



#ForestPartnerships #EUGreenDeal #TeamEurope

FORESTS FOR THE FUTURE

Our future is in our hands and in our trees

Interview with **Cristina Coc**

Q'eqchi Maya community leader, Belize

Why do forests matter to you?

Forests matter because it is the home to many indigenous peoples globally including the Q'eqchi and Mopan Maya of Southern Belize. As forest dwelling, forest dependent people, our entire identity, livelihood and spirituality comes from the sacred Tzul-Taqua (mountains and the valleys). The forest is a sacred element, as is the water, air and earth. We source everything from the forest to make our shelters, our medicine, plant and grow our food. It is in the Forest that we teach our children of our practices, beliefs, language, values and cosmovision. The forest matters to me because it is the sacred gift from the creator to sustain our lives, grow our corn and beans, and raise our children.

What are the main challenges to forests in your area today?

Belize is certainly blessed with natural landscapes including southern Belize where a very vibrant biodiverse rainforest remains the home of indigenous Peoples. Like forests everywhere in this world, the forest is under threat. Some of the main drivers of deforestation include massive large scale mechanised monocrop farming and cattle ranching, logging, purchase into private property, and tourism. Among the Maya communities their land tenure has become insecure after massive logging concessions, oil exploration concessions and land sales. The Maya peoples' rights to their traditional lands continues to be denied even as the Caribbean Court of Justice affirmed these rights in 2015.

What is your idea of sustainable forest management?

Sustainable forest management is not a term commonly used among the Maya but certainly a concept of practice in the very relationship Maya people have with their lands and forests. The use, occupation and guardianship of the forest is built on a system of reciprocity with each other and with our environment. We use only what we need, we sustain for the enjoyment of our children's children, we teach respect, value and care through our spirituality. When we have to pierce the face of mother earth to sow our corn seeds, we ask in reverence for permission by burning our sacred copal and offering gratitude for giving us life.

Forest People Portraits no. 3/2022



The Proust Questionnaire

Freely inspired by a parlour game popularised by the French novelist Marcel Proust

Your chief characteristic?

Perhaps being an advocate.

What do you appreciate most in people?

What I appreciate most from anyone is understanding and kindness.

Your idea of happiness?

My idea of happiness is swinging in a hammock under a tree with my beautiful kids talking about anything that interests them and exploring our wildest childlike imaginations.

Your greatest fear? War.

If not yourself, who would you like to be?

If not myself, I would like to be a builder, designing homes that are eco-friendly and engineering buildings that maintain to the greatest extent the integrity of the natural environment.

Your favourite tree?

The Ceiba, the tree of life for the Maya people.
The majestic Yaxche.

We practice a collective well being, where we exchange labour, knowledge and values as we thatch our homes, plant our fields, harvest our crops. We build an identity as Ral Ch'och "children of the earth" so that we know the responsibility of protecting mother earth no matter where we go in this world.

This is my idea of sustainable forest management. When we recognize ourselves as the keepers of the earth, only then can we truly understand sustainability.

How can sustainable forestry contribute to create jobs and income?

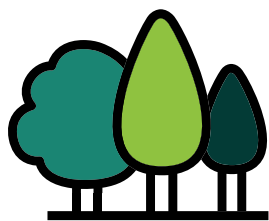
Indigenous Peoples have been extracting from the forest for their personal use and subsistence for centuries. The commercialization of the forest then, is a very different relationship in so far as it applies a market value on timber and non-timber forest products. The Maya have been on the defensive for the last 30 years fighting off the sale of their logging concessions on their lands to multinational corporations. With a historic court ruling affirming their rights over these lands they can finally go on the offensive and build a viable economy on their land. We want to create jobs and income, but we dream of building an economy that is unlike the conventional economic development model. Selling just raw material for export to foreign lands is an archaic model that generates very little returns. Sustainable Forestry should be seen in a way that provides for the sustainable extraction while adding value by producing finished products that provide for a local economy as well as a global economy. It also requires that we look to non-timber forest products.

How can the European Union better support your country's objective in relation to the forestry sector?

Continuing to promote the security of Land tenure for Belize's indigenous peoples. It is important to monitor that funding is not used to abrogate the rights of the Maya people as they continue to defend their rights to their ancestral lands. Forests depend on people living in nature and are reliant on nature for their livelihood. The must EU insist that Belize complies to international obligations such those enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights Indigenous Peoples, and other global standards. It would be our desire to directly work with the EU through our customary representative bodies.

Which forest-related achievement do you admire most?

Maya villages of southern Belize have formalised and decentralised customary use permits to harvest and enjoy forest resources administered at the village level by village leaders. This initiative has greatly aided the Forest department to detect and curb illegal logging in the Toledo District through local governance mechanisms. Women and youth are experimenting with forest materials to diversify their artisanal products through local entrepreneurship. For example Maya women have identified several types of natural seeds that they use to make artisanal jewellery. This is a clear indication that women have their own unique use and enjoyment of the land and should therefore be integral in the discussion surrounding Maya land rights. By taking on an active role to document their own customary forest governance practices, the Maya people are actively engaging in sustainable forest management.



Cristina Coc is a leader of the Maya community in southern Belize. She has served as co-spokesperson for the Maya Leaders Alliance (MLA) and is the founder advocacy organization, the Julian Cho Society. In 2015, she and the MLA were awarded the Equator Prize for their efforts in protecting indigenous rights.



FORESTS FOR THE FUTURE FACILITY

The EU-funded Forests for the Future Facility (F4) provides technical support to contribute to healthy forest ecosystems and forest-related value chains in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. The Facility is managed by DG International Partnerships Unit F2 – Environment, Natural Resources, Water.

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