Oral presentation

The aguaje palm (*Mauritia flexuosa*): A conservation and agroforestry project in northeastern Peru.

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Introduction. The aguaje palm (*Mauritia flexuosa* L. f.) is the most economically important palm in Peru's largest region of Loreto. The unsustainable exploitation of the palm's nutritious fruit, called aguaje, has negative impacts on the region's forests, fauna, and people. The traditional view of aguaje conservation has concentrated in protecting productive aguaje palms in the wild. This study analyzes a different approach, where the aguaje palm was planted in an agroforestry project with smallholders in their fields, in the buffer zone of a large community reserve in the Peruvian Amazon.

Objectives. To understand why farmers were planting aguaje palms, how the palms were growing in agricultural lands, and cropping strategies with the palms in these new agroforestry systems.

Methods. Thirty-two farmers were interviewed for a study of the decision-making process behind their decisions to plant aguaje. Fifteen fields were surveyed to determine planting methods and density of aguaje palms, the number of associated crops, to conduct soil analysis, and land use practices by farmers. A total of 907 palms were measured to analyze growth and development. A spherical densiometer was used to measure weed cover in fields.

Results. Local customs and beliefs had prevented farmers in the region from cultivating the palms until recently. Initial performance of aguaje in fields was affected by seed quality, environmental conditions, and planting strategies. Sixty-seven crops were cultivated in association with aguaje. As field age increases, association with tree crops increases in upland fields, while decreasing in floodplain fields. The palms grew significantly shorter and developed faster when growing under environmental conditions that were different from those of wild aguaje.

Conclusion. Findings from this study will help smallholders in the region to sustainably cultivate an increasingly scarce and valuable palm fruit that can provide them with long-term food and economic security. Maturity time for aguaje is probably underestimated by current literature.

Keywords: Amazon, non-timber forest products

Selected References

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