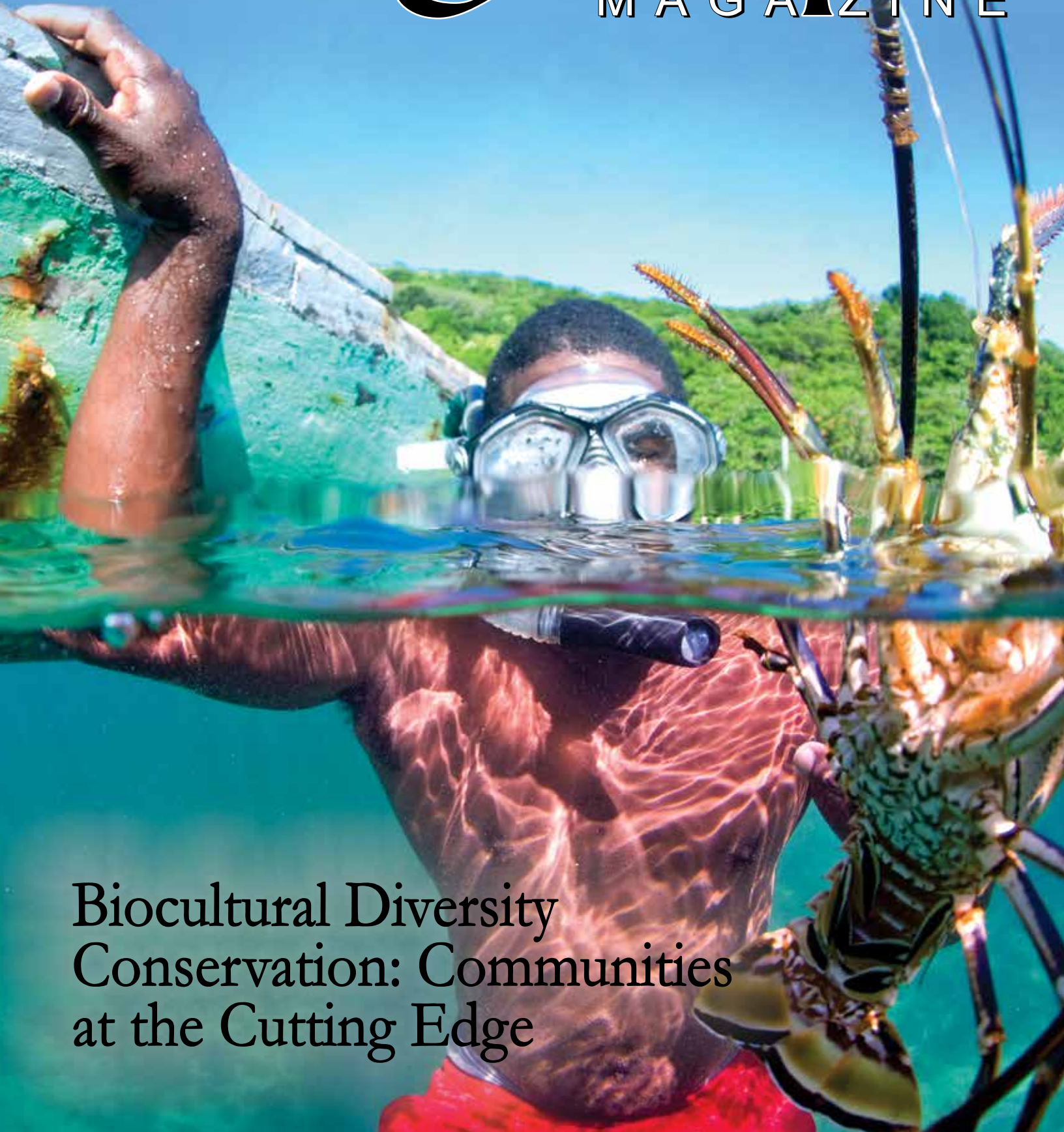


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Langscape

MAGAZINE



Biocultural Diversity
Conservation: Communities
at the Cutting Edge

Langscape Magazine is an extension of the voice of Terralingua.
It supports our mission by educating the minds and hearts
about the importance and value of biocultural diversity.

We aim to promote a paradigm shift by illustrating biocultural diversity through
scientific and traditional knowledge, within an appealing
sensory context of articles, stories, and art.

