GUIDING THE WAY TO NEW OPPORTUNITIES IN THE COPÁN VALLEY, HONDURAS

Maria-Valéria Junho Pena and Kathryn Johns Swartz

Archaeology in Copán is not just about dead people. It is about the growth and development of contemporary populations. It is about feeding poor people, giving them jobs and making them proud of their heritage.

— Dr. Ricardo Agurcia, founder and director of the Copán Association.

Background

One of the challenges of rural poverty reduction in Latin America is to enhance non-farm economic activity, diversify employment, and foster enterprise activity. Although poverty has decreased over the last decade in Honduras, it continues to be pervasive, particularly in rural areas in the southern and western areas, including the Copán Valley, where the devastating economic impacts of Hurricane Mitch linger. This area contains the Copán Park, one of the most informative and impressive Mayan ruins in Central America with a large quantity of excellently preserved stone sculptures and hieroglyphic texts. This site is an important element in the patrimony of Honduras and the Government is seeking to preserve it for future generations, while increasing the number of tourists to promote sustainable economic development.

During 2000-2002, a small, innovative, and successful program was carried out in Copán, with support from the IDA-financed Profuturo Project, to help increase employment opportunities and promote research and dissemination of knowledge concerning the world of the Maya. The implementation of this program provides many lessons for development initiatives in areas of tourism growth and rural poverty, particularly among indigenous communities. In coordination with local initiatives and Government support, this program has helped to foster a new perspective on the role that parks such as Copán can play in regional and local development, poverty reduction, and environmental management.

Copán Valley. Copán is recognized as one of the most elaborate of all the Maya cities. Over the last decade, a strong program of research and site restoration has been accompanied by an increase in tourism and regional economic development. The number of annual visitors has increased from 12,500 in 1975 to 120,000 in 2001. Government revenue from Copán has increased and between 1997 and 2000, the equivalent of US$ 6.8 million was collected from visitor entrance fees.

The population of the Copán Valley is majority mestizo with a small contingent of international researchers and entrepreneurs. About 4000 Chortí Maya indigenous people live mainly in the mountainous rural areas with concentrations along the border with Guatemala. The majority live in conditions of extreme poverty with limited income and educational opportunities. The livelihood of this area has traditionally been agricultural. The large number of visitors has supported growth in tourism services, but has not resulted in wider income generation opportunities for a large portion of local inhabitants, particularly the Chortí.

World Bank Involvement. The World Bank began to support activities in Copán in 1999 with the US$8.3 million Interactive Environmental Learning and Science Promotion Project, also known as Profuturo (Cr. 3250). Approved less than a year after Hurricane Mitch, Profuturo promotes sustainable development by encouraging and expanding scientific, environmental and cultural knowledge and management. Profuturo was originally designed to finance a
facility for interactive learning in Tegucigalpa, the design of a smaller interactive learning facility on Maya heritage in Copán, and an inventory of cultural heritage for a sustainable tourism strategy. Following Hurricane Mitch, the project was re-oriented to also address emergency works, reconstruction needs, and employment opportunities in the Copán region. The Honduran Council of Science and Technology (COHCIT), is the implementing agency and the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History (IHAH) in the Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Sports is closely involved in all project activities in Copán.

The Copán Program consisted of three main elements:

**Emergency Subprojects:** Profuturo financed 21 emergency subprojects to repair areas of the park either damaged by Hurricane Mitch or in immediate need of preservation. All of the subprojects, which included restoration of the Archeological Court; installation of protective coverings; Hieroglyphic Staircase; and dredging of the Copán River were successfully carried out providing short-term employment and skills training for local residents.

**Management Plan:** The Copán Park has been managed as a protected area since the 1950s, with the first Management Plan being developed twenty years ago as a part of the declaration of Copán as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. An updated Plan was necessary to identify deterioration of the site due to natural and cultural factors and to provide a framework for a systematic conservation program going forward. The plan, which will be finalized this year, was prepared by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and consists of a resource inventory; evaluation of current management; prioritization of needs; and an operational plan. The preparation of the Plan benefited from a high level of input from stakeholders, including participatory workshops and consultations.

**Pre-Hispanic Heritage:** The Pre-Hispanic subcomponent in Copán was designed to support research on pre-Hispanic practices and provide scientific knowledge for teachers and students, promote ownership among indigenous peoples, and help establish a small learning center on the Maya for children. This subcomponent was implemented by the non-profit organization, the Copán Association through an Implementation Agreement with the Profuturo Project. The sub-component supported: (A) Guide Training Program; (B) Research and Information Program; and (C) Small Interactive Learning Center on the Maya. The implementation and outcomes of this sub-components are discussed in detail below.

