

# The Talamanca Initiative

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Talamanca is the region in the south of Costa Rica that stretches from the Caribbean to the continental divide in the central mountains, and borders on the southeast with Panama. It is the country's poorest region in socio-economic terms, but the richest in terms of biodiversity and tropical forest ecosystems. It harbours almost three percent of the world's known plant and animal species, many of which are found only in this area. Stretching from the highest point in the country to sea level, Talamanca's natural features include cloud forests, steep mountainsides, rich alluvial plains, mid-altitude and lowland rainforests, large expanses of wetlands, and offshore, a variety of marine ecosystems including Costa Rica's only coral reef. The Talamanca Range-La Amistad Reserves, covering over 500 000 ha and including the seven national parks in the area, were declared a UNESCO World Heritage Biosphere Reserve in 1982.



The Talamanca region stretches from the highest point in Costa Rica down to the Caribbean Sea.

Talamanca is home to more than half of Costa Rica's indigenous population, including peoples of the Bribri and Cabecar tribes, each with their own language and customs. The Hispanic/Mestizo population is also unusually diverse, due to historic and continuing immigration from various parts of Costa Rica and Central America. Along the coast the dominant group is English-speaking West Indians of African origin. Smaller numbers of immigrants from elsewhere have also established themselves there.

Traditionally, cacao was grown extensively in the region with very few inputs and little effort. It formed a component of the very diverse indigenous systems. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, banana growers invaded Talamanca and drove the indigenous people off much of their land. Talamanca was one of the first parts of the world where bananas were grown for international commerce. Eventually, the banana companies abandoned Talamanca in the

late 1930s due to Panama disease, declining soil fertility and a huge flood that destroyed most of their infrastructure. They tried to maintain ownership and control over their land by planting cacao plantations, managed by a small number of ex-banana workers in exchange for the harvest. The indigenous people who returned from their high mountain retreats to settle again planted cacao along with subsistence crops in their traditional way. Other settlers managed parts of the old plantations more intensively.

In 1978, the area was devastated by the appearance of the fast-spreading *monilia* pod rot (*Monilia roleri*). As a result, most cacao plantations were cut down or abandoned and many were transformed into cattle pastures and short-term cropping systems.

To help local people address the economic and social crisis brought on by the appearance of *monilia* pod rot, a local NGO, *Asociación ANAI*, and later two other organizations, the Association of Small Producers of Talamanca (APPTA) and the Talamanca Caribbean Biological Corridor (CBTC) started an initiative to encourage farmers to put into practice methods that both conserved the environment and generated income. This local initiative encouraged diversification based on perennial crops and ecological principles. It also encouraged farmer organization and ownership of a marketing cooperative, introduced and helped develop the marketing of certified organic products and developed ecotourism. The success of this initiative has now been internationally recognized.

## The Talamanca Initiative

Known as the *Talamanca Initiative*, these three partner organizations, each with its own programme and specific objectives, share the common goal of improving the quality of life in Talamanca through the preservation and environmentally ethical use of its outstanding biodiversity and unique ecosystems. A common core belief is that the key to conservation and sustainable development is the successful management of these issues by the local people. It is based on five core principles:

1. No inherent contradiction exists between economic development and environmental conservation. If communities and nations are to thrive, development and conservation must take place together.
2. The best stewards of the tropical lowlands are the *campesinos* (small-scale farmers) and Indian farmers who have dedicated their lives to these lands.
3. All natural tropical areas that are not protected will be radically altered during our lifetime. We must work to protect these areas and preserve their biodiversity for future generations to enjoy.
4. The natural forest and other unique primary ecosystems are Talamanca's most economically valuable asset in the long term.
5. A successful strategy to address these issues must successfully integrate environmental, social, economic and organizational needs.

## Finding suitable farming methods

The first step was to find an alternative to cacao as a source of income. Talamanca farmers knew that diversification was the answer to sustaining their livelihoods, as it would protect their crops from disease and provide year-round food and income.

The problem was, how? The region is characterized by a humid tropical climate with frequent torrential rainfall, steep slopes and limited infrastructure.

