

# **(De-)Constructing conservation corridors in human landscapes of the Mesoamerican dry tropics**

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## **Background & Objectives**

In global conservation, biological corridors have been designed and promoted widely as a model to achieve both biodiversity conservation and sustainable human development. Ecologically, corridors can provide a range of benefits to biodiversity including enhancing landscape connectivity; preserving important ecosystem functions and processes; expanding habitat area; and enabling pathways for species dispersal, migration, and colonization. Socially, corridors can support human livelihood needs through forms of sustainable resource management like agroforestry.

The potential of corridors is especially important in developing countries such as El Salvador, where much land has been converted for human use and conventional land-sparing strategies are limited in effectiveness. As the most densely populated country in Central America lying at the heart of the Mesoamerican biodiversity hotspot, El Salvador presents a unique case study for corridors because of its rich biodiversity and highly human-modified landscapes. With the expansion of urban and agricultural land uses and increasing pressures on existing natural habitats, corridors have been adopted into the country's conservation policy and planning on national and regional scales, drawing from legacies of the former multinational Mesoamerican Biological Corridor project.

Within this context, my master's research examines historic and present discourses and design of corridors in El Salvador in an attempt to deconstruct the motivations, priorities, and challenges behind this particular model of integrated conservation and development. My field research, supported by the CLAG Field Study Award, centered on two research questions: (1) *Where have corridors been proposed in the past, and why?* (2) *In the future, would they be designed in the same way? Why or why not?* In addressing these questions, my research seeks to inform future corridor policy and programs in El Salvador as well as the wider Mesoamerican region.

## **Field Research**

Fieldwork for this project was based in El Salvador's capital city of San Salvador and was carried out over three weeks from July to August 2018. During this period, I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-six conservation and/or development professionals to discuss past and ongoing corridor projects as well as experiences and challenges in planning and implementing these. The professionals I interviewed represented a range of sectors and institutions from public and NGO to private, including the Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (MARN), Ministerio de Turismo (MITUR), Fundación PRISMA, ASAPROSAR, and SalvaNATURA.

My fieldwork also included several trips to key protected areas of the country, where corridor projects have been recently proposed. At these sites, I interviewed park and program managers in order to better understand local conditions and the challenges to designing and implementing corridors in practice. In addition to interviews and field trips, I dedicated a portion of my time in El Salvador to compiling policy and planning documentation for subsequent document analysis.

During my time in the field, I worked with a Salvadoran university student in biology, who accompanied me on interviews and field trips as a research assistant. Working with her was one of the most rewarding parts of the field experience, and we learned a great deal from each other throughout the process. I continue to mentor her as she completes her own senior thesis project at the Universidad de El Salvador.

Interviews, documentation, and data collected during my field research will be processed, coded, and analyzed during the fall of 2018. An in-depth discussion of results will be included in my final master's thesis as well as presented at the American Association of Geographers conference in Washington, DC, in the spring of 2019. I will also present and provide my findings to key collaborators in El Salvador and my partner organization, Paso Pacífico.

### **Acknowledgments**

For this research, I am collaborating with a conservation NGO called Paso Pacífico, which focuses on conservation of Mesoamerica's Pacific slope ecosystems through integrative and community-based approaches. While the organization works primarily along the Pacific coast of Nicaragua and has seen measurable progress there, it hopes to upscale its mission to form a regional network of communities and partners committed to conservation of the greater Pacific corridor. In light of recent political events and social unrest in Nicaragua, my originally proposed work with Paso Pacífico in Nicaragua was suspended for safety concerns. However, through continued collaboration, my current research seeks to extend the organization's purview into El Salvador helping to advance its regional agenda.

The support provided by the CLAG Field Study Award was crucial to making my project possible, affording me the opportunity to travel to El Salvador for three weeks of fieldwork. CLAG funds covered three weeks of living and meal expenses as well as ground transportation costs. CLAG funds also allowed me to support a local field assistant, who benefited through valuable research and professional experience related to her field of interest. Thank you, CLAG!



My field assistant and I at Lago Coatepeque in the department of Santa Ana, El Salvador



View from a mirador in Parque Nacional San Diego y San Felipe Las Barras in the department of Santa Ana, El Salvador