**Learning program brings opportunities**

The training program was a unique partnership between Government, a local non-profit organization, and a university. The Copán Association managed this program and the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional Francisco Morazán (National Pedagogical University, UPNFM) was selected to design and implement the program. The training program consisted of four sub-programs targeted at:

**Local residents and teachers** - 20 men, 15 women were trained in a range of skills broadly covering Archeology, Astronomy, Biodiversity, Communication, Ethnohistory and Indigenous Populations, and 44 hours of practical training with workshops and field visits. Language training (English and French) was also provided. Participants generally viewed the training as a means of enhancing their employment opportunities (e.g. allowing them operate as guides) or of enhancing existing tourist operations, including hotels. The participants learned about the importance of oral history, how to carry out a systematic register of local traditions, deepened their knowledge of the Maya and Copán and also gained a better understanding of the impact of tourism on the cultural resources and local population. There was prolonged interaction between academics and government officials with the participants and local population. The university produced bibliographies for each training module, which has helped to systematize knowledge of Honduras and specific information on the Copán area applicable to cultural/ecotourism. UPNFM, the coordinator, and other professors benefited from the program and the institution had a successful experience which may lead to future training in the region related to tourism and guiding.

**Indigenous Residents** - Eighteen young adults representing three Maya Chortí communities attended courses and practical training. The recruitment of participants was handled through the National Council of the Indigenous Maya Chortís (Consejo Nacional Indígena Maya-Chortí de Honduras, CONIMCHH) and announced through the local councils, with the coordinator visiting each aldea (village).

The training was tailored to the participants’ needs, circumstances, level of schooling (most had completed primary school), age, and available hours. The main topics addressed were Archeology, Biodiversity, Communication, Astronomy, History of Honduras, Guiding for Tourists, Museography and English language skills. The participants learned methodologies used in documenting traditional practices. The training, in particular the unit on Museography, provided participants from one village with the inspiration and the necessary skills to install a community museum.

As a result of this training program and concurrent initiatives carried out by the Chortí organization and community leaders, the Chortí villages are beginning to make plans for tourism in their villages and for possible employment in the park. The training program was timely and it has served as a catalyst for the aspirations and ideas that the communities have for tourism. By providing knowledge and skills training, it has empowered the communities to provide their own guiding and other services, rather than rely on intermediaries.

**University Students** - The Program Director from UPNFM provided lectures on the Mayas and their neighbors and
tourism; a comprehensive bibliography was developed and presented to the students; and there were eight organized study tours of about four days to Copán with a total of about 100 students participating.

**Advanced Students/Professionals** - This module was initially developed to attract university professors and advanced students to become involved in a long-term research project at Copán. While it initially proved difficult to attract professors given the limited stipend available, the addition of key professors and young professionals helped. Twelve participants representing a variety of disciplines were selected to become involved in short periods of fieldwork and research and attend lectures. Fieldwork experiences included research on land use/vegetation change during the last 40 years, archival research, and practical training in geoscience techniques.

One of the most interesting outcomes of this subcomponent was that the concept of interdisciplinary research, as carried out in Copán, was introduced into the university environment. This should broaden employment prospects for students, many of whom, it is hoped, will choose to continue their professional development in this field.

**Understanding 4000 years of change**

The main objective of the research program was to construct a model of interaction between the cultural and natural landscapes and the population of the valley over the last 4000 years. This program brought together the efforts of numerous researchers with both public and private sector support (up to 15 different universities and organizations involved). The French Center for Mexican and Central American Studies (Centro Francés de Estudios Mexicanos y Centro-Americanos, CEMCA) was selected to coordinate the program. A portion of the research focused specifically on changes to the environment which have occurred in the last 40 years and their impact on local populations but also included the identification and description of Chortí medicinal and ornamental plants. The research program has already produced some new theories related to the Maya, particularly to the characteristics of the natural environment at the time of their arrival in Copán and how it may have been transformed and adapted by its human inhabitants. It is hoped that this work can help inform environmental planning in the Copán Valley.

**Linking past and present**

The objective of the Casa K’ínich Learning Center is to create a forum for children and families of residents and visitors to learn about the Mayan civilization. In the design of the exhibits, special emphasis has been placed on the spiritual relationship between the Maya and their environment to help the children become more aware of the importance of this relationship. Casa K’ínich opened in January 2002 and to date, about 8,000 children have visited the Casa.

**Lessons Learned from the Copán Program**

This relatively modest project has generated a number of tangible benefits. There is a better understanding about cultural resources and related economic opportunities among all stakeholders, which should facilitate better planning and management of the entire area. Increased participation of local organizations in these processes potentially extends the benefits of eco/heritage-based tourism to many sectors of the local population and provides clear gains for the poor. Training provided by the program, particularly for the indigenous population, should greatly enhance their integration into the economic development of the Copán Valley and has, as importantly, provided them with a sense of dignity derived from the knowledge of their own history and cultural environment. Specifically, the main lessons learned have been:

- **Building Local Ownership and Decentralized Implementation**: Most of the project work in Copán, was carried out through an Implementation Agreement with the Copán Association. By keeping the objectives modest and targeted, and by linking the program to a trusted NGO and a local community-based organization (CONIMCHH), the program was accepted and had a very positive impact.