ANAI's vision was to minimize destructive agricultural practices by establishing diversified agroforestry systems. These agro-ecosystems would mimic the natural forest and complement the conservation of biodiversity in the natural forest areas that exist in patches throughout the region and as a large block in the national park area. Because tropical rainforests maintain almost all their nutrients in the trees and other plants, when a forest is cleared almost all the nutrients are lost and the original forests cannot be regenerated. This combination of agroforestry and natural forest would not only preserve the biodiversity of the region, it would protect the watersheds and provide opportunities for tourism and local recreation. It would also allow the sustainable harvesting of wood and other products, such as medicinal plants.

ANAI began by planting organic crops on their experimental farm in 1980, eventually planting more than 150 species of fruit, nut and spice crops that had been identified from the world's lowland rainforest areas as having the potential for integration into Talamanca's small farm systems. This included local varieties of bananas and many types of less known fruit trees, such as *araza*, *sapoti* and jackfruit. Using the information gathered during the crop trials, ANAI helped local farmers establish tree nurseries in every community of Talamanca, an innovative approach that allowed the distribution of the new crops and new varieties of cacao to communities far from the nearest road.

These community nurseries were developed not only as a means of producing seedlings locally, but also as community training centres and focal points for community organization.

### Galvanizing community movement

ANAI learned early in the process that most people and communities had little experience of coming together in groups to make decisions and solve problems. The nurseries became meeting places where people could learn about crops and come together to organize community work. Large numbers of people became engaged because participation resulted in both tangible and intangible benefits for them and their families.

ANAI's leadership helped catalyse the formation of multiple grassroots organizations. Over four years (1985-1989), ANAI met weekly with farmers from each community, and monthly with representatives from all communities, designing a regional programme to address sustainable development and conservation issues. This eventually led to the formation of grassroots organizations including APPTA, an association of farmers; CBTC; *Finca Educativa*, a regional training centre; and a diversity of community-level organizations such as savings and loan groups. The practical activities created a culture of collective work, which had far-reaching positive impacts.

The Initiative now involves the collaboration and co-operation of more than 20 grassroots organizations, 1500 families, small producers and Costa Rica's Ministry of the Environment and Energy. Participants include men and women from all the social and ethnic groups of the southern Caribbean region of Costa Rica, including indigenous, Afro-Caribbean and Mestizo peoples.



Photo: APPTA

Organically grown cacao pods.

Between 1985 and 1990, more than two million seedlings of cash crops, food crops and trees for timber were planted on the region's family farms, creating a larger and much more diverse resource base. The variety of plants and trees mimicked the variety in natural forests and so helped to support biological diversity – a key to thriving human and natural communities.

### Commercializing crop diversification

To make crop diversification economically viable APPTA developed a local processing infrastructure and marketing strategies. ANAI identified the potential for growing and marketing organically grown crops, and used this information to find and develop markets, locally and worldwide. Receiving fair trade and organic certification from internationally recognized organizations was an instrumental step that made it possible to pursue these new markets. Together, ANAI and APPTA established one of the first organic certification programmes for small farmers in Costa Rica, certifying the first 500 farms, and subsequently helping to facilitate the creation of ANAO, the national organic agriculture association. This has now developed into a national certification agency, Eco-Logica, a key element in Costa Rica's growing organic agriculture movement. The price premium farmers are receiving for their certified organic products ranges from 15 to 50 percent.

Today, over 1500 Talamancan farmers have established organic agro-ecosystems, combining commercial crops with food security strategies in a multi-story planting system that mimics the structure and function of the rainforest.

Talamanca has become the largest volume producer and exporter of organic products in Central America, generating an annual income of US\$500 000, which is channelled into the local economy through a large number of family farmers. Current sales of organic banana generate more than US\$12 000 per week. Demand for organic cacao has outgrown supply, so the programme is being expanded to neighbouring countries to meet demand. Smaller volumes of many of the other perennial crops introduced during the "nursery project" are now being marketed by APPTA to Costa Rica's biggest chain of food stores, thereby distributing the farmer's income more evenly over the year. This distribution of income is perhaps even more important than the amounts involved, since it improves social stability and allows farmers to stay on their farm with their family all year, instead of having to migrate seasonally in search of paid work.

