The first thing I would like to say is that I work for Conservation International (CI) and I am not a biologist. I work within a department at CI called the Conservation Enterprise Department. What we do is work very closely with local communities, with our country programs and with other NGO partners to target Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) that could be harvested, processed, and marketed. We help local communities and NGO partners to develop the enterprises needed to establish the supplies of these products, and at the same time travel all the way down to the other end of the chain — to work with the marketplace and figure out how to work with firms in setting up strategies for distribution and supply so as to get what’s in the forest out into the marketplace and out to the consumer.

So, when I thought about what type of audience would be here, I imagined there would be communities — like we have from Mexico and Brazil — who are actually working with NTFPs, representatives from NGOs involved in NTFP projects, and students who are interested in working in this area. What I wanted to do was share with all of you some of the challenges and lessons that we have learned at CI by actually doing forest product development.

Economics drives rainforest destruction. Local people clear forests to plant crops, raise cattle, and feed their children, and governments grant logging concessions to generate foreign exchange revenues and pay off debt. Over the past decade, conservation groups and local communities looking for innovative ways to counteract these pressures have fought back with market based strategies. One of these strategies is the development of enterprises based on the extraction of sustainably harvested Non-Timber Forest Products. Conservation International helped to pioneer the use of NTFPs in conservation with the launching of the Tagua Initiative in 1990.
Since then CI has expanded its NTFP work to include 3 major industries, 11 ecosystems, and 15 to 20 different products.

This paper discusses issues relevant to the enterprise aspect of NTFP development and presents some of the broad challenges CI has identified and a few of the lessons we have learned. This paper does not address the numerous and critically important ecological and socio-economic challenges of NTFPs. All of the decisions made about demand and supply-side strategies should be taken within the context of ecosystem conservation goals. Enterprise decisions must support the overall ecological and social integrity of the project and promote conservation, but I’m focusing on enterprise issues because that’s what I know well, and because many NGOs neglect to look at this aspect when they are considering NTFPs.

CI believes that simply harvesting and processing NTFPs will not save the rainforest. Rather, NTFPs can play a role as important tools for conservation. NTFPs help strengthen integrated conservation strategies that include education initiatives, resource management, communications, and land tenure and policy work. NTFPs can help provide alternatives to ecologically destructive activities and demonstrate the viability of sustainable forest management. In many communities and governments, it is easier to talk about jobs and income rather than conservation, and NTFPs can serve an important demonstrative role to both local people and national policy planners.

A FEW OF THE CHALLENGES

Markets are not perfect and therefore NTFPs are not easy. If markets were perfect then forests would be valued differently and NTFPs might be easier. In most cases, there is a reason or reasons why the aggressive marketplace has not catalyzed the harvest and processing of NTFPs. Producers of NTFPs face numerous market failures and barriers-to-entry in commercializing their products. This an important point for NGOs and communities with visions of easy market access and simply solved inefficiencies.

Producers of NTFPs generally encounter two types of challenges. The first set are classic market failures — lack of capital and information. Producers may have immediate access to products in which the market has great interest, but firms and producers usually do not know about each other and face huge investment costs in bridging the gap. In the development of NTFPs, NGOs and governments have helped to resolve these gaps by channeling information between firms and producers and by offering access to cheap sources of capital. This is the primary role of CI in its NTFP work.

The second set of challenges faced by producers can be broadly termed as socio-political failures. These challenges stem in part from Simply harvesting and processing NTFPs will not save the rainforest. Rather, NTFPs can play a role as important tools for conservation.
the marginalization of forest producer groups by governments. Solving information and capital gaps may be relatively straightforward, but solutions are useless unless the capacity is there to actually get the leaf off the tree, into a processing system, onto a boat or a truck or a mule, and into the marketplace. Broadly defined (and there certainly may be more), these socio-political challenges are:

- lack of resource ownership/land tenure rights
- barriers to collective action and organization
- lack of educational options
- lack of transport infrastructure

Identifying and understanding these challenges is key in developing NTFP strategies with the highest possible chance of success. The “lessons” outlined below are general rules that will help meet these challenges.

LESSONS LEARNED

Creating strong markets for NTFPs involves work along the entire length of the value chain — from the forest to the end user. Much like any other business, this work requires a series of choices and decisions along with a large dose of uncertainty. However, unlike most businesses, the goals of developing an NTFP are usually more complex than making a profit. Building financially healthy enterprises in the middle of the forest, without running water or electricity, that are based on ecological sustainability, community empowerment, and are linked to conservation, is a fairly daunting task.

