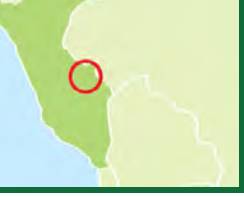

PERU

Polylepis protection in Peru

by Matthew Cranford, Imperial College London

Since 2003, Rainforest Concern has teamed up with La Asociación Ecosistemas Andinos (ECOAN) to help support the reforestation of Polylepis in the southern Peruvian Andes. Rainforest Concern has also helped support some of ECOAN's community development initiatives for households whose livelihoods depend on these woodlands.

Polylepis forests are the highest growing in the world, and one of the most vulnerable neotropical ecosystems, providing habitat to numerous endemic and charismatic species. In large part due to centuries of human influence, the forests now only cover a small percentage of their potential range in Peru and their distribution is extremely patchy.

In the summer of 2008, with support from the Holly Hill Trust, the Centre for Environmental Policy at Imperial College London carried out an investigation into the economic and social aspects of ECOAN's community conservation. The research highlights the success of the work already carried out and illuminates potential future directions.

Within the region that ECOAN works in to conserve Polylepis, over 60 percent of the households live in extreme or moderate poverty. These households have traditionally depended on wood from the forest, not only for construction, but as their only source of fuel for cooking and lighting. Although felling trees for wood is the greatest threat from and to local communities, current agricultural practices also place significant pressure on the woodlands.

Previous research carried out by the University of Plymouth (as described in Rainforest Concern's Autumn 2007 newsletter) found that although the area of forest has remained relatively stable, the density and quality of Polylepis forest patches decreased over the second half of the 20th century. But this is not to say that local communities do not value the ecosystem. In fact, it is clear that the majority of locals understand it is important to conserve the natural resources they depend on. The main restriction to conservation by locals is a lack of alternatives for fuel.

Forest degradation has been reduced through community initiatives

Local households reported that, in recent years, they have reduced their forest-degrading activities by close to 70 percent. In fact, the vast majority of that reduction is attributable to ECOAN's community conservation initiatives. ECOAN has worked to provide sustainable agricultural and fuel alternatives while helping to reduce energy needs. Additionally, the value that locals place on Polylepis woodlands has increased with reforestation efforts.

The dependancy on Polylepis wood for fuel is being reversed

Altogether, this means that community conservation efforts have helped locals to change their attitudes and behaviours away from forest degradation. The social environment is now supportive of conservation of the natural environment. The remaining question is how to capitalise on this success so that we can continue to sustain and protect this unique ecosystem.

Payments for ecosystem services (PES) have arisen in recent years as a very popular market-based conservation strategy. Organisations that benefit from ecosystem services, such as carbon sequestration, biodiversity and watershed protection, can pay landowners to conserve the natural ecosystem and provide those services. Not only do direct and conditional payments help ensure conservation, they can be used to transfer wealth from relatively richer buyers to impoverished ecosystem service providers in the developing world.

Polylepis - no other tree grows at such altitude

The main concern with PES is that the social environment is often not immediately conducive to them. However through community conservation, ECOAN and its partner organisations have not only begun to conserve Polylepis, but have also helped to create a local social environment with the potential to support PES. With carbon markets already in place globally and markets for biodiversity and water rapidly catching up, now may well be the time to consider implementing PES to increase and sustain conservation of the Polylepis forests in southern Peru.