

Restoration Cases Flagship Collection

Case #1: Community-led watershed restoration in Intag Valley, Ecuador



Local farmer clearing grass around planted trees. Photo credit: Jake Brennan

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In brief

Overview

In one decade, farmers in the Intag Valley in Ecuador went from clearing to conserving and restoring forests. Intag's dense cloud forests were cleared rapidly in the 1970s and '80s for agriculture and ranching. Soon after, landholders experienced severe declines in water quality, seasonal droughts, and declining soil fertility. The future of farming was uncertain, and communities faced an environmental crisis. A local NGO, Defensa y Conservación Ecológica de Intag (DECOIN), helped people make the critical connection between healthy forests and clean, abundant water. Funded through international donations and partnerships with international NGOs, DECOIN sought to improve water resources and conserve forest biodiversity. They helped 38 communities establish small-scale watershed reserves, introducing communal land arrangements and the practice of forest restoration using native species. DECOIN's tree planting projects ignited a restoration movement. Most people participated in communal planting, and after seeing the benefits firsthand, even more began planting trees on private lands. Planting trees accelerated forest succession and increased biodiversity in degraded pasture. Linking trees with water and establishing communal land for reforestation gave farmers the technical and cultural conditions to switch from degrading to restoring forests.

Exemplary practices

DECOIN created communal lands, signing the reserve land title over to communities for conservation and restoration with use restrictions (e.g., no burning, cattle, mining, or harvesting for sale). DECOIN held high-impact local environmental awareness campaigns, including working with schools. They experimented with a variety of native trees and then trained local community members to collect, cultivate, and plant them. They also engaged trusted local leaders to implement projects, worked with communities most in need, and provided flexibility to accommodate community needs and preferences.

Key lessons learned

- ◇ *Environmental crises can motivate people to restore.*
- ◇ *Reframing restoration as solution to tangible environmental problems can make projects relevant to local communities*
- ◇ *Work with communities and people who stand to benefit most from restoration.*
- ◇ *Restoring communal lands can encourage more inclusive participation and facilitate knowledge sharing.*
- ◇ *Communal restoration on shared land can inspire and facilitate planting on private land.*
- ◇ *Restoration on communal land can achieve goals that may be out of reach to individuals but possible when people work collectively.*
- ◇ *Restoring forests can encourage people to conserve them.*