



**COMMUNITY TOURS SIAN
KA'AN**
Mexico



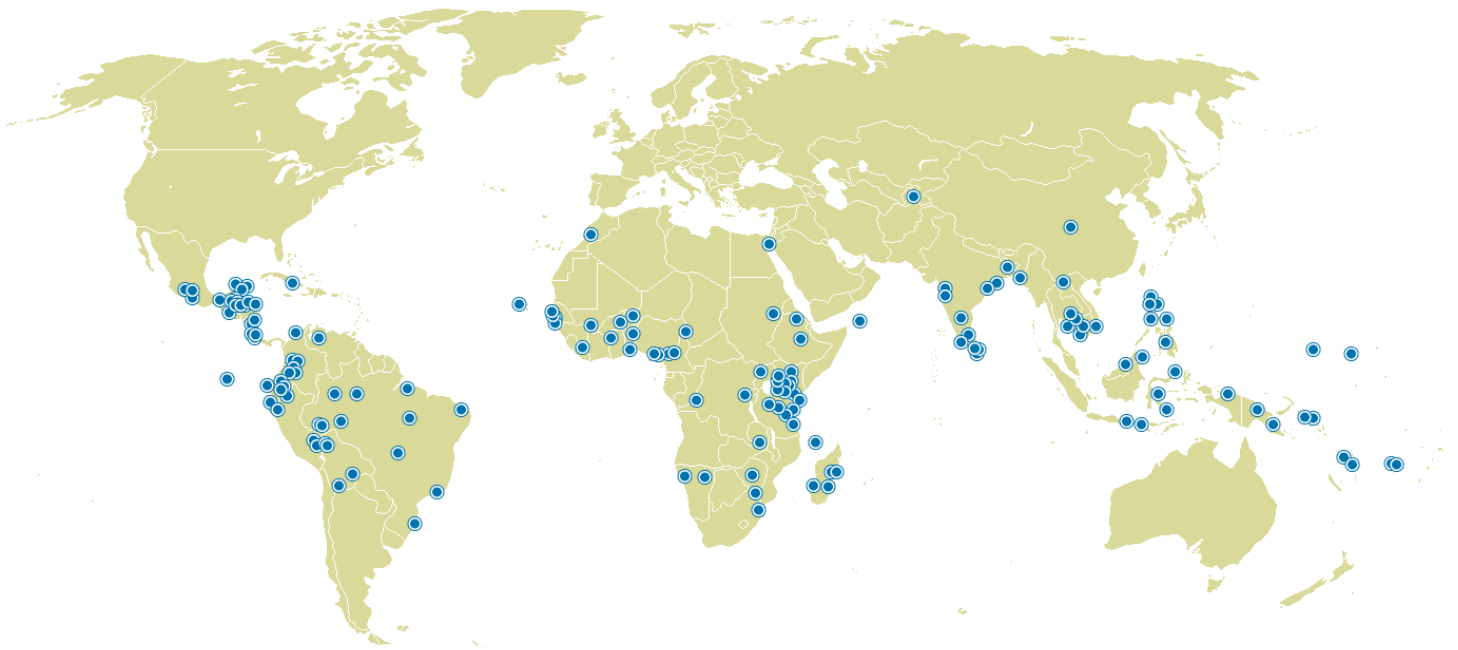
Equator Initiative Case Studies

Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities

UNDP EQUATOR INITIATIVE CASE STUDY SERIES

Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative.

To mark its 10-year anniversary, the Equator Initiative aims to fill this gap. The following case study is one in a growing series that details the work of Equator Prize winners – vetted and peer-reviewed best practices in community-based environmental conservation and sustainable livelihoods. These cases are intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as models for replication. Case studies are best viewed and understood with reference to *'The Power of Local Action: Lessons from 10 Years of the Equator Prize'*, a compendium of lessons learned and policy guidance that draws from the case material.



Click on the map to visit the Equator Initiative's searchable case study database.

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COMMUNITY TOURS SIAN KA'AN

Mexico

PROJECT SUMMARY

The Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve is the largest marine protected area in Mexico, spanning more than 1.3 million acres of land and ocean. It has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in recognition of its rich biodiversity and wealth of Mayan culture; "Sian Ka'an" is Mayan for "where the sky is born".

Working within this protected area is Community Tours Sian Ka'an, an alliance of three sustainable ecotourism cooperatives that work directly with the Punta Allen and Muyil indigenous communities. While the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve receives thousands of visitors every year, indigenous communities have not historically benefited from this traffic or from investments in the local economy: the initiative has aimed to change this by training community guides in operating small, group-based ecotourism ventures, promoting Mayan culture through visits to archaeological sites, and the sale of tourism-related handicraft products.

