



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Consolidation of the Amazon Region, COAMA (Colombia)

(1999)



...for showing how indigenous people can improve their livelihood, sustain their culture and conserve their rainforests.

COAMA representatives
in Stockholm

Between 1986-1990 the Colombian Government legally recognised 20 million hectares of rainforest in the Colombian Amazon region as 'collective indigenous territory' - resguardos. This policy was an unprecedented move towards the recognition of indigenous rights and the important role of forest peoples in the conservation of the world's tropical rainforests. It was achieved through the pressure of indigenous communities, and the determined support of many Colombians, including Martin von Hildebrand, as Head of Indigenous Affairs at that time.

In 1990 funds were secured from the EU to set up a network of field officers to accompany the communities to develop and implement their recognised rights to continue to manage their rainforest ecosystem according to their own cultural norms and priorities. This evolved into the COAMA Programme, which Martin von Hildebrand helped to foster and now coordinates, and which consists of a number of Colombian NGOs - Gaia Amazonas, Fundación Etnollano, Fundación Erigaie, Hylea, Fundación Ecologia-Social, FundaMinga, CECOIN, and the Gaia Foundation in London. Through a process of intercultural analysis and reflection, the COAMA team (which eventually grew to about 50 people) established a relationship of mutual respect and reciprocity with those indigenous communities who wished to work in this way. This has allowed them to make informed, collective choices to determine their own development path. Out of this process, microprojects developed in health, education, cultural and ecological recuperation and market product projects, through which the indigenous communities began to reclaim control of their livelihood systems.

The COAMA group of NGOs continued their cooperation through the 1990s, while maintaining respect for each other's differences, and thereby provided united support for about 250 indigenous communities of 22 differential cultural groups in this enormous rainforest sanctuary. COAMA has provided a context in which a mutually respectful alliance has evolved between indigenous communities and occidental specialists which has helped to transform the historical relationship of exploitation into a creative joint search for sustainable options in the present context. Based on the work and values of indigenous communities, COAMA has promoted an alternative approach to tropical rainforest conservation, which implies strengthening indigenous rights and promoting a genuine process of inter-cultural collaboration.

An international evaluation, undertaken in 1996, stated that the COAMA projects have had 'a big impact in the indigenous communities, which have strong bonds of trust with the expert personnel'. A former President of Colombia, Alfonso Lopes, has called COAMA a 'ray of light', describing it as 'our contribution... to the creation of a world of co-operation and solidarity and our fight to save humanity

from the ravages of civilisation'.

Quotation

"Inter-cultural approaches are not simply combining different elements, but are ways of respecting differences and of searching together for appropriate paths."

Martin von Hildebrand

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