

## **Eco-Palms: Providing a Sustainable Commercial Alternative to Palms for Palm Sunday**

**Deidre Marie Peroff**, Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington, 98225  
email: dmperoff@gmail.com

**Abstract:** There is a widespread view that commercialization of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in the tropical forests of Mesoamerica is both economically and environmentally sustainable in rural communities. Despite this belief, research shows that the harvesting and commercialization of NTFPs alone do not necessarily alleviate poverty or maintain biodiversity within rainforests. This paper describes the eco-palm program, a program which serves to sustainably harvest and export *Chamaedorea* palm fronds from Southern Mexico and Northern Guatemala. The eco-palm program works with churches in the United States to charge a five cent premium on palm fronds that are imported from Mexico and Guatemala annually for Palm Sunday services. Through the eco-palm program, rural harvesters are taught how to sustainably harvest the palms and subsequently reduce over-harvesting that leads to destruction of the tropical forests. Consequently, the program reduces inequitable profits to rural farmers by providing them with additional income. The eco-palm program is an example of a rapidly growing specialized market project for an NTFP and provides a potential example of an economic and environmentally sustainable trade program.

**Keywords:** non-timber forest products, sustainability, fair trade, Central America, rural agriculture

### Introduction

My research involves asking whether or not the “eco-palm” project is an economically and environmentally sustainable market for non-timber forest products (NTFPs). In this paper, I provide a brief history of the eco-palm project, including the impetus for its development and how the project has progressed since its inception in 2005. Next, I evaluate the success of the program by looking at results that have already been found and I discuss possible evaluative questions I will address in my own analysis. Along with this, I mention methods that I may use in my analysis and look at how the program may be expanded in the future.

### Background Research: 2001-2005

Preliminary research behind the eco-palm project began in 2001 when the Commission on Environmental Cooperation, or CEC, part of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) asked Dean Current at the University of Minnesota’s Center for Integrated Natural Resources and Agricultural Management (CINRAM) to conduct a palm study. The CEC was concerned as to whether *Chamaedorea* palms, or “xate” palms, were being produced, harvested, and exported in a way that was ecologically and socially sustainable for future generations. In

other words, they were concerned about negative environmental impacts from palm harvesting such as over-harvesting and inequitable profits received by local harvesters. Initially, the goal was for local communities to harvest certified palms.

Dean Current and CINRAM began by surveying and interviewing local floral retailers and wholesalers in Minnesota. Interviews included an investigation of whether or not retailers were interested in selling sustainable, certified palms. Additionally, researchers examined the demand for xate in the United States and conducted an assessment of retailer's requirements towards the quality of xate palms. CINRAM found that, surprisingly, over ten to fifteen percent of palms imported per year were for Palm Sunday services and were purchased by Christian churches and congregations (D. Current 20 Feb 2006). With this information, Current and CINRAM decided to focus their research on churches and they formed a "working group" that included members from CINRAM, Presbyterian Churches-USA (PC-USA), Lutheran World Relief (LWR), Continental Floral Greens (CFG), members of Mexican ejidos and local Guatemalan community members where the palms grow. Later, the working group also included the Rainforest Alliance of Guatemala and Pronatura of Mexico, two non-profit organizations. The working group continued to interview churches and floral retailers in the United States and started an annual trip to Guatemala and Mexico to assess current conditions of palm harvesting in these regions.

The group found that most commonly floral retailers did not know where the palms they were selling came from or if any programs to export sustainable palms existed. Further, they found that churches were equally as concerned with social issues as environmental issues and most congregations were willing to spend at least twice as much on xate palms that were sustainably produced, or certified (D. Current 20 Feb 2006). When they visited Central America, the working group discovered that there was an extreme overharvesting of the local forests and that local harvesters were not being equitably compensated for their arduous work harvesting palms. Specifically, they found that over fifty to sixty percent of the palms harvested were being discarded before they were bundled and exported to the United States because they were either damaged or too young and should not have been picked (D. Current 20 Feb 2006). Additionally, where palm gatherers received about \$1.20 for 144 leaves, in the United States, that same \$1.20 buys only twelve leaves (*Yahoo! News* 2003). After assessing results of the palm study, the working group decided to develop a more sustainable program to support both local forests and communities in future generations of palm harvesting.