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KEY FACTS

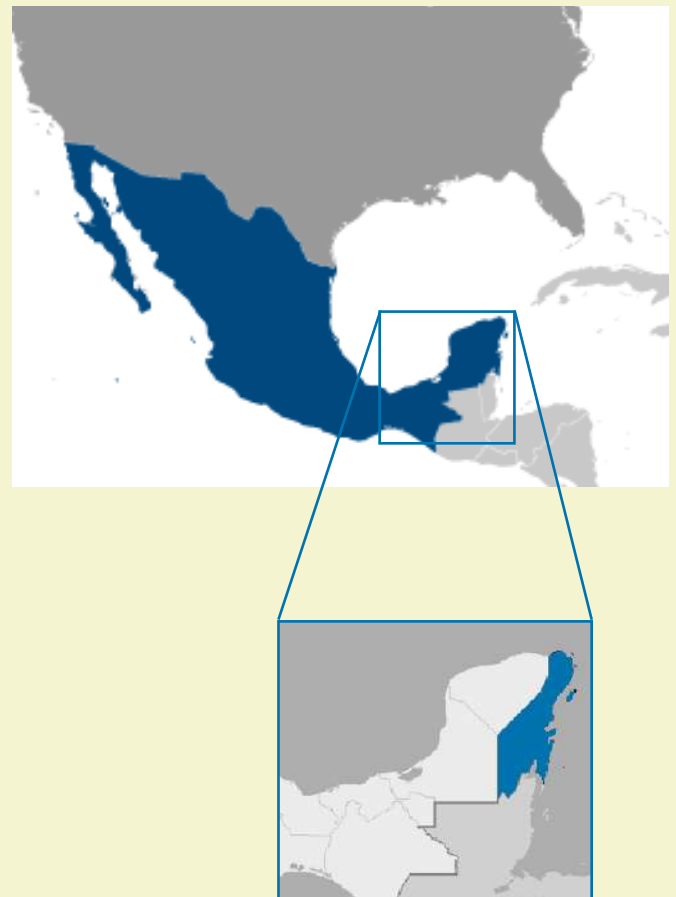
EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2006

FOUNDED: 2003

LOCATION: Tulum, Mexico

BENEFICIARIES: Three cooperatives in two villages

BIODIVERSITY: Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve



Background and Context



Community Tours Sian Ka'an (CTSK) is an alliance of three cooperatives that run sustainable ecotourism operations in the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. Working directly with members of the Punta Allen and Muyil indigenous communities, the organization uses low-impact ecotourism to provide the local population with sustainable livelihoods in a manner that does not diminish the biodiversity or unique ecosystems found within the reserve.

Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve

The Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve is the largest marine protected area in Mexico. It spans more than 1.3 million acres of land and ocean and has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in recognition of its rich biodiversity and wealth of Mayan culture. The reserve consists of lowland forests, flooded savannas, mangroves, and a portion of the world's second largest coastal reef – the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef. It is also home to over 800 plant species, 350 bird species, and important populations of jaguar, puma, ocelot, spider and howler monkeys, crocodiles, and several types of turtles. The reserve also contains 23 different archaeological Mayan sites of pre-Columbian culture. Sian Ka'an is Mayan for "where the sky is born".

A community-based ecotourism enterprise

Community Tours Sian Ka'an aims to make ecotourism a profitable sector for local communities and a catalyst for conservation action. Within the borders of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, the group organizes tours, trains and employs local guides, assists communities

in the development of tourism support services such as hotels and restaurants, and collaborates with national and international non-governmental organizations to promote sustainable, low-impact tourism and high-impact conservation. The organization aims to raise awareness about the cultural and natural wealth in the reserve, the challenges to its survival and the ways in which effective action can be pursued. CTSK generates both direct and indirect employment for the local community.

CTSK was founded in 2003 when the cooperatives of Punta Allen, Vigia Grande, Los Gaytanes, Uyoolche Maya, and Los Aluxes de Muyil joined forces to provide visitors with a consolidated menu of tourist services. In 2007, a business plan was developed which outlined the suite of services and products that would be provided by CTSK as a collective to visiting tourists. At the end of that year, the group was officially recognized and legally incorporated. Since then, the organization has overseen an average annual visitor increase of 30% as well as a 30% increase in average household incomes.

Governance and institutional structure

The leadership of the CTSK is composed of a president, secretary, and treasurer. This executive meets at regular intervals with representatives of member cooperatives to develop short, medium and long-term work plans. Meetings are also held on an ad hoc basis when specific challenges or opportunities arise.