CI’s “lessons learned” are broadly defined guidelines that help minimize uncertainty and help make decision-making easier. Decisions are still tough and uncertainty will never be eliminated, but understanding the boundaries of what you know and don’t know certainly helps.

GENERAL LESSONS

Risk

Sharing Risk

An important role CI plays in developing NTFPs is to absorb risk. We absorb the risk of producers who have something to sell but no market access, and we absorb the risk of firms who want new products but don’t know where they are or how to get them.

Sharing risk among the three players — producers, firms, and CI
— is key in insuring a product’s longevity. Risk should be shared according to each player’s capacity to absorb it.

Of the three, rainforest producer groups face the greatest risk. Economic options are scarce and the cost of failure in a subsistence-level lifestyle is high. Yet, at the same time, most producers participate in some form of marketplace every day and most understand the buy and sell mechanism. The goal is to garner the greatest reward with the least risk. CI helps minimize the costs by helping to link producers with market partners at a flexible pace that creates gradual acceptance and understanding of risk.

On the demand side, while markets in general are fairly elastic, firms are not. Switching sourcing of Brazil nuts from a stable, well known New York broker to an unknown supplier in the jungles of Peru with a crackly phone line is a risky venture for a business. While firms can usually absorb more risk than producers, they face their own failure costs. By serving as a link between the firms and the producers, CI helps design production and sourcing strategies that meet both sides’ needs and that are dynamic over the long-term.

Taking Risks

Think big, but take small steps to get there. Since bringing NTFPs to market often means doing what no one else has done, be creative and idealistic in the final goal. Getting a vegetal leather product out from the forests of Brazil and into a Déjà Shoe is a pretty amazing thing. We need to think big; think about how to make these great connections. But, be smart, analytical, and wise in how you decide to get to that goal.

Don’t Forget This is Capitalism

Doing NTFPs is capitalism, pure and simple, and if you don’t like capitalism then you probably shouldn’t be doing NTFPs. While most rainforest producers understand the buy and sell mechanism, many NGO staff do not. Philosophical or ideological problems or concerns with the whole issue of capitalism can often serve to derail a project. Building NTFPs is a business — the pursuit of profit and the need to pay attention to the bottom line. It means competition, pricing, loans, banks, credit, successes, failures, and lots of hard work.

Asking for a buck is a lot different than trying to make a buck. This is something that can be quite alien to NGOs. You can cultivate a donor for two years, but you’re going to get your million dollars on a single day, and there’s not much control about what you do with that million dollars. Meanwhile, nine out of ten new businesses
in the US fail, and it takes businesses in the US three to five years to even make a profit. Doing NTFPs is hard; it takes a lot of perseverance and it takes a long-term perspective.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT PRODUCTS AND ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT

Product Selection

Overall, products should be selected that make the best economic sense for the producers over the long-term. CI does not encourage the selection of products based on the whim of a particular client since this makes the producers totally dependent on a single buyer, as Terry Turner pointed out in the Kayapo case. Markets change, prices fluctuate, and clients lose interest.

Look for Real Value

Don’t assume that just because products are ecologically interesting and might have a potential use that there is real value. To have real value, products must have a market and it must be possible to commercialize them. There is little value if you can’t get the leaf off the plant, and the wax off the leaf, all at a price that makes sense, and into a form that people want to buy.

Start with Existing Products and Look for New Ones

Despite the words of caution on real value, there are many products not yet commercialized that are of great interest to the marketplace. There are four areas in which greater value can be brought to rainforest producers:

• Improve the value chain for existing products

The harvest, production, and marketing of most products is not always done efficiently. Interventions can be made into existing processes to add efficiency, reduce costs, and bring more benefits to the producer.

For example, allspice in Guatemala is a major industry, although Guatemala ranks second behind Jamaica in the Global market. Jamaican allspice commands a higher price, because it is sun dried, whereas it is dried over a fire in Guatemala. When companies extract the oil to use in ketchup (the largest user of allspice), it tastes smoky. So one of the interventions that CI has been discussing — one that can be an easy thing to help bring a greater value to the producer — is developing portable solar driers that people can actually take out into the forest with them when they are collecting allspice. These types of interventions can be put in place easily, do not require any great marketing strategies, and entail the least risk for the producers.
• Look for by-products of existing processes

Products and product processing already in place may yield valuable by-products. For instance, sugar cane processing (although not an NTFP, but a good example) has been found to yield cheap quantities of alpha-hydroxy acids (AHAs). AHAs are all the rage now in the personal care industry and are being used heavily by everyone in skin care products.

