



Q&A with Martha Isabel 'Pati' Ruiz Corzo, winner of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests Wangari Maathai Award 2014

What does winning the CPF 2014 Wangari Maathai Award mean to you?

This endorsement provides necessary visibility in the face of climate change to promoting the voice of the forests. Grupo Ecológico Sierra Gorda is a civil organization that works to conserve the extraordinary biodiversity in the Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve, the last well-preserved bio-corridor in central Mexico. We take care of the kinship we have with flora and fauna. An honour such as this recognition of our efforts gives us the opportunity to call attention to the extraordinary times we are living and the wave of love that we must orchestrate to defend the natural heritage of the planet.

You have made conservation profitable for rural communities in Sierra Gorda. How did you do this, and how easily can this model be replicated elsewhere?

The Biosphere Reserve is one million acres with 638 communities who are the landowners. Their forests and jungles provide refuge for biodiversity. So we involve every generation and stakeholder in our programmes: our community-based environmental education includes valuing the services of nature such as water filtration, capture and storage of carbon, and the forests that make it possible. Natural capital is in the hands of extremely poor property owners, and valuing nature is a necessary economic driver for them. Sierra Gorda's experience shows that this could be replicated in other forests where state government protocols can be developed as alternative mechanisms for financing conservation on a local level. We call it 'tropicalizing the Kyoto Protocol'.

You successfully introduced payments for ecosystem services in Sierra Gorda. A wonderful example was getting the state government to offset the emissions from their fleet of vehicles by paying forest owners living in extreme poverty to restore their land. What were the biggest obstacles you faced in implementing such payment for ecosystem services schemes?

Gaining credibility for the local carbon protocol means implementing flexible rules adapted to the owners of the forests in order to make global mechanisms accessible. The regulated markets are a lot of talk, and they do not reach the base of the pyramid because of high expenses and unrealistic complications for rural communities in the forests. Our proposal for a local protocol was accepted and today sits within the framework of the Climate Change legislation of Queretaro State – a solid strategy to finance forest conservation.

How have you dealt with pressure from people who wanted to use the natural resources of the Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve?

I was the federally designated Director of the Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve for 14 years, and we certainly survived many battles to defend the territory, successfully instituting regulations and deterring public works that would have had great impacts on the landscape. Thirteen thousand hectares of forests have regenerated since land use change rules have been enforced. There are also many more natural sanctuaries after livestock practices were removed from the understory in old forests, benefitting wildlife and providing environmental services like water and carbon capture.

What is your future vision? What do you want to achieve in the future for Sierra Gorda and beyond?

I want to replicate Sierra Gorda's strategies such as payment for forestry carbon offsets and the capture of carbon in soils, as well as to strengthen the capacity of extremely poor landowners to generate quality tourism services in other protected areas around the country. To achieve a paradigm shift among ranchers using regenerative livestock practices on large extensions of land, capture water and carbon, save the sacred fabric of nature, awaken public consciousness and, in so doing, raise that wave of love for the planet.

What advice would you offer to young people, and in particular young women, who may wish to follow in your footsteps?

Young people must make a complete commitment to the Earth: to make every effort to live frugal, organic and natural lifestyles, and know that wherever life takes them that the gravity of the problem is in their hands. The legacy that adults are leaving them is shameful, for we have over-mortgaged their inheritance and passed the point of no return with ecosystems. With the reality of the unravelling of natural cycles and systems, this is an emergency that must mobilize all of us, with every bit of life's energy, and we must all put our hearts into the service of the planet.