"Participation of the community is essential. Local people need to be empowered to make decisions about their resources and the environments in which they live."

Roman Caamal, Operations Coordinator, Community Tours Sian Ka'an

Key Activities and Innovations



While the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve receives thousands of visitors every year, indigenous communities have not historically benefited from this traffic or from investments in the local economy. CTSK aims to change that by redirecting the benefits of a tourism-based economy to the indigenous communities of the region. Among the main activities of the company are small, group-based ecotourism ventures; operation of botanical gardens; promotion of Mayan culture through visits to archaeological sites and operation of a community museum (in Muyil); awareness-raising campaigns on biodiversity loss and indigenous culture; beach cleaning campaigns (as part of the company's environmental and social responsibility); trainings and workshops for bird-watchers in the bird monitoring center (in Muyil); and engaging the local indigenous community in the development and sale of new ecotourism-related products and services.

CTSK promotes the conservation and preservation of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve through ecotourism, educational tours, workshops in schools, and beach cleaning campaigns. The company earmarks 5% of ecotourism revenues for local conservation activities and has constructed a 1000-meter trail across a natural channel, which has reduced the need for an environmentally damaging boat launch that was causing erosion in the channel.

Ecotourism in Sian Ka'an

As a community-based ecotourism company, Community Tours Sian Ka'am aims to generate jobs for the local people and to promote the region's natural and cultural wealth through ecotourism services. CTSK places an emphasis on low-impact tourism that will ensure the ongoing conservation and preservation of the reserve. This is accomplished by a company policy of working with and serving small groups of visitors. (Excursions and educational tours are carried out in groups of no more than 12 people.) To carry out its tours, the company maintains six 23-foot boats with outboard motors, twelve two-person kayaks, and two single person kayaks.

Visitors are offered a range of services and outings, including: a walking tour of Muyil Forest, swimming in the Chunyaxche Lagoon, a sunset tour of the reserve, a kayak tour of a channel which passes through four ecosystems, a catch-and-release fly fishing tour, and a birding and natural history walk) with exposure to the over 350 bird species in the reserve). The company works with the community to develop new activities that draw on local knowledge and expertise and which source from local artisans, painters and wood carvers.

CTSK aims to change the way tourism companies provide services in the reserve. The company uses boats with environmentally friendly engines. Instead of bottled water or soft drinks, CTSK provides visitors with juice made from local fruits.

Botanical garden and bird monitoring

CTSK has created a botanical garden – which houses largely medicinal plants – for the preservation and dissemination of traditional ecological knowledge. The garden also hosts a community museum, which provides visitors with information on the flora and fauna of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve and the Yucatan Peninsula more broadly. The botanical garden and museum also receive local school children for presentations on biodiversity, conservation and Mayan culture where the children are encouraged to share their own personal ideas on where conservation and culture overlap.

The company is in the process of exploring partnerships with Mexican universities, specifically those with conservation and ornithology expertise. The objective of these partnerships is to encourage graduate students to conduct research in the community bird monitoring center, thereby improving the community's monitoring and evaluation capacity and creating new data on which to base strategies for environmental care and the preservation of endemic migratory bird species.

Impacts



BIODIVERSITY IMPACTS

Due to the confluence of a subtropical climate and shallow soil depths, a rich and unique variety of vegetation is present in the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. Four distinct ecosystems are represented: tropical evergreen forest, including the dominant Maya nut and sapodilla species and climber species such as lianas vines and a variety of orchids; tropical deciduous forest (present in drier regions); thorny forest, which contains a heterogeneous mix of lowland forests with a high thorn content; and sub-aquatic vegetation, which is present in the area's brackish lagoons and marshes.

The reserve is home to a number of threatened species, including the endangered manatee, as well as regionally and globally important populations of jaguar, puma, ocelot, spider and howler monkeys, crocodiles, turtles, wild boar, badger, and armadillo. Some of the 350 bird species found in the reserve include the Ocellated turkey, pheasant, toucan, cardinal and vulture. The reserve also contains a number of unique frog, toad, and lizard species as well as rattlesnakes, coral snakes, boas, yellow beards.

The tourism services provided by CTSK are educational in nature, aiming to raise awareness about the importance of protecting and conserving biodiversity in the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. Beach cleaning, workshops, and community discussion forums have all helped to change local attitudes towards conservation and the negative impacts human activity can have on the natural environment. The company has overseen significant reductions in slash-and-burn farming, groundwater contamination, and hunting (or poaching).

SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

The company has created income-generating opportunities, employment and a value-added ecotourism model to benefit the local communities of Chumpon and Muyil. In addition to creating

direct employment in the ecotourism operation, CTSK also supports local artisans by providing them with a space and showroom to sell their products (in the company office and community museum). On average, the company aims to host and serve approximately 500 visitors per month.

CTSK runs a collaborative business model, bringing together a number of different community-based tour companies. The net result has been a reduction in price competition. Through CTKS, a consortium of community-based tour companies has been able to establish standards for pricing, and to raise tour prices by 40%. The price of a three-hour tour has increased from USD 90 in 2003 to USD 130 in 2006. By establishing similar standards for environmental care and reinvestment in the community, the company has been able to justify this increase.

Investments have been made in training, education and workshops for local translators, operations coordinators, receptionists and managers. Training places an emphasis on customer service. Local staff – in particular, guides – are equipped to be knowledgeable and passionate about local culture and biodiversity. The company has worked with partners such as CYSK, UNESCO, UNEP, the United Nations Foundation and Rare to build the capacity of nature guides and that of the consortium to promote and market its ecotourism services.

The community-based ecotourism industry has provided the local population with an alternative to environmentally destructive activities that used to be mainstays of the local economy, namely poaching and illegal logging. Job creation has also reduced out-migration to large cities, which has encouraged investments in youth and long-term education. CTSK has expanded opportunities for local women, and broke new ground by hiring the first female tour guide in the reserve. The company helped launch a group called Ulumil Beh – a women's self-help group that produces dragon fruit jam.

Sustainability and Replication



SUSTAINABILITY

Government agencies, national non-governmental organizations and international stakeholders play an important role in the sustainability of Community Tours Sian Ka'an. A good amount of support has come in the form of technical training, capacity building and the transfer of managerial skills and know-how. Partners have also been instrumental in the development of marketing strategies, implementing community outreach and mobilization strategies, financial management, and the construction of infrastructure to enhance service delivery in the community.

The development of trusted relationships with the tour operators, travel agencies, hotels and promoters responsible for corralling and directing visitors to the reserve from tourism markets such as Cancun, the Mayan Riviera and Tulum has been an essential component of success and will continue to be into the future. By delivering service-oriented ecotourism activities, CTSK has gained a reputation for a reliably high quality experience.

There remains, however, a great deal of competition for tourists coming to the region and to the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. Many of the operations the company is competing with have significantly larger budgets and human resource power dedicated to marketing, advertising and promotion. CTSK recognizes that the best way to continue winning a larger and larger percentage of the tourism market share is to offer a unique and personal ecotourism experience which is set apart by its environmental responsibility and respect for cultural integrity. This said, partnerships will need to be leveraged over the longer term to penetrate markets beyond the reach of personal testimonials and word of mouth.

The community notes a need for greater flexibility from government agencies in meeting bureaucratic requirements for permits, licenses and business operations. A more enlightened policy environment, which created incentives and allowances for community-based

action would improve the adaptive capacity of CTSK and that of other grassroots and indigenous organizations looking to create sustainable livelihoods from non-extractive activities.

PARTNERSHIPS

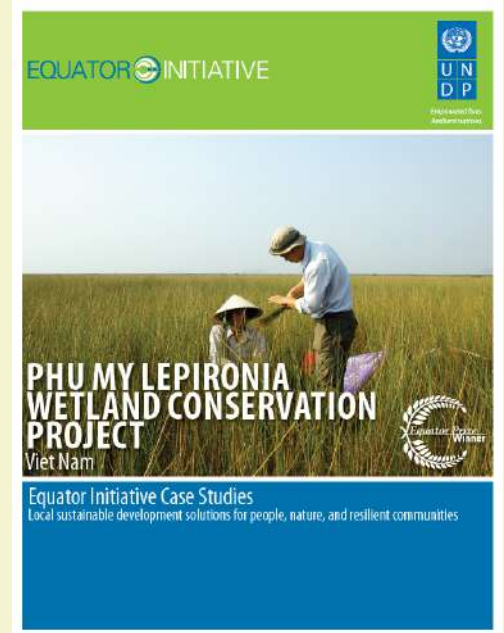
Current partners to the CTSK alliance include Expedia (in partnership with the United Nations Foundation); the Management of the Biosphere Reserve; the Government of Mexico; and Rare, a non-governmental organization that provides technical assistance in local capacity building.



FURTHER REFERENCE

- Community Tours Sian Ka'an website: siankaantours.org/en
- Video on Community Tours Sian Ka'an, Green Living Project (Vimeo) vimeo.com/29992277#

Click the thumbnails below to read more case studies like this:



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