Another example is the tagua waste generated by button disk manufacturing. This waste product has great potential as an abrasive for industrial cleaning, and we are beginning to develop this as a way to increase the benefit to the producers.

• Look for competitive advantages

NTFPs need to compete in the marketplace based on functionality, price, and quality. Products should be selected based on their overall competitive advantage in the market.

• Don’t try to swallow too much of the value chain at once

When designing strategies to link producers with the market, a realistic assessment should be made of the market’s needs, the producer’s existing production capacity, and the economic and ecological time pressures. With most products, as one travels along the value chain, processing, marketing, and distribution strategies become more complex. Trying to transfer too many of those complexities to the producer level at too rapid a rate will only increase the chances for failure.

When one starts working with NTFPs, one needs to constantly think about how to get more value added processes back, but if you do too much of that at once, the whole thing will just crash and burn. This is an interesting challenge that I think the vegetal leather producers are facing now — they’re doing the raw materials, so the next step is to ask how they can start doing more of the processing.

There is a whole set of risks inherent in this. For example, vegetal leather could be used to make handbags. In the handbag industry, however, styles change every six months, so, if you’re going to choose that, you need someone out there in the marketplace who lives and breathes the fashion industry, and who can constantly funnel you ideas on colors and styles as they change.

CI has found that value, in some cases, will travel toward the producer anyway. For example, the Tagua Initiative in Ecuador began in 1990 on the community level with simple harvesting of the nut. Recently, due to pressure and interest from Ecuadorian primary manufacturers, the community is looking into taking on some of the
initial processing done by those primary manufacturers. CI is helping the community to start thinking about setting up drying and slicing operations within the community itself.

**Write a Business Plan**

The simple exercise of compiling a business plan will require a complete analysis of both the supply and demand for a product. Specifically, it will require analysis of a sometimes overlooked component — transportation. With NTFPs, transportation is a major issue as getting a product to market from remote areas will add high costs to the end price. These costs must be taken into account when determining the overall feasibility of the product.

**Improve Technologies**

NTFP producers working without conventional sources of energy need to be creative in gaining efficiencies and reducing costs in their production systems. Any NTFP will require investment in innovative harvesting and production technologies to increase product competitiveness and bring greater benefits to the producer. Someone needs to be there who’s a tinkerer — someone who’s constantly thinking of new ways to put things together.

**Target Community Entrepreneurs and Focus on Skills Development**

The key to any successful NTFP is community ownership of the enterprise. Rainforest communities are full of entrepreneurs who have the energy and insight to pursue good product opportunities. Simultaneous to production and marketing, training and educational initiatives should be offered that will hone the managerial and business skills of producers and insure a technical base for long-term, stable management of the enterprise.

Most businesses in the US fail because of management problems, not because of market problems. NTFP producers are often saddled not only with this problem, but also with marginalization in the sense of educational options.

**Hire Good Managers and Support Them**

While most rainforest producer groups understand the basics of product development and marketing, many products require a more complex set of skills than are initially available within producer communities. A good manager is key in starting up an NTFP enterprise and in coordinating the skill development activities. Good managers are strategic thinkers, good business people, good community workers, and want to live in the forest. These people are very
difficult to find — believe me, I’ve spent a year and a half trying to find at least one.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT THE MARKET:

Understand How Real Markets Work
Understanding how markets work is critical to operating successfully within them. Not fake markets, not markets that you want to create, not markets that you think you can create, but how real markets work. This is the only way that NGOs or anyone else working in the area will be able to find the strategy that makes the best sense for the producer.

The first step at CI for any NTFP is to do a comprehensive analytical overview of the market and the product. This is the basic information that will be used to build a marketing strategy. Size, trends, major players, distribution strategies, and sourcing habits should all be clearly identified.

Build Strategic Partnerships
Working with firms that know, understand, and live and breathe the market is the best way to get a product into the right channels and into the hands of end users. Markets are complex and working with firms who know what they are doing will increase the chances of success. When developing a strategy for a new product or range of products, CI searches for marketing partnerships that will bring the greatest market access and institutionalize products into the mainstream. A good example of a strategic partnership is what Déjà Shoe is doing with vegetal leather.

