

## THE CANDELARIAS CAVE, ALTA VERAPAZ: DEMYTHIFYING COMMUNITARIAN PARTICIPATION IN PATRIMONIAL CONSERVATION

*Mario Del Cid  
David R. García*

**Keywords:** Conservation of the natural heritage, Guatemala, Alta Verapaz, Cuevas de Candelaria, speleology, ecotourism, the Q'eqchi' ethnic group

The hydro-speleological system known as Cuevas de Candelaria is located in the department of Alta Verapaz, between the municipal capital of Chisec and the village of Raxruha. This system corresponds to a karstic mountain range, the last massif before reaching the lower Petén depression, and is a part of the spurs of the sedimentary Highlands and of the orographic system of Sierra de Chama (MICUDE, *Ministry of Culture and Sports*, 2003).

Late in the decade of 1960, the earliest human settlements emerged in areas close to this cave system, mainly including Q'eqchi' families in the search of agricultural lands. With time, these families came to constitute the communities presently known as Mucbilha 1, Candelaria Camposanto and San Miguel Sechochoc. The speleological system was first reported by the French speleologist Daniel Dreux, who between 1974 and 1975 conducted the first investigations in the area (MICUDE 2003); during the 1980's, he set an investigation camp and initiated tourism activities in the caves.

The inhabitants of the local communities took the necessary steps to legalize the ownership of two farms recorded in favor of the State, before the National Institute of Agrarian Transformation (INTA), conducting the first legal measurement in 1982 and the respective adjudication in 1989 (Stocks 2002). The negotiations for the handing over of the final deeds were re-initiated in the late 1990's. In 1999, without any consultation with the local communities, the area was declared Cultural Patrimony of the Nation through Ministerial Resolution 189-99 of the Ministry of Culture and Sports, due to its archaeological, natural, scientific and speleological value, thus hindering the communities from fulfilling the legalization of their lands. Thanks to the work of the Idaho State University, of the Chisec local organization APROBA-SANK, of the Peace Corps, and of the local communities supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), participative methodologies were applied to map the communities. Also, the polygon of the patrimonial area was measured once again, initiating the designing process of a management plan to establish the overall guidelines, and in October 2002 FONTIERRAS handed over the deeds as collective agrarian patrimony to the communities of Candelaria Camposanto, Mucbilha I and San Miguel Sechochoc (Stock 2002).

Based on a letter of understanding between the Ministry of Culture and Sports and the communities of Mucbilha I and Candelaria Camposanto signed on February 7 of 2003, the design of a Master Plan was initiated and approved through Ministerial Resolution No. 728 2003. Within this context, in May, 2003, the Q'eqchi' Community Development and Sustainable Tourism Project, of Counterpart International (funded by USAID), was initiated, with the purpose of developing new economic alternatives for the Q'eqchi' communities in the region comprised between Chisec, Alta Verapaz and the archaeological site of Cancuen in Sayaxche, Petén, based on the sustainable management of natural and cultural resources in two different fields: Analog Forestry and ecotourism, both managed by the communities. In the cases of Cuevas de Candelaria and Cancuen, this project was focused on the development of skills by the local population to manage the patrimony.

Following an extended process of negotiations that involved several institutions, communities and the State, a co-participation management agreement was signed between the Ministry of Culture and Sports and the communities of Mucbilha I and Candelaria Camposanto, as the polygons fixing the limits of their land comprised 74.5% of the patrimonial area (Table 1). This agreement represented the first partnership between MICUDE and the local communities for the preservation of a patrimonial area, and implied a huge opportunity for their human development, while at the same time it posed a challenge in the search of alternative and sustainable strategies for the preservation of natural and cultural resources. This pioneer case of patrimonial management is crucial, and not only for the Candelaria area, considering that the success or failure of this model will largely define its further application in other indigenous communities in the country associated with patrimonial areas, asserting their undeniable right to participate in the management of their historic heritage and natural resources.

