

ECO-PALM POWERPOINT PRESENTATION SCRIPT

(Created by Barbara Hipple, 2008)

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The Eco-Palm Project of the PC(USA) provides an opportunity for congregations to purchase high quality *Chamaedorea* palm fronds for Palm Sunday—a purchase which supports indigenous communities in Guatemala and Mexico, as well as preserves the rainforest.

The project began in 2005 at the University of Minnesota, when 5,000 palm stems were imported and sold to churches in the Upper Midwest for use on Palm Sunday. In 2006, the count was 80,000 stems in 34 states. In 2007, the number increased to 347,330 stems. In 2008, congregations across the US purchased 580,000 stems.

"Palms are a major source of cash income for villagers in forested areas," says Dean Current, manager of the Center for Integrated Natural Resources and Agricultural Management at the university's St. Paul campus. "A lot of these areas also are very important biosphere reserves."

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The Eco-Palms concept is simple: Teach villagers sustainable harvesting techniques; eliminate middlemen; pay more for harvesting, sorting and packing; and thus provide an economic incentive for communities to protect the tropical and subtropical forests in whose shade the plants grow.

To show you how this program works, and what it means to the indigenous people who harvest the palms, I am going to take you on a quick trip to Guatemala to visit one of these communities.

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On the road into the Peten [pronounced "pay-ten"], the northern part of Guatemala, we pass acre upon acre of pasture land, which only 40 years ago was all forest but has since been slashed and burned. In fact, 70% of all ground vegetation in the Peten has been lost in the last 30 years.

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Psalm 107:33-38 "He turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty ground, a fruitful land into a salty waste, because of the wickedness of its inhabitants. **He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into spring of water. And there he lets the hungry live, and they establish a town to live in;** they sow fields, and plant vineyards, and get a fruitful yield. By his blessing they multiply greatly, and he does not let their cattle decrease."

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In 1986, the governments of Guatemala and Mexico decided it was time to do something to protect the remaining rainforest, and created the 1.6-million acre Maya Biosphere Reserve. The original idea was to protect the forest and the animals living in the forest—not the indigenous, marginalized people who had lived there all their lives. They planned to relocate the people but without providing a new means of livelihood. The likely result would be that these people would come back to the forest and harvest wood, palms and other forest products illegally and in the same unsustainable manner as they had in the past.

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Some community leaders got together with the Rainforest Alliance and developed a proposal:

- Government leases the rights to occupy areas of rainforest as 20-yr land concessions—of about 200,000 acres each—to indigenous communities which meet certain criteria. Having a land concession means to "own" the rights to harvest on designated areas in the biosphere.
- One requirement is completing training offered by, and be certified by, the Rainforest Alliance for sustainable management of the forest (for palms or other forestry operations). Through certification, the communities engaging in responsible management practices have the opportunity to benefit directly by receiving a higher price for their palm fronds.
- Another is providing a plan for the organization of the community.
- Another is training from the Rainforest Alliance in how to run a small business, so initial efforts don't fall apart.

- In return, the communities, such as Carmelita and Oaxactun [wa-shoc-toon], protect the forest that is their home. They prevent squatters from claiming portions of the land for sale to cattle ranchers; keep away illegal, non-sustainable, wood and palm harvesters; and patrol the forest in the dry season to protect it from fire.

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Carmelita is a cooperative—not all palm-harvesting communities are co-operatives. Carmelita has been well established over the years, and one of its former presidents, Juan Trujillo [wan troo-hil-yo), now works for Rainforest Alliance and has worked hard to make Carmelita a model community.

Members of the cooperative are farmers (corn & beans), chicle [*chik-lay*] harvesters, palm harvesters or *xaterros* [zha-ter-os], allspice harvesters, *xate* [zha-tay] sorters, wood harvesters, lumber mill workers and owners of small businesses...

SLIDE 9 ...such as the community restaurant.

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This is Carmelita's Tourism Office. Carlos, the president of the co-operative, describes the Eco-Palm project as a challenge—for which they are pleased about their accomplishments.

Benefits of Eco-Palms to the community include:

- The ability to generate employment and provide extra income from the premiums generated by Palm Sunday sales of the palms
- The ability to manage the forest in a more sustainable manner
- Greater attention to quality
- Co-op investment in operation → water tanks, finance a red truck
- The National Council of Protected Areas of Guatemala (or CONAP—Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas) requires all communities to have a plan
- Then certification that palms they produce are managed sustainably
- Education→ primary level (cost for teacher) and secondary level scholarships
- Other social work→ build church, school, (labor provided by community), work on the road to the community, provide room / board for road workers
- Health→ medicines, get a doctor into the community when needed, take someone to city hospital if needed

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Behind the tourist office are toilets and sinks funded by US AID—the only ones in the community. (All other toilets in the community are outhouses.) The blue tanks on the stands are water tanks which provide the running water. Most homes in Carmelita and other communities in the forest use cisterns to collect rainwater for drinking and food preparation, since the groundwater has micro-organisms which cause illnesses—even with the local people.