Stay in Tune with the Market
Strategic partnerships also have the added benefit of keeping producers informed about the market. However, firms have their own agendas and may choose to communicate information selectively. Mechanisms should be established that will funnel market information to producer groups on changing prices, trends, and other news.

Diversify
Diversification of markets will minimize risk by reducing dependence on single clients or products. It can take place both horizontally and vertically.

Diversification can take place horizontally within a market by

Good managers are strategic thinkers, good business people, good community workers, and want to live in the forest. These people are very difficult to find.
increasing the size of the client base or expanding uses for the raw materials. When building diversified markets horizontally, serious consideration should be paid to the trade-off between long-term market access and selling immediately to many outlets. For example, in the personal care market, CI chose to work with a single supplier in a given segment in order to get the biggest access to a large number of end manufacturers. In addition, the supplier brings expertise in safety testing, chemical analysis, sales, and marketing. The other option would have been to facilitate sales directly to end manufacturers. The decision to work with a single supplier was made after thorough analysis and understanding of the expectations of mainstream end product users and their general lack of capacity to source directly.

In addition, markets can be built vertically on the international, regional, national, and local levels. A complete understanding of the product’s economic value chain will reveal opportunities. In general, demand will dictate the mix, but CI has found that the vertical mix also depends on:

- geographical closeness to a specific market
- type of product manufactured
- quality and price
- nature of the industry
- production capacity of the producer group

Don’t Bank on the Green Premium

Consumers, particularly North American ones, are fickle, and generally suspicious of green messages. While consumer polls tend to show a great desire to buy “green” or “environmentally friendly” products, feedback from actual retailers indicates that, if given a choice, most buyers choose a low price over green content. This is an unfortunate reality, but a reality nonetheless. Products should therefore be functional, price competitive, and of the highest quality, and long-term, stable markets should be targeted.

CONCLUSION

Building markets for NTFPs requires strategic thinking, good information, and common sense. Bringing isolated rainforest producers into the tumultuous mainstream market is a challenging task. Flexibility, sound judgement, and the ability to make decisions under a high level of uncertainty are needed to maximize success.

As a tool for creating an overall strategy for NTFP development this paper is limited to enterprise and business issues. There are
many other ecological and social criteria that must be included, such as the ecological sustainability of particular products and the actual conservation impact of the enterprise. Enterprise development and marketing decisions should be taken within the context of established conservation goals for a particular ecosystem.

QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION

Q: It seems that this sort of market development creates an information dependency and, additionally, requires producers to conform to a “western”, or “northern” market construct. In that light, is Conservation International investigating or promoting more localized markets, as opposed to strategies based on, say, the US need for handbags or allspice?

SF: Yes, we look at markets on local, regional, and international levels — markets are markets, so although there is such a thing as dependence on foreign markets, there is also such a thing as dependence on regional and national markets. Often, the risks are the same and the costs of failure are the same. When looking at NTFPs, therefore, it is always important to determine whether or not they make sense, whether or not you are willing to do it, and whether or not you are willing to take on the issues involved in working in the marketplace, and how all this will affect conservation in a given area.

SHARON FLYNN

In three years at Conservation International, Ms Flynn has managed the creation of biodiversity enterprises in Guatemala and Peru, and built marketing arrangements in the personal care and food industries. She works closely with communities and NGO partners to design and implement marketing, production, and enterprise training programs, and insure the conservation link of enterprise development. She has extensive international experience in Asia and Latin America in trade and development. She holds her Master’s in International Management from the University of California at San Diego.
Sharon Flynn Working Group

Sharon Flynn led the discussion with Conrad Reining, the Director of the Guatemala Program at Conservation International, and Liza Grandia, a Yale student and Community Extensionist with Conservation International in Guatemala. The discussion centered on the interactions between local and global economies, and how NTFPs fit into this context.

Q: Is CI working in other parts of the world?
Sharon Flynn: We are working in Asia, Africa and Latin America, in regional, national and international markets. In Asia, the emphasis is on the products, while in Latin America it is on the raw materials. In Peru, we work with Brazil nuts, in Ecuador with Tagua, and in Costa Rica and Panama with fruits for the national market — actually for a fruit drink that McDonald’s is making there. In Madagascar, we work on the local level with some basic products and some handicrafts. CI looks at NTFPs as part of a strong conservation strategy. Of course, to do this effectively, we also have to consider the ecosystem and the situation in the particular country to see how they can work with the NTFPs.

