



Recognized but not supported: Assessing the incorporation of non-timber forest products into Mexican forest policy



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 November 2015

Received in revised form 4 March 2016

Accepted 5 July 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Non-timber forest products (NTFPs)

Forest policy

Rural livelihoods

Forest conservation

Mexico, local culture

ABSTRACT

Although non-timber forest products (NTFPs) are incorporated into forest policy in Mexico, significant problems related to the importance of NTFPs for rural livelihoods, the ecological impacts from their extraction, and their cultural importance, have not been well articulated. This article explores the integration of NTFPs into forest policy discourse in Mexico as a strategy to support livelihood, conservation and cultural goals. Building on the scientific global literature on the subject, we identified 13 prominent NTFP management questions, including the ecological impacts of marketing NTFPs, the distribution of benefits of NTFP production among local populations, and rights of access to NTFP collection. To structure the analysis of Mexican policy we addressed these questions and processed three general dimensions most relevant to policy implementation - these are associated with the oftentimes competing policy goals of supporting rural people's livelihoods, environmental conservation, and strengthening culture (not only of indigenous peoples, but rural people in general). Subsequently we performed an evaluation of key forest policy instruments in Mexico, based on the three dimensions identified, in the effort to learn how successfully forest policy has integrated these dimensions. We conclude that although NTFPs are integrated into Mexican forest policy, drawbacks to their integration remain, related to the diversity in the nature, scale and marketing of these products, as well as to the diversity of local actors involved.

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1. Introduction: NTFPs as a strategy to support livelihoods, conservation, and cultural goals

Non-timber forest products have been harvested by human populations for thousands of years. Their use currently represents an important source for subsistence and income generation for a great number of people living in or near the world's forests (Ticktin, 2004) and particularly, for the poorest sectors of the rural population (Batagoda et al., 2006; Del Ángel-Mobarak, 2012; Vedeld et al., 2007). Up until the 1980s, forest policy focused on the use of forests mainly as providers of timber, downplaying the importance of other products such as mushrooms, resins, medicinal plants, leaves or gums, perceiving them as "minor" products. Attention to "other", "minor", or "non-timber" forest products increased in the late 1980s and particularly the early 1990s, following the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)'s "Earth Summit", in which NTFPs were identified as an important arena that required specific actions to fulfill their

potential to contribute to economic development and income generation (UNCED, 1992).

During the 1990s, increasing pressure on policy-makers -principally from NGOs and consumer groups- to regulate these resources generated new efforts to implement laws and regulations on good management (Wiersum et al., 2013), but according to Laird et al. (2011), in many cases these efforts have been counter-productive, by creating opportunities for corruption or incentives for overexploitation (Cañas and Ortiz Monasterio, 2007). Policy interventions have also tended to criminalize the populations that depend on this activity, and undermine customary law and local institutions which were well-suited for regulating NTFPs. Moreover, in the regulation of NTFPs their cultural importance is seldom considered, although these resources still hold profound cultural meaning and importance for many people around the world (Cocks et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2012).

Forest policy in general has slowly shifted from a focus on conservation, to a focus on livelihoods, thanks in part to studies that demonstrate the importance that NTFPs have for rural livelihoods (Alexiades and Shanley, 2004; Arnold and Ruiz-Pérez, 1998; Godoy and Bawa, 1993; Laird et al., 2009; Shackleton and Shackleton, 2004). The term "livelihoods" itself has become central to the definition of sustainable forest management, as expressed by the United Nations' Sixth Forum on

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Forests, which proposed as an objective, to “enhance forest-based economic, social and environmental benefits [...] by improving the livelihoods of forest-dependent people” (UNFF, 2006). Chambers and Conway (1992) define “sustainable livelihood” as:

“The capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base.”

Managing forests for livelihoods or markets however may not help achieve conservation objectives, because it may imply increasing extraction and production, which in turn, may affect ecological conditions (Arnold and Ruiz, 1998; Stockdale, 2005; Shackleton et al., 2011; Tapia-Tapia and Reyes-Chilpa, 2008). A prevailing underestimation of the socioeconomic and cultural importance of NTFPs for rural and urban households, added to the invisibility of goods important for subsistence uses and local trade (Campbell and Luckert, 2002; Shackleton and Shackleton, 2004), the political or cultural marginalization of communities that rely on forests (Dove, 1994), and social conflicts that may arise from their extraction (Ticktin, 2004), make it very difficult to generate realistic scenarios for the sustainable management of these products (Rist et al., 2012).