This work presents a synthesis of the most relevant facts and progresses made in the process of co-administration of Cuevas de Candelaria, contradicting the more popular myths associated with the participation of indigenous peoples in patrimonial preservation. Such advances are the result of work accomplished by several institutions, namely: USAID, APROBA-SANK, Idaho State University, Peace Corps, Vanderbilt University (Cancuen and VUPACS Project), MICUDE (through IDAEH and DEMOPRE), FIPA, Counterpart International, and the local communities, among others.

## **MYTHS AND FACTS**

### **Myth 1: Indigenous people lack the necessary education or intelligence to preserve the cultural and natural patrimony.**

This first myth mainly comes to summarize two concepts. The first is the assumption that those people who live in rural areas, far from formal education centers, lack the necessary intelligence to carry out processes of planning, execution and monitoring, essential in preservation projects. However, such a bias mistakes intelligence for education (Stocks 2002; García and Demarest 2004). The fact that people who live close to areas with a cultural and natural patrimony lack the high levels of education achievable in urban centers does not mean that they lack the capability to learn how

to participatively manage the resources that constitute their cultural and/or natural heritage. With only three years of training conducted in the communities close to the system of Cuevas de Candelaria, they are already managing in full the regulations of patrimonial preservation; they are abiding and following the Master Plan for the area approved by the Ministry of Culture and Sports.

Another concept that wrongfully used this myth was the assumption that only scientists were capable of taking care of, and managing, the cultural heritage (Stocks 2002; García and Demarest 2004). Currently, the idea that only the experts in the fields of ecology, archaeology and speleology are capable of understanding how to study and preserve the patrimonial areas, is common. This falsehood has hindered many indigenous groups from actively participating and from having a saying in the decisions made about the cultural heritage that surrounds them. In the case of Candelaria, such assumptions led to the creation of a patrimonial area without the previous consent of the communities involved. Such a process was initiated for personal, rather than collective interests, and to favor laboratory work, rather than field work.

The in-depth knowledge that locals have about their environment, makes of them the perfect candidates to act as leading actors in the protection of resources, be it as rangers or as co-participants in the management of the area. Both opportunities have been acknowledged by MICUDE, and currently, two individuals from each community at Cuevas de Candelaria have been hired as rangers of the cultural and natural heritage. This effort offers a new option to the unsuccessful habit of hiring outsiders. The rangers of Cuevas de Candelaria work under the incentive of honoring their commitment not only to MICUDE but to the entire community as well.

### **Myth 2: The Q'eqchi' have destroyed their cultural and natural heritage with their crops and carelessness**

In effect, the Q'eqchi' group is said to be one of the most destructive ethnic groups for the environment in Guatemala, particularly in the northern area of Alta Verapaz and Petén. The use of unsustainable agricultural practices is very common among the Q'eqchi'. However, the history of migration to new territories is a part of this process. It should be taken into account that throughout the years, when Petén was colonized by the FYDEP, the adamant instruction for gaining access to the adjudication of a parcel was: prove that you are working the land, and the land will be yours. For a farmer, this means, plain and simple, cut the jungle down and the land will be adjudicated to you. The INTA, who adjudicated the lands to the communities in the entire Transversal Strip at North, including Mucbilha I and Candelaria Camposanto, had a rather similar discourse, so that the practice of swidden agriculture was in fact encouraged.

However, who has actually offered an alternative to the swidden agriculture practiced by the Q'eqchi' in fragile environmental areas? One example may be found approximately three hours away from the city of Cobán, in the township of Cahabón. There, the program designed by DIGESA initiated in the eighties the introduction of cacao sowing as an economically viable crop for the Q'eqchi' located in that region. In communities like Champenco, one may find production areas dating 15 to 20

years back, with an extension of 40 to 50 hectares. Today, these constitute highly productive areas and represent the most important cacao producers in Guatemala. Similarly, the Q'eqchi' Community Development and Sustainable Tourism Project, of Counterpart International, has introduced a methodology that involves encouraging the Q'eqchi' and teaching them to establish perennial production systems, mostly dominated by trees, and denominated Analog Forestry. Such methodology is a synthesis of the scientific application for conservation of the biodiversity and practice of sustainable agricultural techniques with the local knowledge of mixed family orchards, where monoculture is left behind to give way to a variety of crops compatible with the permanence of the woods. The establishment of these areas dominated by trees but at the same time productive for farmers represents a true effort by local groups of farmers, not only to maintain the existing woody cover but also to restore the ecosystem and the biodiversity.