Q: You talked about people working in the communities, but how are the people there involved with CI? Are they Guatemalans or are they part of CI? How does it really work?
SF: It really depends on the program. Most of the CI personnel in Guatemala are not gringos — they are local people. This is the reason that CI was founded, 10 years ago — it was a break from The Nature Conservancy because that wasn’t happening. Conrad can give more detail about the program in Guatemala.

Conrad Reining: In broad terms, the strategy is one of conservation. We have been working in the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Northern Guatemala since 1990. The idea there has been to work with the local communities because the central government in Guatemala is pretty weak. You can’t count on the National Park Service or government to do anything. Instead, we need to count on local governments and people. The way we do this is to connect with producer groups that are already using NTFPs, because they already have a vested interest in seeing the forests survive. So what we have done is approach and suggest to them ways of working with these other NTFPs as well. We try to identify ways to diversify and get around some of the problems with middlemen — to get more of the value to the local people. We spend a lot of time going in and talking to these communities and telling
them what it means to work with these products and building the capacity of the community to develop these things on their own with some technical assistance. The basic goal is get the local groups empowered. This then becomes the tool of conservation because once something is set up you have built a constituency within the community that wants to conserve the forests. It might not be a lot of people but if they are interested in conserving the forest then at least there is a local voice.

Q: I work in Brazil where sometimes we have problems when the communities start to commercialize NTFPs. There is always one big company that is getting the product and putting it on the market. How does a company, such as The Body Shop or Ben & Jerry’s, really put money back into the community? I don’t see how it is possible to make these NTFPs sustainable and help the community — what will compel these companies to return the money? Furthermore, is this conservation strategy really sustainable? Once these projects leave the communities, we have found that communities cannot sustain the NTFP. So how can we improve the ability of these communities to maintain these NTFPs?

SF: To maintain sustainability they have to use the right strategies. The NGOs need to have it done correctly — NGOs can really push the market around and this is how they can be most effectively involved. They can push the market in the right direction, but it needs to be done correctly. Also, there has to be the management capacity within the communities. What often happens is that there isn’t the education provided and there isn’t the training provided. If the communities don’t know how to manage the NTFPs, then you have to have skills development to have long-term management of the community enterprise. You can’t ask the community to do something that they are unable to do. Usually, they don’t have the technological skills to do the whole product.

On the company side, any business faces the challenge to make as much money as possible. In these situations, where the company might be the only source of information for a single tribe, it has a strong incentive to manipulate their trade relationship. I agree with Terry Turner in his analysis of this dynamic; however, I think that companies need to be recognized for the values they have — they are not necessarily all fat cats, and some do approach their suppliers with a genuine concern for equitable relations. Nevertheless, the producer needs to understand the value of the market, the company, and the particular product. Ultimately, you don’t want to remain dependent on one single company.
Q: I think a good example of this is the Mutran family in Brazil who supplies Ben & Jerry’s. In this case, there is a single family making a lot of money from the NTFPs. The communities add value through processing and by providing the basis for a green message, but the Mutrans do not share any of the profit.

SF: The Mutrans are an example of a monopolistic regime. This is the kind of thing CI is working to change. They control the Brazil nut trade out of Brazil and they control the market there. They control all the information and all for their benefit. They are greedy and a lot of producer groups can be screwed over in the process — they are an extreme example of control of the marketplace. On the other hand, companies do add value. The Mutrans probably add value as well because they know suppliers in Brazil and they have connections in the international marketplace.

This is where your research and understanding of the value chain can help in determining what you should do. Interventions can be made, but you need to understand what is going on. It is not easy to break a monopoly like the Mutrans. It is hard for a lot of producers to get together because each controls only a small percentage of the marketplace. They are all competing, as well, and need to make wise decisions. Idealistic goals like breaking up the Mutrans are not realistic, but there might be a lot of other things we can do to get around monopolies. Cultural Survival does this kind of thing.

Q: How do you analyze the market for a certain product? Can you walk us through this process?