A livelihoods approach to sustainable NTFP management must encompass the elements of employment, poverty reduction, well-being and capabilities, livelihood adaptation, vulnerability, resilience and sustainability of the natural resource base (Scoones, 1998), whilst also incorporating cultural elements. The purpose of this article is to assess the integration of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) into forest policy discourse in Mexico as a strategy to support the goals of livelihoods, conservation and culture. In the following sections we explain our methodology in greater detail and later proceed to analyze forest instruments building on three analytical dimensions proposed.

2. Methodology and research framework

To begin, we performed an extensive review of scientific literature on the subject of NTFPs and management, to identify the topics that receive most attention. The review was based on a search of academic articles and publications, institutional reports and mainstream media publications in the past 60 years. Research into NTFPs is ample and as we speak, more work is being published. The literature review started with a broad search in scientific journals, through databases such as Scencedirect and other Elsevier search engines, EBSCO, JSTOR, and also Google Scholar. A group of journals was selected based on the frequency with which articles on NTFPs had been published (see Annex I). A fast screening through each journal allowed us to make a selection of the articles that had strong relations with our interest, focusing on

issues such as livelihood importance, conservation, forest policy, poverty alleviation, commercialization, culture and government support, all related to NTFPs. The search was performed in both English and Spanish. We selected a total of 136 documents, all of which were read and coded using the program N-Vivo 10, in which we created categories based on the issues identified (see Table 1).

A parallel search was done within international institutions which in the past years have developed a particular interest on NTFPs, mainly FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) and CIFOR (Center for International Forestry Research), and some documents published by the United Nations and the World Bank were also included (reports of their programs).

Once we identified these issues we grouped them into three main dimensions for policy analysis. In order to categorize these topics into dimensions we grouped them in terms of their associations and similarities. The resulting dimensions were: *NTFPs as a strategy to achieve conservation objectives*; *NTFPs as a strategy to improve rural livelihoods and enhance income generation efforts*; and *NTFPs as a strategy to support local culture and knowledge*. Reaching this dimensioning of the selected issues was complex, because some issues are considered in more than one dimension. For example, the source of the product is related to resource access, but at the same time to aspects of domestication (nature of the product) and to ecological impacts, thus, it could appear in the analysis of more than one dimension. This fact makes it difficult to come up with specific dimensions for the analysis of policies promoting NTFPs, yet it has been precisely this difficulty that has occupied the discussion of NTFPs and how to promote them as part of conservation, livelihoods, or poverty alleviation efforts (see Sills et al., 2011). Our approach was to organize the themes highlighted in the literature into dimensions that can form a basis for the generation of policies that focus on the issues most relevant for the NTFP literature in a more integrated way. Our thorough revision of the issues selected from the literature resulted in the three dimensions that seize the essence of the objectives highlighted in the NTFP literature, and which emphasize conservation, livelihoods and income, and culture and local knowledge as the most important objectives for policy and programs promoting NTFP management, marketing and use.

Reaching a proper definition of what is an NTFP is of uttermost importance in the study of these resources; therefore, we offer a brief discussion of the difficulty of reaching a definition, and the influence of definitions on the management focus developed in policy instruments. Following the literature review on NTFPs, we identify those policy instruments that are most relevant in terms of their impact on NTFP management. By policy instruments we mean “all those means that an actor uses or can use to help achieve one or more objectives” intended by a policy (Bressers and Klok, 1988). From the range of forest policy instruments in Mexico, we selected those that are closely related to

Table 1
Key NTFP Issues grouped into analytic dimensions.

NTFP Issues identified from the literature	Policy Dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Source of product • Nature of product¹ • Scale of production of product • Certification • Ecological impacts of extraction • Land tenure • Ownership and distribution of benefits and impacts • Marketing • Income generation • Land tenure • Land tenure • Access to resources • Rescue of traditional/local knowledge • Gender dynamics • Indigenous rights 	<p><i>NTFPs as a strategy to achieve conservation objectives</i></p> <p>(Supported by Stockdale 2005; Wiersum and Shackleton 2001; Ticktin and Ticktin 2004)</p> <p><i>NTFPs as a strategy to improve rural livelihoods and enhance income generation efforts</i></p> <p>(Supported by Tapia-Tapia and Reyes-Chilpa 2008; Peters et al. 1989; Alexiades and Shanley 2004; Alexiades et al. 2013, others).</p> <p><i>NTFPs as a strategy to support local culture and knowledge</i></p> <p>(Supported by Batagoda et al. 2006; Belcher 2003; Casas et al. 1996; Guariguata et al. 2012, others).</p>

¹ For most definitions “nature” refers to the physical characteristics of the product, that is, is it woody or non-woody, is it an animal product, is it a service or is it a product such as gravel or soil. The “source of the product” refers to the spatial characteristics of where the product is produced or grown, that is, is it from a plantation, from mixed arboriculture, etc.

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