Reconciling Productively: Identification of Viable Sustainable Production Activities for Settlers in the Golfo Dulce Forest Reserve

by Aguilar et al., 2013

Executive Summary

(Synthesis and translation by Austin Cruz)

Intentions of this Investigation

The efforts of INOGO, alongside the Neotrópica Foundation, are working to identify concrete, practical, and viable sustainable and productive development options for the Golfo Dulce Forest Reserve (GDFR). This work is crucial for improving governance, livelihoods, and incomes for residents in the GDFR. These efforts also work toward reducing threats against the conservation and preservation of biodiversity and ecosystem services (such as those from forests, water resources, and land interactions) in the GDRF.

The sustainable and productive development options proposed will all be creative solutions that are permissible under both the national and regional legal framework, including the laws that govern territory that has been declared Natural Heritage of the State. Additionally, the proposed options will follow administrative responsibilities set by the Management Plan and its jurisdictions.

More importantly, it is crucial that these development plans are aligned with the needs and wishes of the inhabitants of the region. The ideas presented must respond to different stakeholder groups of these communities, such as teenagers, women, farmers, associations, and others. This report will work to address the needs of these populations in areas of wage increases, strengthening a regional and local identity, and employing local knowledge, culture, education, innovation, and expertise of, and for, the region.

Simultaneous effort is also needed to develop technical capacity and markets that can facilitate potential economic opportunities for the improvements in wages, wellbeing, and quality of life of the local communities. As such, identifying specific productive linkages between different

activities across economic sectors at the local, regional, and national levels would maximize the generated benefits.

These proposals and solutions would, of course, be implemented by local, strategic actors and organized groups within civil society that are in the process of building a green economy, defined as one that "improves human wellbeing and social equity while reducing environmental risks and ecological deficiencies" (United Nations Environment Programme, 2011). Additionally, it is low in carbon emissions, efficient in use of resources, socially inclusive, and conserves biodiversity, where increases in wages and employment are created by public and private investments that ensure social and cultural equality. In short, a green economy includes mechanisms that promote community empowerment as a means of conflict resolution and obtaining a more just distribution of the costs and benefits of conservation and sustainable development.

The Golfo Dulce Forest Reserve

The GDFR is the largest Protected Wilderness Area in ACOSA, accounting for 14% of the total land in the area, boasting an abundance of fauna in high density. Examples include the scarlet macaw *(Ara macao),* peacock *(Crax rubra),* many types of large cats *(Felis sp.),* and the titi, howler, and white-faced monkeys *(Saimiri oerstedii, Alouatta villosa y Cebus capucinus)*. Important rivers, such as the Carate, Rincón, Agujas, Corcovado, Drake, Chocuaco and Esquinas, and other hydrological features play a prominent role in the biodiversity of the GDFR, and by extension, are key components of the health of the Reserve's mangroves found in the estuaries.

Land use in the GDFR has been characterized by a mixed property-regime with tenuous land tenure, resulting in increased pressure on its resources. Contamination, deforestation, loss of wildlife, and ecosystem fragmentation are all products of increased pressure upon the area, contributing to the impossibility of approval of appropriate management tools that would effectively implement conservation goals. In an evaluation of the management effectiveness in all 25 Protected Wilderness Areas in the country, the GDFR ranked 20, meeting only 41% of the requisites in the evaluation.

In 1992, the first Management Plan was proposed for the GDFR as part of the Neotrópica Foundation's BOSCOSA project. The BOSCOSA project, which eventually failed to fully come to fruition, sought to implement community forest models, environmental education initiatives, and other sustainable activities that reduce pressure on, and conflict over, resources in the area. Helping with those tasks were a number of NGOs, educational and governmental institutions, as well as the Ministry of Environment and Energy, The Latin American School of Protected Areas of the University for International Cooperation, and The Nature Conservancy. Also included in the planning stages were those who were less approving of the social appropriateness and legitimacy of the GDFR, ensuring that social alliances and decision-making were well-rounded and inclusive.

The goal of this all-inclusive participation and planning was to familiarize and raise awareness amongst residents and community members that management plans serve as indispensible

instruments in resolving issues of land tenure and resource-use in places such as the GDFR; and that these instruments are also capable of enacting legally feasible means to the improvement of well-being, sustainable options, adaptive management mechanisms, and the guarantee of community participation in the management of Protected Wilderness Areas.

Background

With only 51,100 km^2 of terrestrial surface area and 589,000 km^2 of territorial sea, Costa Rica is considered one of the most bio-diverse regions in the world. This high percentage of biological diversity is due to the variety of microclimates and ecosystems created by its geographic location along the Central American Isthmus, topography, climatic diversity, and wide range of zoning and soil landscapes.