SF: Basically it is just a lot of research: who are the major players, how are the products sourced, what are the distribution strategies, what are the different types of products, and so on. I know a lot about the personal care market, for example, and I had to learn it all before I could begin to be active in it with NTFPs. You need to understand how all these things work. Take The Body Shop — they operate in a $60 billion market. This is a big market and the end manufacturer is going to want to have complete control over the product. They need a lot of different quantities and qualities of the different products. Plus, there is a lot of FDA oversight. All the while we need to figure out all these factors as we develop our strategies. We have to look at the suppliers and the industry trends and read the magazine articles. So, to be independent, these NTFP producers need to understand the markets. They need to talk to these companies and figure out what is good and bad about working with them. We are constantly studying all the information and trying to make decisions based on what is going on — the decision is coming from research.

Idealistic goals like breaking up the Mutrans are not realistic, but there might be a lot of other things we can do to get around monopolies.
Q: I was a Peace Corps agroforestry volunteer in Mali. There, I worked to establish local markets in Mali and was working with rural community groups to try to develop local markets. In Mali, many Indigenous plant and animal products had been replaced by western goods, but now urban populations no longer have the money to buy these goods. So we were trying to find ways to introduce these local products back into the market, and I think maybe the challenges were a little different.

SF: Well, no matter what market you are dealing with, you need to ask the same questions: who is the market; does it make sense; what is the product?

Q: Is there resistance on the part of the local urban population because they don’t want their own products and maybe they see the western products as better?

CR: That is an important issue, but it isn’t a driving force. We’re trying to find products that make sense and that people want — that’s a market, and it doesn’t matter where it is. If international markets make sense for the volumes that these projects produce, then that’s fine. Often times there aren’t national markets for these products, as is the case in Guatemala. So, we look at whatever market we can that will work and that will help diversify the production.

SF: There is a competitive advantage with Guatemala, in particular — it is close to the US. Sometimes people think international markets are more risky but that’s not always true. For example, selling to the Mutrans might be more risky then selling to Ben and Jerry’s.

CR: International trade has a lot of experience with various goods, so adding another product can fit into existing market structures.

Q: There are ecological problems that can arise from market involvement and there are market problems that can arise from ecological concerns. A market driven boom-bust cycle can develop that is detrimental to natural populations, or an ecosystem may not be able to supply the volumes demanded by the market. How do you reconcile these forces?

SF: To avoid problems of having communities getting involved in projects that eventually fail, we start projects at a small scale and then build from there. You need to make sure that the market makes sense, and some communities can begin doing the product. Something that people talk about is the idea of franchising. Think of a community building a franchise and an NGO subsidy to figure out what is going on in the marketplace. Once the community owns the technology and is a business that is interfacing with the market, then you can build leverage. Once one
community has gotten it figured out, then it can negotiate with other communities. You can’t have an NGO go and tell all these communities what to do because there are often errors in communicating the message correctly. It goes back to risk, and how you manage and absorb risk, and being conservative in your actions.

CR: This might not create a lot of jobs right away and you will have only a small amount of production at first, but you want to expand slowly — you don’t want these boom and bust things. You need to keep expectations really low, so that people don’t expose themselves to too much risk. If say you only have four jobs but the project ends up with eight jobs, that’s a bonus. Then you can think that you did more then you thought you were going to do.

Liza Grandia: Also, I think it’s important that everyone knows what is going on so the community isn’t mad if the expectations are not met.

Q: Do you run into ideological conflicts with other NGOs about how to change things? How do you work around this and does it deter your work?

SF: These conflicts deter the work of the entire conservation movement. CI has pissed off some people at The Nature Conservancy as well as WWF, and as a result some people have come over to CI. This has been detrimental and there are still some hard feelings. Even within CI there is a challenge to NTFPs and enterprise development. The staff of anthropologists, sociologists, and ecologists don’t like what I am doing. These people look at what I am doing and say “yuck — this is capitalism!” So again, don’t forget this is capitalism — you can’t do it and pretend it’s not. Producer groups and SEED enterprises speak the same language — they understand the buy and sell mechanism, but the problem comes when NGOs have different views of what capitalism should be. CI isn’t trying to change the whole market, we are only trying to change a small part of it. We are capitalists and that’s what we pursue, but CI is not interested in reconstructing economies — we encounter problems because of that.

Q: What are some of that challenges that you face in marketing NTFPs? Is transportation of the products a challenge?

SF: Cost. Transportation is a cost. For example, in the Colombian Choco there is only one small road so you need a boat. It costs $2000 to get in there — the same price as to get to New York. So, yes, transportation is expensive and you need to include these things in your business plans, otherwise you won’t realize the costs until they finally kill the project.