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTOS

Front: In Cayos Cochinos, Honduras, Mario Flores Aranda is promoting sustainable fishing, using a line loop for live capture so that undersize lobsters may be released unharmed.

Photo: Antonio Busiello, 2015

Back: Rice harvest in a rotational farming field in the Hin Lad Nai community of northern Thailand, at the end of the farming year or *quv*. After harvest, the land will enter *hsji wa*, the first year of fallow in the rotational farming cycle.

Photo: Nutandai Trakasupakhon, 2016

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Designing Biocultural Protocols with the **Embera** People of Colombia



**Gabriel Nemogá, Justico Domicó,
and Alejandro Molina**

The working group on territory and infrastructure meets at a workshop on the biocultural community protocol, Polines Community Library. Photo: Dinson Bailarín, 2017

AT THE INSISTENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS and organizations, the 2015 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, or *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) included a section addressing ethnic issues. Since the agreement's approval, the government has met enormous internal resistance from traditional privileged elites against the implementation of the peace agreement; the ethnic provisions have not been a priority at all. In fact, the peaceful post-conflict environment contributes to the obscuring of the ongoing drama of hundreds of communities that are still fighting for their ancestral lands. In this challenging situation, communities continue to take actions to reclaim their right to their territories, protect their biocultural heritage, and secure a better future for their children and coming generations.

In Colombia's recent history, the Embera people are one of the Indigenous groups most impacted by forced displacement and violence. Along with other Indigenous nations, such as the Wananni, Guandule (formerly known as Kuna), and Afro-Colombian communities, the Embera share the richly biodiverse Chocó region. Repeatedly displaced

within their own territory, the Embera communities of the Urabá subregion strive to protect their biocultural heritage. This is the story of their resilience and of our efforts to bring Indigenous worldviews to bear on the realms of policy and legislation.

“In Colombia's recent history, the Embera people are one of the most impacted by forced displacement and violence.”

The Embera communities of Chigorodocito and Polines are located in the northwestern part of the Antioquia province and form a biocultural complex within an area of high endemism in plant and animal species. The Indigenous council *Cabildo Mayor Indígena de Chigorodó* (CMCh in Spanish) represents the *resguardos* (Indigenous collective lands) of Yaberadó and Polines and covers five communities, including Chigorodocito and Polines, where our work took place. The population is around 2,250 people in the two *resguardos*, which currently cover approximately fourteen thousand hectares. Displaced

to their present location since the 1980s, the Embera engaged in land reclamation and sought legal recognition of their lands with the national government. With the support of the Indigenous Organization of Antioquia (OIA), they secured the title to their collective territories between 1987 and 2003.

In the new locality, Embera communities encountered strong pressure from established sectors to adopt the social and commercial practices of the region. Engaging in dealings outside of the immediate community and pursuing trade for individual gain has impacted Embera solidarity, thereby reducing the opportunities for collective work and community affairs. Additionally, like many other Indigenous communities around the world, the Embera face a double threat to preserving their ancestral knowledge and wisdom: elders who have been keepers of the knowledge, wisdom, and ceremonial practice are passing away; and, simultaneously, youth are not fully committed to and engaged in preserving their ancestral legacy. These threats are made worse by the strong assimilation trends of the surrounding market economy, material consumerism, and systematic institutional practices that erode Indigenous identities, languages, and traditional knowledge.