To protect this vast ecological richness, the government of Costa Rica created the National System of Conservation Areas – similar to the U.S. National Parks System – that is divided into 11 distinct areas. In the south of the country is the Osa Conservation Area (ACOSA in Spanish), covering the cantons of Osa, Corredores, and Golfito of the Puntarenas province, totaling to about 158,721 ha of protected land and 11,675 ha of sea.

ACOSA is composed of wilderness areas under public, private, and mixed governance mechanisms. It has the largest wetlands area in the country, with an area of 187,000 ha of primary forest that provides great value and natural capital to the region, and by extension, to the country and world. Within the Osa region itself though is about a third of all tree species in Costa Rica, including half that are considered threatened, as well as 24 endemic species. In terms of fauna, 275 species of birds, 124 mammals (more than 50 being bats), 40 species of freshwater fish, over 8,000 species of insects, 71 species of reptiles, and 46 amphibians are found in the Osa canton, representing between 30-50% of all known species in the country (see terrestrial ecosystems report, Dirzo, 2014).

Meanwhile, the human communities in the region face several challenges in terms of well-being, infrastructure, and basic social services. Although 85.2% of the population of ACOSA has full medical coverage provided by the nationalized healthcare system, the services are basic, deficient, and difficult to access for certain communities (see Gaffikin, 2013). In addition, a significant proportion of houses in the area are in a state of deterioration.

Educational deficiencies are also of great concern, with about 11% of the population receiving no education at all, and close to 23% of children between ages 5-14 years old not attending school. The average graduation rate from primary school is 60%, 21% for secondary school, and only 4% from the university, with a dropout rate of close to 12% (see education report, Menke, 2013).

The ACOSA region suffers from high rates of unemployment, a high labor demand, and limited employment opportunities, which vary in productive activities that are developing in the region, primarily being within agriculture. Especially high is unemployment amongst women, who only recently have had opportunities in the tourism and service industries. A strong out-migration

from the cantons of ACOSA, exacerbated by a diminishing population, is due to the scarce employment opportunities in the region.

The cantons of Osa and Golfito, where ACOSA is located, depend heavily upon agricultural and are among the poorest in terms of socioeconomic development, ranking 73rd and 78th respectively out of 81 cantons in the entire country. According to diverse social diagnostics, ACOSA's most serious and immediate problems are the lack of potable water, the mismanagement of solid waste and treatment, the absence of landfills, high rates of pregnancy, prostitution and drug addiction amongst teenagers particularly in border and urban areas, domestic violence, deficient health care services and provision, lack of sufficient public space and overcrowding, and the limited possibilities of employment (See Gaffikin, 2013).

With this social panorama, it is easy to see the challenges and opportunities that are presented alongside conservation goals of the lands upon which a high percentage of disadvantaged and impoverished communities live. An integrated development perspective, one that incorporates regional, national and international conservation interests, is fundamental in ensuring a positive and proactive socio-environmental resolution.

Equally important in ACOSA's ecological work in the Osa Peninsula are the areas of Corcovado National Park created in 1975 with 42,469 ha, and the GDRF in 1978 as an important buffer zone against human impact, currently with 61,000 ha. The creation of Corcovado National Park was the result of a brokering between diverse groups, such as:

- An alliance of developmentalists who advocated for foreign investment and capital with ties to specific government sectors.
- An alliance of conservationists, national and international scientists.
- NGOs with technical capacity and funding from international and governmental donations.
- A social alliance composed of peasant colonists, leftist political organizers, and state institutions of agrarian reform.
- Osa Forest Product, a company that had previously held land in Corcovado National Park.

Before the creation of the area that is now Corcovado National Park, 1,500 inhabitants had established livelihoods within the park, some of whom were later partially and unsuccessfully resettled elsewhere with the help the Agrarian Development Institute (IDA, now INDER). Today, those who were resettled by IDA live in a tenuous land tenure situation, as the GDFR was designated in an area overlapping with IDA settlements, creating a complicated issue of jurisdiction. Other inhabitants within the area without secure land tenure are indigenous communities, such as the Ngöbes, whose level of absolute poverty is the highest in the country and who remain without basic services such as electricity, telephone lines, access to secondary education, and roads and bridges.

Ecologically and economically, the ecosystem services provided by the synergy between Corcovado National Park, Piedras Blancas National Park, the Térraba-Sierpe National Wetlands, the Isla del Caño Biological Reserve, and the GDRF amount to tremendous and concrete benefits

to the southern region and to the country. Estimates of the yearly ecotourism revenue contributions to the local economy from the Isla del Caño Biological Reserve and Corcovado National Park alone amount to more than $41 million, more than $8.9 million to the regional level, and more than $41.6 to national economy, totaling to over $91 million dollars.