

## CONNECTING ACADEMIA AND ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE FOR DISEASE PREVENTION

In times of climate change, deforestation, and increasing health risks, there is a crucial need for extensive cooperation among all affected parties. In the Selva Maya region, GIZ taps into ancestral knowledge and indigenous traditions as part of its innovative and environmentally friendly strategy.

“Now the families in the communities know what to do,” says Prof Dr Carlota Monroy. “By painting their houses with lime and using bed nets with a repellent made from a mixture of fermented plant leaves, they will reduce the number of mosquitoes in the future.”

Carlota Monroy is a long-term researcher at the University of San Carlos (USAC) in Guatemala City. As a pioneer for vector control using new approaches in EcoHealth to prevent zoonotic diseases amongst marginalised populations, she led a research team into two rural Mayan villages in the Petén region of Guatemala. The area partially belongs to what people call “Selva Maya,” a region with ten million hectares of rainforest containing 23 different ecosystems extending across the borders of Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico. In this region, maintaining a One Health focus that connects the human, animal, and environmental sectors is even more vital.



In Petén, Carlota Monroy’s team tested the application of a lime product on the walls of dwellings in the two villages. The lime product, made from natural ingredients traditionally used by the indigenous Maya population, has proved to repel mosquitoes responsible for deadly malaria infections. “The greatest burden for humans comes from the diseases Dengue, Leishmaniasis, and Chagas,” Carlota says.

To address this issue, GIZ unites actors from civil society, science, and politics at the regional and national levels. This even involved the local context, such as in the case of Carlota Monroy’s research in rural Guatemala: “We brought employees from the Ministry of Health into the two villages. Through actively participating in this pilot project, they could see with their own eyes that there are alternative options for an effective vector control,” she says.

In addition, GIZ delivers trainings to traditional midwives who serve as a connection between indigenous pregnant women, their communities, and the national health care system. The establishment of the national One Health platforms in Guatemala and Mexico is another highlight while also supporting the crucial regional stakeholder platform “Alianza One Health Selva Maya”. The “Alianza” has been active during the regional zoonotic disease prioritisation workshop coordinated jointly with the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention and, conducted collaboratively with One Health sector ministries from Belize, Mexico, and Guatemala.

Carlota hopes that in the aftermath of the project, the use of indigenous traditions and ancestral knowledge – methods Selva Maya’s early inhabitants strived for thousands of years ago already – will find their way into policy papers and national health strategies: for better healthcare for animals, the environment, and humans alike.



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