### Eco-Palm Project

The eco-palm project officially began in 2005 with only twenty churches buying palms and three states represented. In just three years, it burgeoned to over 2,100 churches buying over 600,000 fronds in 2008 with all states represented except Hawaii (D. Current 2008). The program works by charging consumers an extra five cent premium per frond. This is considered a "fairly" traded system because although all principles of fair trade are followed in the eco-palm program, it is currently too expensive for the palms to receive the official "fair trade" certification label.

Another important distinction between eco-palms and traditional harvesting techniques is that the program takes out the ‘middleman’ or contractor. By doing this, the program works to keep jobs local, and supports work towards ecological sustainability by having less links on the market chain. Cutting out the ‘middleman’ from the production to consumption market chain has also allowed the sorting, bundling, and processing of the palms to take place in the communities where the palms are harvested. These processes, through the program, are often done by women and provide more jobs for members of the community.

Training is provided by local non-profit organizations such as the Rainforest Alliance and Pronatura to ensure that the palms are responsibly harvested and not picked prematurely. Annual trips by the working group to Guatemala and Mexico provide reassurance that they are concerned with the overall social welfare of the local communities as well as the long-term sustainability of surrounding forests.

Since its inception, the eco-palm program has received wide support. It has been advertised through the media, such as newspapers, online articles, newsletters and publications. Also, nonprofit organizations in the United States, such as Conservation International, have become aware of the program and are very supportive of current efforts. The eco-palm working group has begun to observe evidence of the program’s success in their annual visits to the harvesting communities. They have found evidence that, through the program, a higher quality palm is produced and, in effect, when before fifty to sixty percent of the palms were discarded before exportation, through the program only five to seven percent of the palms are discarded (D. Current 2007). Additionally, the income of rural harvesters is five to six times higher and often the extra income coming into the community is used for social programs to benefit all residents (*PC-USA News* 2007). For example, past profits have been used to support a teacher’s salary for one year in Guatemala and another community used the additional income to give money back to elders in the community who no longer harvest xate palms (Waagbo 2007). As the eco-palm program continues to grow, communities are forming cooperatives and getting closer to certification by demonstrating their ability to work collectively not only within communities but with outsiders willing to support a sustainable market.

### Analysis and Methods

My research will focus on evaluating the effects of the eco-palm program both on local communities and the surrounding forests. A series of questions include asking whether or not, in general, the program is successful. The eco-palm program’s success will be evaluated by asking a series of questions, including:

1. Is the program providing an incentive for villagers to protect local forests?
2. Is the program helping to alleviate poverty in rural harvesting communities?
3. Are local communities supportive of the program?

Additionally, I am interested in seeing exactly *how* local communities may benefit from the eco-palm program. For example, if they receive extra profits, I will research how the extra income is being used in the community.

Most of the analysis will be done through an ethnographic study. I will visit the regions where eco-palms are being harvested, in Southern Mexico and Northern Guatemala, to interview local community members. An explicit list of questions will be used to minimize the amount of variability in responses and to ensure my presence is acknowledged as a student conducting research. To get an idea of the effects of the program on all community members, I will interview different members of families who perform different roles in the commercialization process. Usually men in the communities harvest the eco-palms and women do the bundling and sorting of the palms before they are taken to capitol cities to be transported to the United States. Through interviews with local community members, I will assess whether or not their livelihoods have improved since the inception of the eco-palm program.

### Expansion

If the eco-palm program is determined to currently be successful, further research will need to be conducted to ensure continuation of the program's success in future years. As awareness of the program expands, one must assume the market demand for a sustainable, certified palm will also increase. Further, the supply will also have to increase and both communities and distributors must ensure that the demand can be met. This may involve establishing more distributors in the United States and incorporating more Guatemalan and Mexican harvesting communities into the program. If the success of the program is guaranteed and it is confirmed that the demand can be met, researchers may want to veer towards expanding the eco-palm program to year-round and marketing the program to the floral industry for use in weddings and funerals.

### Conclusion

This paper describes a clear history of the eco-palm program and looks at how the program has expanded since its inception. Further, I briefly discuss how my research will methodologically and analytically evaluate whether or not the eco-palm program has been successful both in increasing the social welfare of local harvesting communities and reducing harmful effects on surrounding forests. Lastly, the paper briefly discusses issues that will need to be addressed if the program continues to expand.

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