

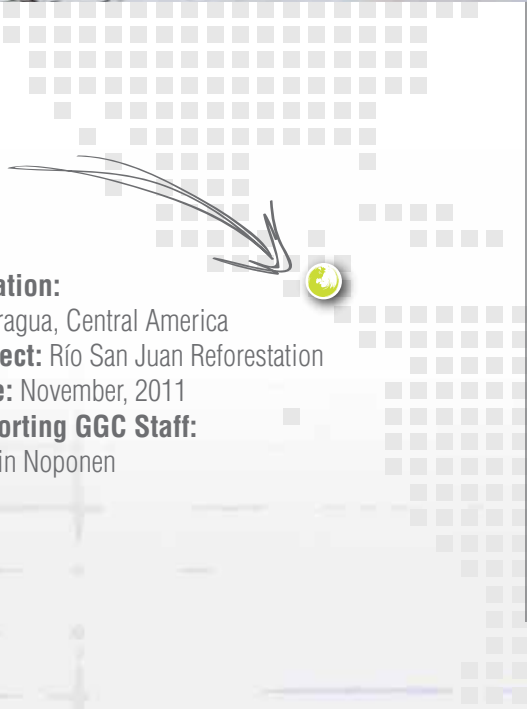


GLOBAL GREEN
Carbon

Notes From the Field



Río San Juan Nicaragua



Location:

Nicaragua, Central America

Project: Río San Juan Reforestation

Date: November, 2011

Reporting GGC Staff:

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Río San Juan, Nicaragua

Managua – As soon as I exit the plane a wall of warm humid air hits me making me reminisce of my PhD days sampling coffee farms in this beautiful country. My flight is delayed and I arrive at the airport late at night a little worried that my driver might have had to wait for a while but then I remember – this is Nicaragua.

I remind myself that the pace of life around here is a little different to that back in the UK and it is now time to change into Nica mode!

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The next morning I prepare for my journey to the Rio San Juan where Global Green Carbon – Nicaragua (GGC-N) is advancing a reforestation-agroforestry project. I catch a small plane to San Carlos which lies at the southern tip of Lake Nicaragua, close to the Costa Rican border. It is quite a contrast from the large and comparatively luxurious airplanes travelling across continents to this tiny propeller machine, although I feel very comfortable and excited being able to take photos of the beautiful landscape.



Watching the pilot unfold his lunch pack I can identify all the places that I had visited before in my numerous trips to Nicaragua: beneath us, at the foothills of Vulcan Mombacho with its lush cloud forests, lies the old colonial city of Granada. You can just make out its magnificent cathedral, and in the foreground the Islettas, a formation of hundreds of small islands, are just passing by. In the background I can make out the Laguna de Apoyo, one of the many crater lakes in the region. At the top of its crater rim lays the small town of Catarina and surrounding villages, famous for their beautiful pottery and artefacts.

After less than an hour's flight the pilots are preparing for the landing and a short while after we touch down on a sandy

runway which seems far too short. But the journey is not over yet. I catch a taxi to the harbour and board the last

boat to my final destination in the El Castillo municipality which is located within the department of Rio San Juan.

El Castillo lies on the edge of the Indio Maiz Biological Reserve, a national park which aims to protect the remaining forests and their inherent biodiversity and natural ecosystems.

After a couple of hours on a crammed boat passing by countless birds sitting in trees warming and drying themselves in the evening sun, I get off at Boca de Sabalos just before sunset. Simon Besnard, the GGC-N Rio San Juan project manager, welcomes me and together we set off to the new office which will be my home for the next week.

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At the office, which lies in the middle of the village, I meet Juan and Roberto, the two forestry technicians who have been working alongside Simon in identifying, interviewing and mapping potential project landholder participants. Both technicians are from the area and have not only in-depth knowledge of the technical aspects of the different project components but also a very deep understanding of the cultural bonds and traditions within the communities. I tell them about my new position within the GGC team and the objectives of this first trip.

Together we come up with an itinerary for my stay which will allow me to get a first insight and understanding of all elements relevant to the project. As a result, over the course of my trip, we manage to meet a whole range of people involved in the project in one way or another; we visit numerous farms and organizations wanting to contribute to the success of the project; and we have lengthy discussions with farmers, technical staff and other GGC members on how best to proceed and continue working successfully. The following are a few excerpts to summarise this experience:

One morning we set off to visit Don Eulalio whose farm has been selected as one of two pilot sites. Although the rainy season has officially come to an end, the roads are still very muddy and progress on our motorbikes is slow. After an hour or so we reach a small house on the side of the road.

We park our bikes and continue on foot through untouched rainforest, passing a group of women washing their clothes in a stream. Then suddenly, the landscape dramatically changes. This formerly deforested land has been recently reforested with African Palm (*Elaeis guineensis*), a commercial species used

to produce palm oil. The impact on the local environment and the people themselves from these large-scale mono species plantations can be devastating. Biodiversity, watersheds and soil quality are just a few of the many important ecosystem services negatively affected. Without other livelihood alternatives, however, farmers are tempted by this short-term opportunity.