It did not take long before the Q'eqchi' understood that if the karstic hills were deprived of their wooded cover and soil, the water retaining system would be seriously affected and the passage of water would become very brief, thus jeopardizing the formation process of caves. Similarly, they understood that the erosion caused by annual crops implied serious effects on the karstic systems that depend on the free running of water, and which could result in severe floods.

To mention some positive results, over 30 forest gardens have already been designed and implemented in each one of these communities. Likewise, two pasture grounds for cattle were transformed into woody areas that house an innovating vanilla production. However, beans as well as maize have been and will always be the basic food for the Q'eqchi'. Trying to change this would be a violation to the rights of the indigenous peoples. Therefore, together with the territorial rearrangement within the polygons of these communities, the areas where maize and beans may be sown without damaging the ecosystem have as well been identified.

### **Myth 3: Local inhabitants lack all juridical certainty about the possession of the land.**

This is a particularly significant myth in the case of Cuevas de Candelaria. The facts are clear. Around the end of the 1960's, the first settlers arrived from Lanquin to exploit second class rubber near the caves. In 1970, approximately, the first inhabitants settled down in the area and formed a community. In 1982 the first legal measurements by INTA were completed, and later, in 1999, and with no previous consultation, the Candelaria River Caves Cultural Patrimony (*Patrimonio Cultural Cuevas del Río Candelaria*) was created. In 2002, they were given the deeds in collective agrarian patrimony by FONTIERRAS. In 2004, the co-participation agreement was signed for the management of the Cuevas de Candelaria patrimony among the two communities represented by their COCODES and Civil Associations, and the Ministry of Culture and Sports, an unprecedented event.

Therefore, the legal situation of the land may be summarized as follows. Both the communities of Mucbilha I and Candelaria Camposanto have a Deed granted by the Lands Fund in 2002. Fragile areas, such as the karstic hills that house the caves and

the archaeological sites minutely recorded by the Department of Prehispanic Monuments, remain subject to a future designation of ownership, and therefore, the State of Guatemala, represented at this time by the Ministry of Culture and Sports, keeps the guardianship of the patrimony present in these fragile areas.

Due to the participative and careful process through which local inhabitants were trained to look after the cultural and natural heritage represented by Cuevas de Candelaria, the MICUDE decided to initiate a pioneer process which, based on an Agreement signed by both parties -the communities and the MICUDE-, and legally formalized when approved by Ministerial Agreement No. 1-2004, defined the responsibilities and rights of both communities, and therefore, they are now the guardians, jointly with the Guatemalan State, of this precious heritage.

#### **Myth 4: The local populations are unable to provide sustainable tourist services without destroying the caves or the patrimony**

This kind of statement has been one of the major arguments of those who are against the participation of the indigenous communities in the management of the heritage and the rendering of tourist services, and Cuevas de Candelaria was not an exception. In Guatemala, tourism has been traditionally handled by national and foreign companies, which, with capital and the know-how regarding the market of tourism have developed profitable operations. However, the local communities have historically been left aside when referring to the benefits of these activities, and were forced to act as mere spectators (Del Cid 2003). Cases abound when such exclusion ended up by propitiating patrimonial destruction (Demarest and Barrientos 2002), as local populations got involved in illegal activities in the pursuit of tangible incomes.

