

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE MANAGEMENT OF THE SMBR.

Sergio Graf Montero, Eduardo Santana.

The Sierra de Manantlán is an extremely complex territory where multiple actors and interests converge, many times interacting in a conflicting manner. When the area was declared a Biosphere Reserve in 1987, new rules were established that modified this interaction. New sources of conflict were introduced with the restrictions imposed on natural resource use on property through the creation of zoning without compensating land owners (Graf *et al.* 2000). Therein lies the fundamental importance of mechanisms that allow attending to the broad range of problems and conflicts through which stakeholders can arrive at binding and satisfactory decisions.

Taking into account the context of lack of democracy and “corporate” control by external political groups in many ejidos, the guidelines to achieve a truly participatory mechanism under those conditions were proposed in 1988 in the “Estrategia para la conservación de la Reserva de la Biosfera Sierra de Manantlán” (Jardel 1992) in the following manner:

“The participation of the [reserve] inhabitants in planning and decision making processes is important to take into account, but it must be clear that this form of participation, when conducted through representatives in councils, does not guarantee that it is an effective and truly representative mechanism that reflects the interests and rights of the [local] inhabitants. The reality of the conditions of agrarian communities in rural Mexico must be taken into account, where a situation of internal conflicts, disorganization, disinformation, undemocratic political controls [cacicazgos], and even corruption, do not guarantee in many cases the functionality of [so called] representative mechanisms.”

“For this reason *in the case of the SMBR we have proposed that the participatory mechanisms be established through the [participation in] communal and ejido assemblies* [italics in original text]. In this initial phase, the differences in organization, social problems and conditions in each community implies [considering] different processes with regards to the effective integration and participation of the [local] inhabitants. This implies that you start with a general conceptual plan that serves as a framework for implementing actions in the different agrarian communities in the reserve, which can be considered as subunits of management, which are presently [in 1988] out of phase from the on-going [reserve establishment] process, but tending towards integration in the medium term.”

After a long process of generating trust among different stakeholders, including the governing assemblies of ejidos and indigenous communities, the reserve management achieved legitimacy among the local communities. New spaces for community participation began to be constructed where debates could take place. One of these spaces is the Advisory Council (CA) in which community and local academic institutions and social organisations are represented, as well as the three levels of government. In cases of ejidos or indigenous communities where undemocratic conditions prevail (not presently a widespread situation in the reserve as was the case previous to 1995 after the Zapatista uprising and the political changes in the State Government of Jalisco), then the DRBSM made special efforts to incorporate social or ethnic organizations that represented groups that were disenfranchised and traditionally excluded from the decision-making processes in their own communities.

The management plan is discussed and approved by the Advisory Council, and is implemented by the different members of this council at the level in which they each participate (e.g., at the scale of ejido and indigenous community territory, or in private plots). The management plan, as well as the AC, form part of the mandate of the National Commission of Protected Natural Areas (CONANP) of the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT) to administrate natural protected areas.

The *raison d'être* of the CA is to attend in a formal and institutional way the key issues defined by the local society along strategic guidelines (e.g., community forest management, core zone management, poverty alleviation, water pollution in the Ayuquila River, and gender issues) and provide conciliatory mechanisms for addressing conflicts and interactions among its members, as well between those interests that are juxtaposed to nature conservation. The consolidation of these potentially open, democratic and participative processes is a key factor in the planning, evaluation and decision-making involved in the different spaces and levels (Graf *et al.* 2003).

The main actors in this complex scenario are involved in both of the two Advisory Councils (CAs) of the Reserve, one in Colima and the other in Jalisco. Conceived as spaces for deliberation and decision-making on matters relating to the management of natural resources in the Reserve, one CA for each state was created in 1997 by the Head Office of the Reserve. The objective was to facilitate operational planning and synergy with federal and state government programmes that were applied to the specific context of each state, in a political environment of tense relations between the governments of Jalisco and Colima due to a long-standing conflict over boundaries between in the zone adjacent to the reserve. However, collaboration between both CAs has been achieved at the level of their sub-councils and commissions which operate jointly on thematic issues.

Currently, the CAs of the Reserve include a total of 22 of the 28 ejidos, three indigenous communities, three indigenous social organisations, eight municipalities, two universities, two NGOs,, a representative of each of the two state governments and a representative of the federal government. The Council attends strategic agendas such as the management and conservation of forests and water, eco-tourism, the improvement of production systems, gender equity, etc. As part of the Council, two sub-councils have been formed: one for forestry development and another for management of the Rio Ayuquila Basin, supported by two working commissions, the first for the development of eco-tourism and the second to promote equity between men and women (Graf *et al.* 2003).