

Case Study 4

Mundo Maya Tourism Route

Location: Central America: Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras

Timeframe: 1988-Present, IDB-financed Mundo Maya Sustainable Tourism Program: 2000-2004



Background

The Mayan world covers around 500,000 square kilometers from Mexico to Honduras, including a 1,000 km shoreline, mountain ranges and tropical forests. It contains some of Latin America's most important cultural heritage and a rich and beautiful biodiversity. The region is historically known for being impoverished, with low wages and high levels of inequality. In the 1980s, these issues as well as social unrest, skewed land ownership and high inflation caused regional governments to seek alternative methods to develop the region, such as sustainable tourism.

In 1988 the five concerned countries signed a declaration supporting the creation of the *Ruta Maya*, focusing on linking archaeological sites and ecotourism parks. The countries subsequently set aside land, creating national parks and trans-boundary biosphere reserves¹. A program called *Mundo Maya* was simultaneously being discussed, which incorporated *Ruta Maya* concepts with a wider range of goals aimed at addressing social issues sidelined by the *Ruta Maya*. The two concepts eventually merged in 1990, leading to the creation of the *Mundo Maya Organization*.

The route began as a promotional umbrella and evolved into a mechanism for sustainable development and conservation, headed initially by Mexico through early feasibility studies, supported by Guatemala's subsequent studies (through the European Economic Community), followed by the involvement of Belize's and then Honduras and El Salvador. In 2000 the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) supported the creation of a Permanent Technical Secretariat to administer the Mundo Maya Organization, with a rotating presidency among the member nations.

IDB Support

From 2000-2004 the IDB financed the Mundo Maya Sustainable Tourism Program, providing the Mundo Maya Organization with US\$ 150 million and technical assistance aimed to *"contribute to the sustainable social and economic growth of the region through cultural, environmental and adventure tourism via cultural heritage conservation and environmental preservation, ensuring the participation of the Maya and other local communities."*

¹ Guatemala approved 44 conservation areas, including 33 new national parks in 1989, with Mexico & Guatemala together established 2 adjoining biosphere reserves of 4.7 million acres in 1989.

The program identified **eight priority areas**, each with a circuit where a secondary archaeological site would be linked to a major site. It funded the development of one site in Rio Amarillo, Honduras adjacent to the emblematic archeological park of Copán, with the Mexican Ministry of Tourism funding the second site in Quintana Roo. Sites in El Salvador, Belize and Guatemala struggled with implementation due to diverging political interests.

The program had four main components with subsequent investments in planning and regional integration, archaeological restoration, development of national parks and protected areas management plans, tourism and social infrastructure, tourist microenterprises, training and streamlining border crossings.

A US\$ 1.2 million grant was devoted to the preparation of a *Mundo Maya* strategy and action plan, as well as the establishment of a strategic alliance (the Mundo Maya Alliance) among Conservation International, Counterpart International and the National Geographic Society to support the Mundo Maya Sustainable Tourism Program. The Mundo Maya Organization was responsible for the program's implementation, National Geographic for disseminating information to professionals, sponsors and the public; while Conservation International would provide technical assistance in conservation, ecotourism and protected area management assistance; and Counterpart International focused on institutional strengthening, community development and microcredit.

The private sector took the lead in developing regional tourism circuits to act as tourist corridors, initially supported through the IDB-financed program. Each country established its own management committee, which met regularly at local and regional forums, relaying decisions to the Mundo Maya Organization through National Tourism Authorities. The national secretariats analyzed these recommendations according to ecological and social conditions and coordinated with National

The Concept: Inter-Linked Product Nodes

The Mundo Maya Sustainable Tourism Program identified secondary sites near tourist corridors of natural and cultural touristic importance comprising of a heritage site, a community and natural beauty. The site would then be rehabilitated or excavated and its touristic infrastructure developed. The surrounding community's micro and small enterprises were developed and *last mile* access infrastructure improved, with the final step being its integration into the *Mundo Maya* promotional route.

Each node should be self-sustainable, irrespective of the greater tourism route's success. Two nodes- one in Rio Amarillo, Honduras and one in Quintana Roo, Mexico were successful, while other struggled to develop. Both successes had strong community support.

Mundo Maya Sustainable Tourism Program

- I. Priority Investments
 - i. Archaeological and historical monument Rehabilitation
 - ii. Low impact transportation and basic infrastructure
 - iii. Micro-enterprise development and promotion
 - iv. Environmental protection and promotion
2. Participation, consultation and training plans
 - i. Indigenous participation and consultation
 - ii. Training in tourism-related activities
3. Marketing strategy development
4. Tourism migration facilitation and safety
 - i. Single-visa regional travel

Ecotourism Councils² to assess implementation and feasibility of options. National Ecotourism Councils were country-level groups made up of diverse stakeholders that would be consulted for support in tourism decisions and implementations. They were an integral link between the public sector and communities.

Outputs

Mundo Maya is currently a recognized brand, recently revived to promote the 2012 end of the Mayan calendar. Main results include:

- Establishment of national parks and trans-boundary biosphere reserves
- Increased regional cooperation, leading to discussions on subsequent topics of environmental disputes, agriculture issues, tariffs and debt management
- The creation of regional marketing plans
- The successful implementation of two tourism node projects, resulting in protected heritage and empowered communities

Critical Success Factors

- Its organizational structure linked and streamlined high-level ministerial decisions with local participatory planning councils
- Initially driven by Mexico, it involved country-owned and led initiatives, with plans integrated into policies and national strategies
- The purchase of heritage site land for community ownership and management was crucial to the success of the Quintana Roo project
- The development of small-scale self-sustaining product nodes with increased community participation

Issues and challenges

- The political weight of certain players (Mexico and tourism ministers) led to a skewing of project goals
- Existing political interests and instabilities led to a lack of continuity, and special interests destabilized the projects. For example Guatemala changed their tourism minister 5 times in 3 years
- Community involvement and participatory planning was often hindered by government authorities
- Regional coordination efforts were reduced by inadequate information sharing between NGOs and development partners, resulting in project overlaps, multiple initiatives which stretched national capacities, resources and therefore results
- The rotating presidency of the Mundo Maya Organization hampered project continuity

² Part of the *Paseo Pantera* program, which was funded through USAID, while the Mundo Maya Organization was funded by member nations

Lessons Learned

- Counterparts from the tourism, social and cultural agencies must be equally involved
- The Bank's role as honest broker with institutional backing should be leveraged to supersede special political interests
- The visible *project champion* must be a politically high-profile, savvy and impartial individual or organization with connections and knowledge of the region

Key Considerations for the World Bank

Involving a variety of stakeholders is key to creating and implementing successful regional initiatives. However each new entity adds a level of complexity, and therefore reduces the likelihood of effective implementation. Working at regional-level substantially increases the complexities by including differing regulations and jurisdictions.

The streamlining of procedures and compartmentalization of components to the lowest level are therefore crucial. Creating a regional program to be broken down by country, then state administered-components is an effective way of addressing this and the inclusion but not domination of the main regional country (in this case Mexico) in the program.