In Guatemala and other Latin American countries there are countless examples of indigenous communities that manage tourist resorts and provide services to the tourists, who represent new jobs and a source of income, while at the same time the natural and cultural resources are duly taken care of. Some such cases are: the Ecoquetzal project (managed by Q'eqchi' communities in Alta Verapaz, who for around 12 years have been offering trips to the cloudy forest with tourists living together with local families), the Ak' Tenamit Project (managed by Q'eqchi' communities at Livingston, Izabal, including one hotel, restaurants and craft productions); Carmelita (which for over 15 years now has been offering trips to the archaeological site of El Mirador, generating jobs for many in the community); the Sepalau Lagoons and the B'omb'il Pek Caves (both located at Chisec, Alta Verapaz, and managed by two Q'eqchi' associations, preserving a communitarian reservation area), and the Pluri-National Federation of Communitarian Tourism of Ecuador (grouping 20 communitarian destinies across the country, some of them with a 20-year experience in tourist management with cases of cultural heritage management, such as that of the archaeological site of Ingapirca). These cases are not flawless; however, they are examples showing clearly that properly trained and organized indigenous populations are perfectly capable of hosting tourism, while generating a new source of income and preserving the patrimony.

Training and organization are the primary axis that must guide tourism activities in charge of communities (Beavers 1995: Brandon 1993); therefore, these have been

the two pillars for the development of tourist services at Cuevas de Candelaria. At Candelaria Camposanto and Muchilha I there are civil associations of development and tourism to manage tourism activities. Counterpart International has conducted several training workshops focused on the strengthening of these associations in the fields of organization, administration, planning, accounting, and implementation of projects of infrastructure. It is worth mentioning that those associations do have a legal capacity and are registered before the Superintendence of Tax Administration.

In terms of training, local communities initiated a process of training in tourist services, through the course Local Tourist Host taught by INTECAP. Counterpart International has provided continuity with the training of tourist guides, as they are the ones who will be in closest contact with visitors and will be largely responsible of the patrimonial preservation. The guide training courses involved subjects such as: the qualities of a good guide, how to accomplish thematic tours, karst and cave formation, identification of local flora and fauna, Maya civilization, and tour practices, among others. With the support of the Guides Association of Cayo District, Belize, the implementation of more specific courses was initiated, taught by professional cave guides and referred to: organization of tourist groups in caves, introduction to first aids, cave rescues, use and maintenance of gear, use of ropes and rapel, and cave tubing and kayaks. With the support of USAID and FIPA, and jointly with VUPACS (Vanderbilt University), a trip to Belize was made in 2003 with representatives of both communities, aimed at learning more about tourist management and preservation in selected caves. Recently, training was implemented in the field of mapping cave impacts, with the purpose of developing the skills of guides and rangers to retrieve information about the present state of the caves, and to monitor and minimize potential impact caused by visitors.

Regarding other tourist services, trainings have been initiated on the use of the Internet, on food services and customer service, as well as workshops on hostelry and management of camp areas. These different efforts have been undertaken in the hope that communities were duly prepared to render quality services to satisfy their customers, with activities complementary to agriculture, adequate to generate new sources of income. Jointly with MICUDE, and with the support of USAID and FIPA, the creation of a Plan for the Public Use of Cuevas de Candelaria is now underway. This document will be in force for five years, and will constitute a tool aimed at regulating all tourism activities carried out within the patrimonial area.

#### **Myth 5: The Q'eqchi', as well as natives in general, are not reliable allies for the preservation of cultural and natural heritage**

This myth is based on the contempt towards the capabilities of the Q'eqchi' and other indigenous groups. However, the lack of human and financial resources suffered by institutions in charge of patrimonial management makes it necessary to develop alternative models that involve the communities in the effort of preserving the natural and cultural resources (JICA 2001; Núñez 2000). The use of a co-management model which takes advantage of tourism as a tool for preservation, combined with other productive activities (such as diversified crops) are viable options for patrimonial preservation. The case of Cuevas de Candelaria shows that whenever indigenous communities can turn to integral development alternatives

based on the sustainable exploitation of resources, and to training, acknowledging the relevance of their participation in patrimonial management, they can become best allies for the protection of any given area.