Bringing Indigenous Worldviews into Policy and Legislation

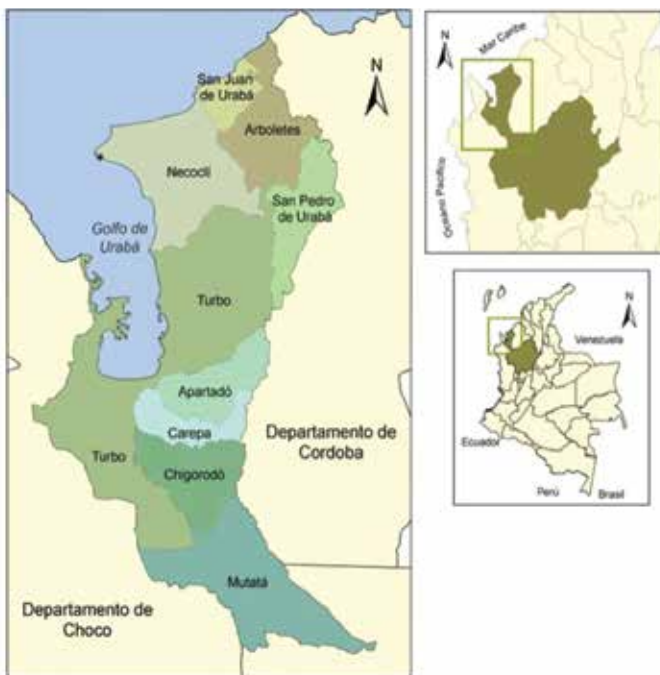
Led by the CMCh, the Embera are working towards the re-establishment of their way of life in territories where guerrilla and paramilitary groups disrupted their cultural and social networks. The CMCh is concerned about the rapid erosion of cultural traditions, reduction of the number of Embera speakers, and the loss of ancestral knowledge. In July 2015, I started conversations with the CMCh about developing a project called Bringing Indigenous Worldviews into Policy and Legislation on Traditional Knowledge and Biodiversity. The basic premise of this project is that conservation of cultural

diversity, in general, and traditional knowledge associated with biodiversity (TKB), in particular, could lead to the conservation of biodiversity and ecosystems but not the other way around. Thus, the overarching goal was to contribute to the protection of TKB through a community-designed biocultural protocol. As defined by the human rights organization Natural Justice, biocultural protocols are the sets of rules and responsibilities that communities design to preserve their worldviews, values, knowledge, and spiritual relations with nature.

By developing a biocultural protocol from the bottom up, members of the communities—including leaders, elders, healers, parents, and youth, both men and women—engage in active identification and self-awareness about their biocultural heritage. Based on their community’s worldview, people prioritize histories, values, cultural expressions, and special and sacred sites for protection; in addition, they define and design the actions to be undertaken through the protocol. For this project, we established a community Embera Biocultural Heritage Protectors’ team with two members from each community, combined with the communication unit of the CMCh.

A Forced Change on “Being Embera”

Subtle and open discrimination reinforces changes in cultural patterns and social interactions of Embera communities. A tacit rejection of Embera culture coincides with further exposure to media (e.g., TV, radio), official education, and Christian proselytism. Leaders from different religious sects and denominations (Jehovah’s Witnesses and various Protestant churches) continually travel to the communities and involve Embera host families in proselytizing talks. Once they gain trust with some members of the communities, they move in and openly organize religious meetings, targeting *jaibanás* (traditional healers) and their ancestral practices. Accusations of witchcraft against *jaibanás* are common as a tactic to diminish healers’ social and spiritual recognition,



Location of the *municipio* (municipality) of Chigorodó, Colombia. Source: CMCh, 2014



The late Teresa Bailarín Majoré (1949–2017), an Embera elder who was an exceptional keeper of her people’s biocultural heritage. Photo: Justico Domicó, 2017



A protectors' team Embra Biocultural Heritage Training workshop, Chigorodocito. Photo: Gabriel Nemogá, 2017

force them to hide their practices, or make them move to a different community.

The identification of one's self as "being Embra" is also openly repressed when people interact with the population in the nearest town, Chigorodó. The Embra language is not accepted for legitimate use in everyday trade; moreover, adult women and men, but especially young people, feel ashamed of wearing their traditional clothing. Girls and boys face stronger pressure to abandon their Embra identity, speak Spanish, and dress more like non-Indigenous kids. At the city's high school, they have to wear standard school clothing if they do not want to be a target of bullying and discrimination. Women have shown more resilience and continue wearing their traditional *parumas* (similar to skirts) and colorful shirts in town. Men, on the other hand, opt faster for a more Western-like appearance and predominantly wear jeans and shirt.

At the community schools, teaching still occurs in Spanish. Although Chigorodocito's school teachers speak Embra, their dialect, Embra-katio, is different from the local dialect, Embra-eyábida. Teaching in Spanish encourages the use of this language at community school meetings. Moreover, schooling in Spanish indirectly dissuades the use of the Embra language within community and family life in general. At the Polines community, the balance is more favorable. Polines has an elementary and high school, and at least four teachers are bilingual and completely fluent in Embra-eyábida. Nevertheless, not all the teaching is doable in the Embra-eyábida dialect at the elementary school level because printed materials to support teachers' work in each grade is limited or nonexistent. Recently, the OIA and other organizations have begun to support the production of the first written Embra dictionary. Work on Embra syntax, grammar, and phonetics still needs to be pursued on a broader scope.

