Recovering an ancient tradition while conserving the environment

Felipe Carrillo Puerto is the shrine capital of Mayan culture. Home to over 20,000 people, it is the most cosmopolitan Mayan city in Mexico's State of Quintana Roo. The town successfully blends traditional Mayan life with the advancements of modern technologies. However, the ancient traditional craft of *the use of natural dyes* was abandoned. What used to be a daily activity has been forgotten by the local population and supplemented by the introduction of dyed yarns and sewing machines. As such, there were no records to be found on the types of plant species suitable for the extraction of dyes, nor were there any organized information on the procedures, fabric treatments, and measurements for optimal colour accuracy.

In the quest of recovering this key ancestral legacy, Econciencia A.C and the mayan communities approached the Small Grants Programme. With SGP's support, a project to recover this traditional knowledge and protect biodiversity started to raise awareness and develop the capacity of the Mayan population. Given the lack of records and local expertise, the initiative started to gather traditional knowledge from indigenous peoples in three states: Quintana Roo, Chiapas and Oaxaca; where vegetable dyes were commercially used. This investigation led to re-discovering the art of natural dyeing, its techniques and types of plants needed for this process.

The rich exchange of experiences and knowledge between the different population groups enabled the project to embark on further research on plant anatomy. With the support of Superior Institute of Technology at Felipe Carrillo Puerto (ISTFCP), other parts of the plant conducive for dyeing were identified; expanding the resource table.

The information compiled was tested in workshops for fabric treatment, extraction and application of vegetable dyes by eight women from the community and two students from the ISTFCP.

The group shared their findings with ten communities, who then field-tested these findings and recorded the outcomes on the types and parts of plants to use; appropriate technique/s to use according to the plant; effective methods for saturation and colour absorption depending on the fabric or thread used; as well as related advantages and disadvantages. The Institute then supported the community by organizing the information according to plant classification, type of pigments produced and type of fabrics to use. Additionally, the community members contacted people who were dedicated to the use of plants for the production of dyes and other related activities. From there, they developed a directory and established a network.

The re-introduction of this ancient traditional craft has generated socio-economic and environmental benefits. Traditional knowledge, undermined by colonialism, has been recovered in three states. This strengthens the identity of the regions and continues to bring pride as the best practices are replicated. It has also enabled the communities to use resources native to their land and now have the potential to build small enterprises around them, especially for women. By promoting self-sufficiency among the communities, the project has decreased their reliance on imports and has generated savings for the communities.

The increased awareness on their native plant species have led to a greater appreciation of biodiversity. During the colonial era, plant species such as logwood or brazilwood were over-exploited reaching a close-to-extinction status. Brazilwood extracts were used for art and cultural expressions such as murals, monuments and stones, as well as for exports. Now, the communities think of the consequences on biodiversity upon using their native species.

Plant	Part of the Plant	Color Extracted
Almendra	Leaves	Yellow
Achiote	Seeds	Orange
Dzalam	Shell	Café
Zapote	Sawdust	Lilac
Caoba	Cortex	Red
Palo de tinte	Leaves	Light Blue

A publication about the knowledge generated from this project is targeted to be disseminated at the end of 2014.