- **Setting Achievable Objectives**: In Copán, Profuturo worked with indigenous communities at a micro level—the project focused simply on providing training and increasing opportunities for the local residents. The Guide Training program had the most impact of all the training activities in Copán and because of the incorporation of the Chortís, it was possible to open a door to their participation in tourism development utilizing their appreciation and knowledge of their own heritage. To help increase the involvement and capacity of local communities, PHRD grant funds were provided for technical assistance for indigenous communities and gender issues near the park.

- **Making the Linkage between Past and Present**: All of the work in Copán has focused on producing and sharing information about the linkages between pre-Hispanic Copán and the current indigenous residents.
• **Scaling up.** The Copán program was designed on a small scale to address priority problems in the Park and increase knowledge about the Pre-Hispanic world. The training program was designed to test the methodology and see how local residents and students responded to opportunities to learn more about the Maya world. Reports from the training show that it has created demand, particularly among the local residents, for more learning opportunities and it has complemented other initiatives in the Valley.

• **Partnersing for Maximum Effect.** The small-scale success of this program prompted the collaboration of bilateral agencies, Government agencies, and other international organizations.

• **Flexibility.** Profuturo and the Bank were able to accomodate unforeseen needs that arose during the implementation of the project.

• **Human Resources.** Using highly respected local professional brought legitimacy to the Project. Both the archeological and pre-hispanic programs were coordinated by prominent and very experienced professionals. Similarly, the coordinator the training program at the University was also well qualified and respected in the field.

• **Interdisciplinary Research.** The research program and the involvement of university professors in the training program have opened up new areas for potential research and collaboration outside of the disciplines of archeology and history, such as in astronomy and physics.

• **Learning by Doing.** The guide training program placed a strong emphasis on theory, but also on practical experiences such as field visits, workshops, and oral history exercises. The Casa K’inch exhibits are designed to be interactive.

---

**Future Challenges**

• **Gender Equity.** Men have traditionally dominated tourist guiding in Copán. As a result of this program, it became clear that there is a need to create more opportunities for women to be involved in income-generation activities. The Bank Project team was awarded a Norwegian Trust Fund for Gender Mainstreaming in 2002 which will help support a targeted educational program for local residents, and specifically indigenous women.

• **Cultural Values.** Future projects that seek to involve the Chortí should also focus on ways to help the communities recapture the values represented in their language and traditions. Full and active participation of the Chortís in the protection of their cultural and natural inheritance is a requirement.

• **Growth in Tourism/Need for Environmental Management and Education.** Tourism has grown exponentially in Copán and with current discussions for improved infrastructure and access to the site, it can be expected that the number of visitors will continue to increase. It will be important to provide education to local residents about natural resource management and environmental planning so that they will have a stake in making decisions about how to ensure sustainable use of the rich resources of this zone.

• **Human Resource Capacity.** During the implementation of these activities, it was apparent that Honduras lacks qualified experts and workers to carry out work related to cultural patrimony. Future programs should seek ways to build the human resource capacity of the country related to historical preservation. This is a growing sector and is linked to tourism and could provide new and diversified skills training for residents living near these sites.

• **Access to Opportunities.** For the outlying indigenous aldeas and those with difficult access, the lack of regular transportation is a limitation for recruiting potential participants.

• **Incentives for Long-term Research.** The program was not able to provide competitive stipends for university professors to become engaged in long-term research. In fact, it became very clear that there is little space in higher education in Honduras for research as part of academic work. In order to increase the participation of professors and other established professionals, any future program should focus on the personal commitment needed for the work, and also provide competitive compensation for individuals’ time and abilities.

• **Management Plan Implementation.** Profuturo financed the preparation of the Management Plan for Copán and the next challenge will be to actually implement the priorities of the plan. A new World Bank operation currently under preparation may help to address those priorities and also help to preserve and develop other nearby sites.

---

**About the Authors**

Maria-Valeria Junho Pena is Lead Sociologist in the Social Development family of the Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Sector Management Group in the Latin America and the Caribbean Region of the World Bank. Kathryn Johns Swartz is a former Bank staff member, currently working as a short-term consultant.

**About “en breve”**

To subscribe to “en breve” send and email to “en_breve@worldbank.org”

**Useful links**

http://www.profuturo.edu.hn
http://www.honduras.net/copan/
http://www.nationalgeographic.com/copan/index-m.html