Building Endogenous Research

During the training of the protectors' team, in addition to modules on biocultural community protocols and biocultural heritage, sessions comprised basic concepts on intellectual property rights and international legal instruments, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, the International Labour Organization's C169 Convention, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The dominant oral tradition among the participants forced a re-orientation of the activities toward more practical group exercises and fewer individual text readings. Recognition and involvement of the community's perspective were guaranteed through the active participation of community members. All the gatherings and workshops were conducted in Embra-eyábida, with sporadic translation to Spanish to facilitate communication with non-Embra speakers.

Members of the protectors' team led the research activities in collaboration with elders and community leaders. In each community, the team carried out two workshops. The team also designed practical teaching exercises and demonstrations of cultural practices. At Chigorodocito's elementary school, for example, the team organized a one-day children's body- and face-painting workshop, under the direction of the *jaibaná*, or traditional healer. In this exercise, the *jaibaná* guided the procedure and the Embra protocols for the use of the *jagua* plant (*Genipa americana*).

Through a couple of community activities, one in Polines and one in Chigorodocito, the team identified key themes for the protocol. In this process, members of the team surveyed the families in the Chigorodocito community and carried out a sharing circle at the high school in Polines to prioritize the themes, as seen in the following list. In both communities, the families surveyed and the participants in the sharing circle were purposely selected to include gender diversity.

