

Project Update: March 2022

Over the course of this period the initial phase of the project was completed. During this time:

- Permission to work in the communities was obtained.
- Local team members were hired and trained.
- Six focus groups in three varied communities were organised and carried out.
- Information on human wildlife conflict, local views of existing conservation projects and local views on wildlife were collected.
- Materials for the second phase of the project are being prepared.

Permission to work in local communities.

The aim of the project is to conduct focus groups in a relatively large, a medium and a small ejidos (communal land holdings) within the municipality. Eventually we will carry out surveys in the same large ejido, as well as in a different medium and a different small ejido. The five ejidos originally selected to be part of the project were: Playon de Gloria, Flor de Marques, Boca de Chajul, Quiringuicharo and Zamora Pico de Oro. Focus groups were planned for Flor de Marques, Chajul and Zamora Pico de Oro. Contact was establishing with the commissary of each ejido with help from the organisation Natura Mexicana. In each case the project was explained to them and permission to operate in each community was obtained. One unintentional positive outcome of this process was that it provided an opportunity for local leadership and people working in conservation to touch base. In one community that did not have much contact with Natura Mexicana, workshops unrelated to this project ended up being spontaneously scheduled during the same meeting where we were getting permission for our work.

Local team members were hired and trained.

Griselda Esteban and Jose Marroquin who are in their final year working on their biology thesis at the university of UNICACH. They were provided training for working as note takers during the focus groups, as well as training in the ethics of human subject research.

Six focus groups in three varied communities were organized and carried out

The planned for six focus groups were successfully carried out as preparation for the next part of the project. A little fewer than 60 people were approached about participating in the focus groups. Thirty-nine people of both sexes ended up participating across the six focus groups. Fortunately, people with different attitudes about conservation and wildlife ended up showing up so that a variety of opinions on human wildlife conflict were brought up. Conservation minded individuals as well as those who did not care as much about wildlife or who were somewhat hostile towards conservationists shared their opinions over the course of the project.

The level of engagement varied over time within focus groups, but one thing that almost universally captured people's interests were cards showing various wildlife species that live in the area which were used in some of the questions. People appeared interested in the biodiversity of their region and at times were surprised by some of the animals that live near them.

Information collected

A wide variety of in-depth data on human wildlife conflict on the border of the Montes Azules Biosphere reserve was collected. Given data analysis is not yet complete and the information collected is in part intended for publication, I will only give some brief examples of information that was collected during this part of the project. One particularly interesting piece of information I will share that came from the focus groups was that a few people identified jaguars as animals that could protect maize fields. At least a few individuals within the community think of jaguars as having both negative and positive implications for their material welfare.

Over 100 different relationships with one wild species eating one domestic species were identified by participants. Some of these were expected, such as people identifying jaguars as one of the species eating cattle, while others were not, such as Mexican musk turtles being identified as eating a lot of ducks in one community. Thus, various potential human wildlife conflicts that have not previously been focused on by conservation organisations in the area were identified.

The focus groups also revealed how people saw themselves as being affected by the losses and how they tried to avoid these losses. Killing wildlife in retaliation was mentioned as a method to avoid losses, but so were a variety of non-lethal and cheap measures. One interesting observation was that sometimes participants learned new techniques for reducing wildlife damage from each other during the focus groups. Wider dissemination of techniques that are already in use within the communities could possibly reduce conflict with wildlife.

One last topic I will mention for now is that during some focus groups people suggested alternative interventions for how conservation organisations might offer to improve conservation outcomes. Some of these interventions are worth further consideration.

Material for the second phase of the project is being prepared

An initial transcription and translation of most of the audio recorded during the focus groups has been carried out. This transcription is being used to make sure the survey that will be carried out next month touches on topics relevant to people in Marques de Comillas.



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