely did.

### **Practitioner Experience Motive**

My motive in applying was to engage my research communities in the final stages of a project, highlighting what the University's Tropical Conservation and Development Program's terms the "bridg[ing] of theory and practice to advance biodiversity conservation, sustainable resource use, and human well-being in the tropics." My intent was to make use of ECOSUR's esteemed reputation among all stakeholders in realizing this goal by acknowledging their role as sponsor.

### **Practitioner Experience**

One week was spent in and around the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve in which both Zoh-Laguna and El Refugio are located. I had been invited months before my departure to present my findings at CBR's anniversary symposium, which proved to be my first stop. I delivered a fifteen-minute presentation on my Master's work and its relevance to the reserve and community as a whole. A laminated copy of my poster was publicly available outside the seminar room. After the talk was over a number of audience members, including ejidatarios, government officials, and other researchers, provided me with questions and comments. Many of these were captious exchanges, but all were civil. I

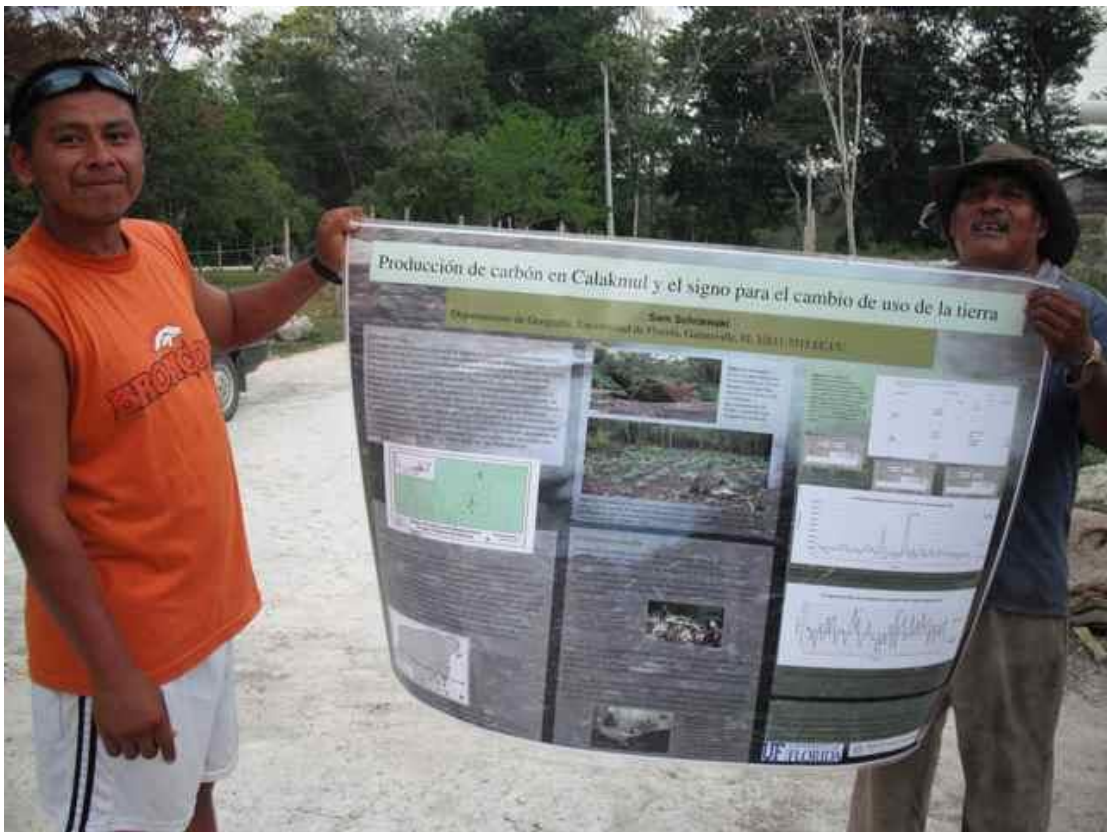
also attended the reserve's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary fair, where among a room full of agricultural demonstrations and folkloric performances, hung a copy of my poster.

Soon thereafter I would spend a three days in Zoh-Laguna, speaking with many of the current and former charcoal producers. This culminated in a presentation before the ejidal assembly, a sort of community town hall, where a pared down version of my symposium talk was delivered. The assembly proceeded for four hours, a quarter of which was devoted to a discussion of my work. Many of the community members with whom I was less familiar expressed concern that my findings would little help them given that the market for the product had changed significantly in the night months intervening. The majority of the community assembled in the meeting, and when spoken to individually, expressed appreciation for my work but stressed that without a change in policy my information might go to waste.

The remaining days were spent transporting back and forth between El Refugio and Zoh-Laguna or Xpujil. El Refugio, the smaller of the two communities where I conducted research, was far less receptive to my entreaties. I cajoled the various ejidal authorities into hosting me for a meeting on three occasions, and on all three no meeting was convened. On one Sunday when most of the male community members--the vast majority of whom are charcoal producers--were idle I made an attempt to discuss my work and to express my gratitude for their participation. I gave a laminated poster to the assembled campesinos and tried to explain its meaning, but few were receptive and more than one individual intoned that without monetary gifts my presence was an unnecessary distraction in their lives. This animosity had not been my experience with the charcoal producers the summer before but is clearly a reality now.

### **Conclusions**

This practitioner experience was insightful for me and underscored the difficulty in reporting the results of substantive research, even when one's communities and individuals of concern might have seemed more amenable to the aims of the project during its commencement (in this case only a year earlier). I have come away with a great appreciation for the facilitation necessary to carry out the effective and worthwhile communication of research findings and hope to have an opportunity to implement lessons learned at a future date.







Photographs (from L to R): Apiculture demonstration during the Calakmul anniversary fair, two community members holding up the poster in El Refugio, the author speaking during the symposium, the author and the ejidal head of Zoh-Laguna outside the symposium, passersby viewing other research projects as part of the symposium.