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## >> Training and education

In 1991, a locally-run regional training centre known as the “Educational Farm” (*Finca Educativa*) was established in the Talamanca Indigenous Reserve. It was constructed by the people who use it and is managed by a local board of directors and executive committee. It serves over 2000 people per year, providing courses and workshops in agriculture, health, appropriate technology, and conservation – for example on the concept of endangered species, reforestation, and the relationship of individual animal species with their habitat. Leadership training programmes have focused on empowering local people to function as community leaders, and this has served, among other things, to strengthen community-based organizations. Environmental education in local primary schools has been undertaken since the early 1990s. As a result of the high participation, the Talamancan people have an exceptional awareness and interest in the environmental issues that challenge the region.

Farmers that have been trained in managing the new crops and agricultural systems are creating many new jobs on their productive, labour-intensive family farms, while at the same time ensuring significant environmental benefits such as improved soil and water quality, biodiversity habitat, carbon dioxide fixation – and improved community health.

### Developing ecotourism

The growth of tourism in Talamanca has exploded since 1985 and has been recognized as a double-edged sword, representing both destructive elements and opportunities. Much of the early tourism development in Costa Rica was carried out by businesses with little regard for the environment or the local people. In contrast, the *Talamanca Initiative* recognized the potential to draw further income into the region by developing a sustainable and locally owned ecotourism market. Therefore, emphasis has been placed on proper planning and the management of activities by local people.

The early work of two ecotourism lodges informed and guided ecotourism activities by other groups. The pioneers demonstrated that locally controlled ecotourism can make their organizations stronger and more sustainable.

In 1998, 17 associations formed the *Talamancan Community Ecotourism Network*, a collaborative effort that facilitates close organizational relations, product development, sharing of information and ideas, training, collaborative planning, production of promotional media, and participation in ecotourism fairs.

Training in ecotourism has been designed to help local people learn the skills necessary to develop community-based ecotourism initiatives, including training in financial management, small business operation, computer technology, ecology, biology, natural history, and tourism management.

There are now nine ecotourism lodges, all of which are owned and managed by community organizations whose objectives include conservation, sustainable economic development, community development, and protection of cultural traditions. The revenue earned goes directly to the families in the community who own and work in these operations, and helps to further develop their environmental, social and cultural initiatives.

The tangible benefits from community-owned ecotourism have been an essential part of the process of developing support for

conservation among the rural poor. Recently the Talamanca Network decided to create a conservation fund, to which they will contribute a percentage of all ecotourism income. In the community of Manzanillo, within the *Gandoca Manzanillo National Wildlife Refuge*, the local people were almost completely opposed to the creation of the Refuge in 1985. Initially, they struggled to be able to finish the deforestation of their portion of what would become the Refuge. Today, almost everyone is an avid defender of the wildlife refuge in particular and biodiversity conservation in general, because the community's greatly improved livelihoods revolve around nature tourism.

The ecotourism venture, managed by local families in the Gandoca community, provides homestays and services for ecotourists and volunteers on the ANAI *Sea Turtle Conservation Programme*. The Nature Guides Association for the village of Manzanillo, managed by an executive committee of member guides, provides local guide services. Other community-based ventures are also beginning to provide services of different kinds, based on the attractions and interesting elements of their community and culture. All these groups are committed to the ideal of ecotourism as both a livelihood and a means for biodiversity and ecosystem conservation. The integration of scientific research, conservation and ecotourism has become the main economic activity in the village of Gandoca, generating more than six times the income previously obtained by poaching turtle eggs.

### Where next?

The *Talamanca Initiative* has achieved some extraordinary outcomes over the last twenty years, only some of which are mentioned in this article. This is a living example of how conservation can improve the local economy and quality of life. Many people are actively creating a better present and future. They have taken responsibility for maintaining a healthy environment, strong local organizations, local economic stability, and respect for the different cultures that thrive in Talamanca. The current generation has grown up knowing how to respect the environment, meeting their economic needs while developing in harmony with nature and society.

The impacts of an outside world with an ever-increasing interest in Talamanca's resources continue to grow, and provide new challenges every day. But many of the region's people and organizations have made a commitment that is not limited by time or funding and they will continue to share their success with others. This process is alive, struggling with the issues of today and tomorrow. It continues to be a very participatory and creative process. A true integration of social, economic, cultural, organizational and environmental needs requires a monumental and continual effort, whereas quick and easy approaches lead to short-lived solutions. The people of Talamanca have accepted this challenge, and are today working hard to establish and consolidate new approaches to living that produce immediate tangible results and also promise a better future. They can see that their efforts are making a difference.

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