On the way to the farm we are approached by another farmer who wants to talk to us. He has heard about our project from his neighbour and is keen to learn more about it. We give him a brief description of the possibilities and arrange to come and visit his farm to carry out an initial interview with him and identify possible project areas within it.

After over a year of project feasibility studies, impact assessments and design, and months of outreach work in the different communities with hundreds of visits and interviews with farmers, I can see that the project is creating its own momentum. This is very good news.

Finally, after a long and somewhat strenuous walk we arrive at the house of Don Eulalio. His wife welcomes us and we set off to meet him in the field – he is currently preparing his land for the

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planting of beans, which are used to 'prepare' the often compacted pasture lands for the agroforestry or forestry stages and as well serve as a first financial return for the farmer.

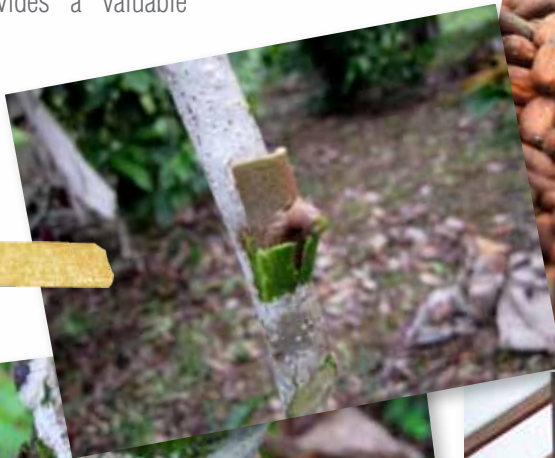
On the way back we pass by a farm which had been mentioned to us by numerous people as producing excellent cacao. We ask the famers' sons to give us a tour of their agroforestry system which turns out to be a very educational visit, including a demonstration of cacao grafting.

The next day we arranged to visit a cooperative in Buena Vista, another community which has members participating in the project. This cooperative has been set up as part of efforts of the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) which has worked in the area for a number of years.

A cooperative member shows us around their processing facilities and we discuss in detail their experiences in designing and managing cacao plantations. He tells us about a successful clonal garden of cacao plants which was established as part of the on-going project, and assures us that they will be able to provide a large portion of the plants needed for the first phase of our project.

We establish that it will be of benefit for both parties to continue working together to help improve the socio-economic situation in the region.

Drawing on the experience and advice of already successfully-established farmers within this region will greatly improve the design and management of our own systems as sustainable and lucrative business entities. This local experience provides a valuable perspective along with that of our cacao experts and on staff expertise.





In the afternoon we met with members of the local council, the National Forestry Development Fund (FONADEF) and representatives of the German

Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) who are all currently working on a short-term development project within the region. Yet again I am reminded of the importance of getting all stakeholders on board and convinced of the positives of such an endeavour, but at the same time I keep an open mind in choosing the right partners that can help drive this project forward. Making these decisions as an outsider can sometimes help as one starts with a 'clean slate' and without existing ties and interests to defend and nurture.

My trip continues with visits to a number of farms which need to be mapped as part of the on-going registration process. I want to understand the criteria Simon and his team are using when deciding for or against a particular area of land that a farmer would like to contribute to the project.

One particular issue that comes up in discussions with a farmer is regarding accounting for already existing shade trees. We explain that as part of the certification we aim to achieve, existing trees on project land have to be kept in place and cannot be removed prior to the project start. Many farmers struggle with understanding the concept of carbon credits, which is understandable considering its novelty and complexity.

Discussions and demonstration on how we measure trees, assess their biomass and how this translates into carbon sequestered is a concept farmers are only slowly beginning to

understand. Much more work on this is needed in order to nurture the realization that although money can be made from reforesting areas, the greater opportunity rests with providing a sustainable future for their children through such long-term projects with diverse and multiple revenue streams.

A highlight towards the end of my stay was the first contract-signing event for farmers who had gone through the necessary screening tests and interviews to determine suitability of project participation and also had their land mapped. As part of this event, Kirsten McGregor, the president of GGC and Luis Mendez, GGC's associated attorney in Nicaragua, came to explain the details of the contract that had been carefully-developed. We secured the municipality hall for this event and consequently had a great turn out from the invited families.

We used this opportunity to reiterate the aims and objectives of the project and emphasize the opportunities this will create if we work together and fulfil our respective roles in realizing this project. The contract details were then laid out and any questions discussed to ensure that all doubts were addressed. Listening to the excellent presentation by Luis Mendez which had everyone engaged and fully understanding the potential of this project, the following quote from his speech drives home the importance of acting now: "This project is a little like a marriage – it is for life but never for certain! Let's grasp the opportunity and make it happen!"



I look forward to my next visit.