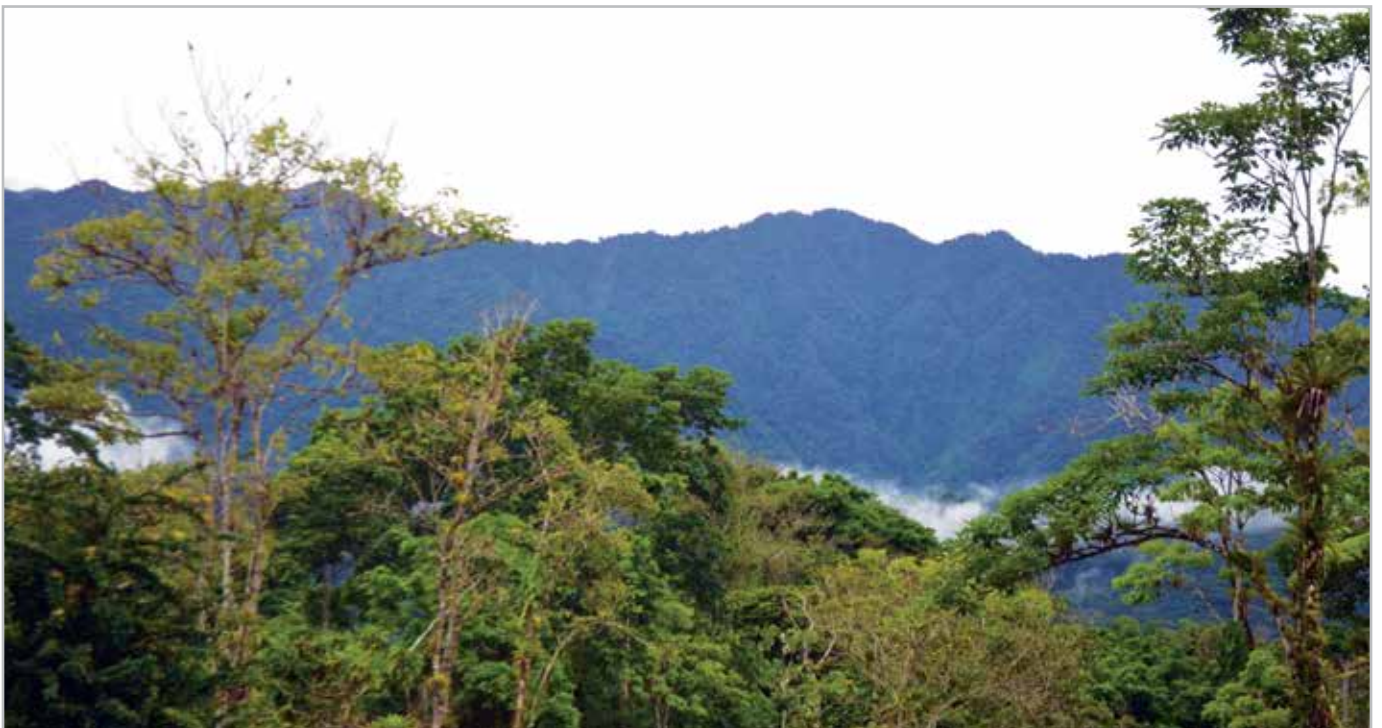


A plenary session at a workshop on the biocultural community protocol, Polines Community Center. Photo: Dinson Bailarín, 2017

The team also conducted four unstructured interviews with elders and leaders to guarantee a more integral representation of community stakeholders. Based on discussions developed in working groups, the team elicited the following themes for the protocol:

- Indigenous identity and history (Embera origin story)
- Indigenous governance and justice
- Territory and sacred sites

- Ancestral wisdom and knowledge
- Education and language
- Health and medicinal plant knowledge
- Duty to consult and prior informed consent
- Cultural practices and expressions, including traditional housing (*tambo*), traditional songs (*truambis*), and other music, dances, handicrafts, weaving



A sacred forest, Chigorodocito. Biocultural protocols allow communities to decide what priority to give to such places. Photo: Justico Domicó, 2017

The protectors' team agreed on a working definition of Embera biocultural heritage as follows: "Our cultural heritage is what distinguishes us as Embera in connection with our territory, our language, our way of life, our ceremonies, beliefs, thoughts, practices, knowledge, innovations and cultural expressions. It is the cultural legacy of our ancestors. Our forest is sacred and is an integral part of our way of life; it provides us with food, medicine, air, water, minerals and joy. We are committed to care, respect, protect and recreate the richness of forest life with its rivers, animals, plants and the spiritual beings" (Biocultural Protocol Draft, December 2017).

"Our forest is sacred and is an integral part of our way of life; it provides us with food, medicine, air, water, minerals, and joy."

This definition of biocultural heritage underlines the knowledge system of Embera people and their inextricable link to the forest and different beings that they recognize in their territory. Indeed, this definition partially coincides with the CMCh's earlier introduction (in 2014) of an annual community cultural exchange. This gathering rotates every year to a different community. Communities demonstrate ancestral dances and songs, as well as skills for the preparation of traditional food and drinks. During these exchanges, the Embera language is used exclusively. The protectors' team's definition of biocultural heritage emphasizes the connection with the territory and a sense of responsibility and care for the forest.

Although the CMCh has been able to keep this annual celebration going, in 2017 budget limitations restricted community participation.

After postponing the event three times, it finally took place in October 2017 in the community of Guapa Alto. The protectors' team contributed in different capacities to its realization, coordinating activities and taping presentations. CMCh's leaders expressed their satisfaction with the event, but regretted that some ancestral practices, such as the preparation of Embera food and drinks, are now becoming irregular activities in the communities' life.

The Bringing Indigenous Worldviews into Policy and Legislation on Traditional Knowledge and Biodiversity project shows that the biocultural framework is not only a generative theory for conducting research, but it also represents an ethical position that recognizes and respects the interests of Indigenous peoples and local communities in their knowledge, territories, and resources. In practical application of the biocultural diversity framework, the Colombian Constitutional Court granted legal personhood rights to the Atrato River by Sentence T-622 of 2016. The design of a biocultural community protocol is a complex and ongoing process. In December 2017, the protectors' team analyzed and discussed a draft version in Chigorodó. After adjustments, the protocol will be submitted for formal adoption by the CMCh.

By working from a biocultural diversity framework, this project recognizes the intrinsic link of traditional environmental knowledge to Indigenous worldviews and ways of life. The protection of TKB will be effective only if the mechanisms involve safeguarding communities' ways of life in connection to their territories. The CMCh has undertaken a remarkable effort to preserve the Embera biocultural heritage, addressing the challenges and opportunities of a unique, volatile, and changing situation after the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC.

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Justico Domicó currently leads the Communication Unit of CMCh and the Embera Biocultural Heritage Protectors' team.

Alejandro Molina is a social communicator and works as CMCh's advisor.

Further Reading

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