## CONCLUSIONS

Cuevas de Candelaria is a pioneer case of participative management of patrimony in Guatemala, and therefore, this model could be replicated in other regions of the country. Work accomplished by different institutions to this day, shows that local communities are able to develop the capabilities needed for patrimonial preservation, and that scientist are not the only ones prepared to provide the best protection. The communities of Candelaria Camposanto and Mucbilha I have legal certainty regarding their lands and have the endorsement of a covenant with MICUDE approved through Ministerial Agreement No. 1-2004 for co-participation in the management of the patrimonial area. The communities have complied with all the legal formalities concerning the area, and they are working under the Master Plan approved by MICUDE through Ministerial Agreement No. 728-2003. The communities are implementing sustainable agricultural activities in areas pending adjudication within their polygons. Local inhabitants are receiving intensive training for adequately handling tourism, the rendering of tourist services and the preservation of the caves system. The profound knowledge that local people have about their environment makes of them the ideal candidates for becoming the leading actors in the protection of resources, involving as well an unprecedented opportunity for their own growth.

**TABLE 1**

<b>Community</b>	<b>Total Area of the Community (hectares)</b>	<b>Community Area within the Protected Area (hectares)</b>	<b>% of Community in the Protected Area</b>	<b>% of Protected Area Occupied by the Community</b>
<b>Mucbilha I</b>	2.362.304	608.526	25.76	64.64
<b>Candelaria Camposantos</b>	747.787	93.462	12.50	9.93
<b>20 Private Parcels</b>	415.480	239.402	57.6	25.43
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.525.571</b>	<b>941.391</b>	<b>-----</b>	<b>100</b>

## REFERENCES

Beavers, J.

- 1995 *Ecotourism and Communities in the Maya Forest Region: A Tri-National Mobile Seminar on Community-Based Ecotourism*. The Nature Conservancy. USAID and MAYAFOR, Flores, Petén, Guatemala.

Brandon, Katrina

- 1993 Basic Steps Toward Encouraging Local Participation in Nature Tourism Projects. In *Ecotourism: a Guide for Planners and Managers 1* (edited by K. Lindberg and D. Howkins), pp. 134-151. The Ecotourism Society, North Bennington, Vermont.

Del Cid, Mario

- 2003 *Desarrollo de servicios turísticos para el sitio arqueológico Cancuen, Sayaxche, El Petén, manejados por las aldeas El Zapote y La Unión*. Bachelor's Dissertation, Departamento de Ecoturismo, Universidad del Valle de Guatemala, Guatemala.

Demarest, Arthur, and Tomás Barrientos

- 2002 Plan de desarrollo de comunidades para la conservación y turismo sostenible de la región del Alto Pasión. Proyecto Arqueológico Cancuén, Informe de Temporada 2001 (edited by A. Demarest and T. Barrientos), pp. 365-377. Vanderbilt University, Nashville.

García, David, and Arthur Demarest

- 2003 Patrimonio cultural en manos comunitarias: oportunidades y retos para la preservación y el co-manejo. In *XVII Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, 2003* (edited by J.P. Laporte, H. Escobedo, B. Arroyo and H. Mejía). Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala.

Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)

- 2001 *Estudio de desarrollo turístico nacional para la República de Guatemala. Primer Reporte Intermedio*. JICA and INGUAT, Guatemala.

Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, DGPCN, IDAEH, DEMOPRE

- 2002 *Plan Maestro y Parque Nacional Cuevas de Candelaria*. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, Guatemala, Guatemala.

Núñez, Óscar

- 2000 *El co-manejo y participación de la sociedad civil en las áreas protegidas de Centro América*. Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza, Guatemala.

Stocks, Anthony

- 2001 *The Struggle for Q'eqchi' Community Conservation and Management Mayan Sacred Cave Sites: The Case of Candelaria and Bo'omb'il Pek in Guatemala*. Paper presented at the Conference "Protecting Cultural and

Natural Heritage in the Western Hemisphere: Lessons from the Past, Looking to the Future”, Harvard University Graduate School of Design.