

# Tasting the results of a joint effort

**Bioversity International is running several projects aimed at creating marketing options for the crops grown in the Central Andes. These activities focus on strengthening the linkages between producers and the local and international markets, and also between farming communities and the tourism sector. The overall objective is to support the development of new tools for income generation for rural and urban areas of countries like Bolivia.**

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**C**ommunity-based tourism refers to small-scale tourism ventures developed and managed by a local community. These are set up to ensure that a greater part of the economic benefits of tourism remain in the local communities, instead of in the hands of outside travel agencies. Agro-tourism refers to tourism experiences that focus on agricultural production and the consumption of locally-produced agricultural products. Examples range from visiting wineries in Italy to spending time in a traditional farming community in the Andes, and learning about what crops are grown and how they are used.

These approaches represent a growing sector of the Bolivian economy: a quick survey reveals that more than 30 initiatives are trying them out today, providing an interesting service to visitors and benefiting local communities. In some cases, these activities are being pursued in the belief that they can play an important role in showcasing Andean agricultural production systems and their remarkable agro-biodiversity. Consisting of many species of crops and animals, this diversity is mostly maintained by small-scale farmers. Through participatory diversification strategies and linkages to the domestic and international food and tourism markets, these activities aim at exploiting native crops for income generation.

## **Agro-tourism around Lake Titicaca**

The partnership established between Bioversity International, La Paz on Foot and other organisations (see Box) was formed to assess and describe local agro-biodiversity, its current conservation status, and to look for ways to enhance local families' income through community-based agro-tourism in a community on Lake Titicaca. Our work started in Santiago de Okola, a community on the south-eastern shore of the lake, at almost 4000 m above sea level. Santiago de Okola is a traditional lakeside village of about 60 families, with a high tourism potential. It is located just 1.5 hours by boat from the Island of the Sun, Lake Titicaca's most important tourist destination, and only 2.5 hours drive from the city of La Paz. The community maintains many traditional farming practices;

farmers grow potatoes and other Andean crops such as oca (*Oxalis tuberosa*) and quinoa (*Chenopodium quinoa*). For these reasons, as well as for its impressive landscapes, the views of Lake Titicaca and its beautiful beaches, this predominantly Aymara-speaking community has long been recognised as a tourist destination for Bolivian nationals.

In June 2006, a group of community members with an entrepreneurial vision formed the "Tourism Association of Santiago de Okola". They approached La Paz on Foot, which had already been bringing tourists to the community. They wanted to exchange ideas and discuss ways by which they could improve the services their community was already providing, and increase their incomes. At roughly the same time, La Paz on Foot was approached by Fundación PROINPA and asked to participate in the IFAD-funded Neglected and Under-utilized Species programme. PROINPA asked La Paz on Foot to help identify an appropriate site for implementing a pilot project.

Santiago de Okola was selected, due to the attractiveness of the landscape, its proximity to existing tourist destinations and –most important– the interest and commitment shown by the local population. The research hypothesis behind the work was that it is possible to generate additional benefits (increased income, conservation of germplasm, cultural survival) from local agro-biodiversity via agro-tourism, especially when infrastructure and human capacities are improved. Since then, the project has carried out a series of activities. Among these, they have facilitated exchange visits with existing community-based tourism enterprises in Bolivia and Ecuador. These visits were very useful, as they helped the farmers learn about the "reality" of running a tourism initiative as opposed to the "dream" of such an undertaking. All participants were able to see how other communities have developed and are managing their tourism initiatives. They could also see the impact which tourism can have in terms of income, day-to-day activities and internal community relations.

Twelve families are participating actively in the project and have set up bedrooms with up to four beds. Approximately

## **Partnerships for development and agro-biodiversity conservation**

Several organisations are involved in this initiative, all of them with different interests and experience. One of them is Fundación PROINPA, a research and agro-biodiversity conservation institution based in La Paz. As a result of more than 15 years' work, they have vast knowledge of the intricate social and technological dynamics that characterise the Andean region. Another is UCODEP (Unity and Cooperation for the Development of People), an NGO based in Rome that has worked on a number of sustainable development projects, including initiatives aimed at helping tourism benefit the local communities. A third partner is La Paz on Foot, a small agro-tourism and environmental education project that organises courses and tourist packages that focus on the natural and cultural history of the Central Andes. The name illustrates the "slow-paced" experiences the company provides: visiting communities "on foot" and engaging in genuine interactions with local populations.