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This is Carmelita's church (you see the school in the background).

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40% of the cooperative's income is invested into the future of the community (improving business).

30% is disbursed amongst the members.

30% of community income goes to education (in the form of high school scholarships and bringing in an elementary school teacher), and health and social work.

SLIDE 15 Members of the community

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Juan Trujillo, who heads the non-timber product development of Rainforest Alliance and grew up in Carmelita, takes us into the forest to see the *xate* being harvested.

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Xate is scattered throughout, and a *xaterro* will range far in a day to collect fronds.

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The Rainforest Alliance trains the *xaterros* to harvest the palms sustainably, meaning:

- Leaving behind enough fronds for the plant to continue to grow, and
- Leaving behind the terminal leaf (newest growing point) so the plant doesn't die...

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... and cutting only large, quality fronds the market requires, rather than chopping down the entire plant.

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Chicle (*cheek-lay*), which forms the base for natural chewing gum, is also harvested here.

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Some of Carmelita's additional income from Eco-Palm harvesting funded this building, which houses the sorting and storage of the palms.

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Inside, the women of the community, also trained initially by Rainforest Alliance and Continental Floral Greens, sort the palms according to size into bunches of 20 and tag them as Eco-Palms—keeping only the quality palms and discarding the rest. A non-sustainable harvest produced 50-60% waste; by harvesting sustainably, there is only 3-6% waste. (In a community that isn't set up as a cooperative, the women earn \$6-7 per day, whereas before they had no income.) The women come to work when it fits into their schedules...

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...and often bring their young children along to play. This is Candia (*Can-dee-a*).

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This photo is an example of a drying shed in the community of Oaxactun, where palms are hung in bundles to dry if they are collected in the rain.

SLIDE 27 The palm fronds are bundled.....

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...and marked with the name of the *xaterro* who harvested and the community that processed them.

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The palms are stored for a day or two in a large basin with a bit of water on the bottom...

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...And get tossed onto the next pick-up truck heading for the city of Flores to go into cold storage and await further shipment.

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This the walk-in cooler, in the nearby city of Flores, which was funded by Guatemala's Ministry of Agriculture. The president of Guatemala, who is very interested in rural development, visited Carmelita in the winter of 2006 and was very impressed with what he saw. Not long afterward, the Ministry of Agriculture donated funds for the cold storage unit needed to make timely and efficient transportation of the palms possible.

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The next stage of the journey: loading the palms onto the truck....

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...for shipment to Continental Floral Greens in San Antonio TX, and then to Hermes Floral for distribution across the United States.

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Palm bunches are tagged to indicate they are Eco-Palms. In this way, consumers and congregations can be confident that their purchase directly benefits responsible harvesters.

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Next steps congregations can take: Speak with local florists about Eco-Palms and encourage them to request Eco-Palms from their floral distributor—Eco-Palms are available for year-round use in floral arrangements and for funerals.

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What difference does your purchase make?

- The premium finally made its way to the Guatemalan communities at the end of September 2007, with the assistance of Continental Floral Greens. Representatives from the University of Minnesota traveled to Guatemala and Mexico to deliver the premium by hand to the participating communities. In addition to Uaxactun (*wa-shok-toon*), Carmelita and San Andres, three other communities harvested palms to meet the Palm Sunday order in 2007.
- These communities are all participating in the Rainforest Alliance/Smartwood timber and non-timber forest products certification program. Some of the communities received their certification in March of 2008 while others are in the preliminary stages of certification. A total of \$6,088 was earned by Guatemala of the \$17,088 total premium amount for 2007. The communities will again be using this money for insurance, teacher's salaries and scholarships as well as other social programs the cooperatives vote on.
- The delegation was able to see in their short time there how much this program means to those involved, especially the women *seleccionadoras*.
- In 2007 Presbyterian congregations placed 376 orders (about 81,000 stems), second only to the Lutherans of the 8 participating denominations.

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Certificates of recognition were presented to community leaders. The University of Minnesota accepted a gift of appreciation from our Guatemalan partners on behalf of the American churches for our purchases and support.

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The women's groups worked together with the timber cooperative groups to make a gift of appreciation for the churches-- a beautiful plaque.

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The Eco-Palm project is at its heart a partnership between:

- The governments of Guatemala and Mexico which protect the rainforest
- The indigenous communities which harvest the palms sustainably and protect the forest
- The Rainforest Alliance and PRONATURA (*pro-na-tur-a*)--the Mexican organization which trains and certifies the communities in Mexico
- The North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) which provided early funding to the Univ. of Minnesota to look into certification and supported early market development.
- The University of Minnesota Center for Integrated Natural Resources and Agricultural Management (CINRAM), which initiated the EcoPalms project and with funding from the University is working to improve the market for Eco-Palms
- Continental Floral Greens and Hermes Floral, a family-owned importer and distributor, respectively, who value environmental preservation and social justice
- And the Presbyterian, Lutheran, Catholic, Episcopalian and Methodist denominations which promote use of the Eco-Palms for Palm Sunday among their congregations.