Additional input comes from "Alexander Coffee", an important restaurant chain in Bolivia's capital city. This chain has a long history of working with farming communities and has supported the development of two successful organic coffee-producing co-operatives. Bioversity International contributes by providing an overall framework within a multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder view. One of Bioversity's main interests is supporting pilot projects that alleviate poverty and generate income for rural communities while conserving agro-biodiversity and the associated cultural practices necessary to maintain *in situ* genetic diversity.



Photo: Stephen Taranto

**Tourists' stay in the community includes visiting farms, where they get a first taste of the local biodiversity.**

90 tourists from Europe and the United States visited the community in 2008, with many more expected in 2009. They stayed with the families in a "home-stay" style arrangement, passing time and sharing meals with their host families. The regular tourist participates in a 3-hour tour of the community. This includes visits to home gardens, farm parcels, the community school and eating a traditional lunch using locally produced foods. PROINPA has directed the development of garden plots that showcase the rich agro-biodiversity present in the Lake Titicaca region.

### **Some challenges remain within the community...**

While the community of Santiago de Okola is excited about its project, there are many challenges involved in its success. The learning curve for the participating families is steep. Their many obligations to farming and other household activities make it difficult to devote time to "growing" their new business. The still unpredictable and infrequent arrival of tourists makes it difficult to invest time and resources in improving the conditions of lodging and other services. In addition, the lure of urban areas means that periodic or permanent migration continues to be an option to many.

Nevertheless, the interest shown by the participating families is strong, and project technicians are working closely with all community members to make the project sustainable. For example, they are inviting more families to participate. Families are also investing personal resources in small improvements, such as cleaning up garbage around the village, painting bedrooms and purchasing china and cutlery for tourists' use.

We have many plans for the coming months. We will be setting up a community agricultural museum, and organising workshops that will look at the preparation of novel and more attractive meals made with local crops. We will be drafting the community company's internal statutes and regulations, and developing a website ([www.santiagodeokola.com](http://www.santiagodeokola.com) will soon be available). With support from UCODEP, representatives from the Runa Tupari agro-tourism initiative from Cotacachi,

Ecuador, will visit Santiago de Okola. At the same time, efforts are being made to re-introduce several native crop varieties on to farms, such as *cañawa* (*Chenopodium pallidicaule*) and new varieties of potato and quinoa. The hope is that this will diversify diets and help farmers to conserve regional agricultural traditions.

### **... and also beyond it**

An important additional partner in conserving the agricultural heritage of communities like Santiago de Okola is the Alexander Coffee restaurant chain. Their coffee shops are very popular with tourists and middle to upper class Bolivians. In 2008, with support from UCODEP, PROINPA and La Paz on Foot, Alexander Coffee led a series of campaigns to increase awareness of the nutritional, cultural and economic value of three Andean grains (quinoa, *cañawa* and amaranth). These grains have a very high nutritional value, but their production can hardly compete with that of wheat, maize or other associated products. Too often, people do not choose to eat them due to the fact that they are stigmatised as foods of the poor, a stereotype which is difficult to eliminate. Various activities took place during the three-month-long campaign. Four novel dishes using these grains were prepared (amaranth muffins and a quinoa salad, for example), and leaflets were placed on restaurant tables and counters with information about the history, culture and nutritional values of each crop.

Results among Bolivian consumers have been encouraging, showing a potentially permanent increase in the consumption of these grains. International tourists who visited Alexander Coffee might find it difficult to consume a diversity of Andean grains in their home countries, due to lack of availability. The idea, however, was to at least make them more aware of the agricultural richness of the Andean region, an aspect usually neglected by tourism companies operating in the region.

The experience showed that through NGO-private collaborations it is possible to reach a large audience with information which is important for increasing awareness about, and consumption of, native crops. It has also confirmed that the promotion of local agro-biodiversity can be successful providing that we use innovative, practical, culturally sensitive and attractive approaches. We find it important to aim at younger generations, for whom local crops and local food should be seen as an opportunity to re-discover their own roots and traditions in a pleasurable way.

The partnerships developed during this project ultimately depend on the willingness of local farmers and communities to continue using neglected and under-utilised species and varieties of native crops. In Santiago de Okola, the innovative approaches that focus on diversifying farmer economies seem to be working, albeit on a very small scale. Project co-ordinators are actively seeking additional support to be able to continue and, hopefully, replicate the positive results seen so far. The interest and commitment of farmers is critical to this process. But as they experience success, we are sure that this interest and commitment will continue to grow as well as their gardens do. ■

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