



5.4 Environmental governance in the Colombian Amazon

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The Colombian Amazon is one of the better-conserved continuous forest areas in the Amazon basin. The area is home to a great diversity of ethnic groups, and public policies recognize their cultural and territorial rights over more than twenty million hectares (ha). The region also has more than six million ha of national parks. These circumstances support the permanence of this ecosystem and constitute a great contribution by Colombia to the conservation of tropical humid forests worldwide.

According to a study on the symbolic understanding of the territory carried out by two traditional authorities of the indigenous Yucuna and Matapí groups (Matapí and Yucuna 2012), it is important to consider shamanic concepts and practices in the management of tropical forests by indigenous communities. It is also necessary to involve these people in the institutional arrangements for environmental governance. From a traditional perspective, the management of the territory should be the responsibility of the ethnic groups who live there. They have a detailed knowledge of the territory, the landscape and existing resources, and they operate under the ecological and cultural principles of balanced management that prevents over-exploitation (Matapí and Yucuna 2012).¹



INCLUDING TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES WILL STRENGTHEN LOCAL GOVERNANCE.

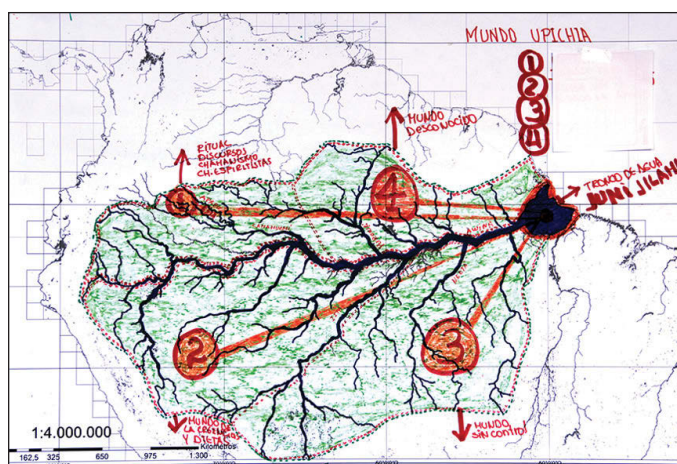
The traditional territory: the vision of shamans

The Yucuna and Matapí occupy the Mirití River watershed in southeast Colombia. Relatively isolated, they are traditional ethnic groups who have maintained a great command of traditional knowledge associated with their territory. They feel that in-depth knowledge of everything that exists in the territory is necessary for the effective management of social relationships within communities and for the appropriate use of natural resources.

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Elders with a large and specialized knowledge of nature and its resources, also known as shamans, know the names of all the topographical features in their traditional territory, starting from the mouth of the Amazon River and ascending to the head of the Mirití River, which is where they were born and where they live.² They consider the greater Amazon Basin as a “great house” (or *maloca*) in which multiple ethnicities are distributed. According to shamans, this enormous region is subdivided into four main areas with sociocultural and ecological similarities. Each of these four cultural areas has its own languages, lineages, rituals and material culture (Figure 1). This article focuses on the first area, defined as the “area for shamanic discourses and spiritual owners” (Matapí and Yucuna 2012). It corresponds to the northwest Amazon, one of the best-preserved areas in the basin. The other three areas are home to other ethnic groups, who have specific ways to manage the forest that are different than those of the Yucuna and Matapí.

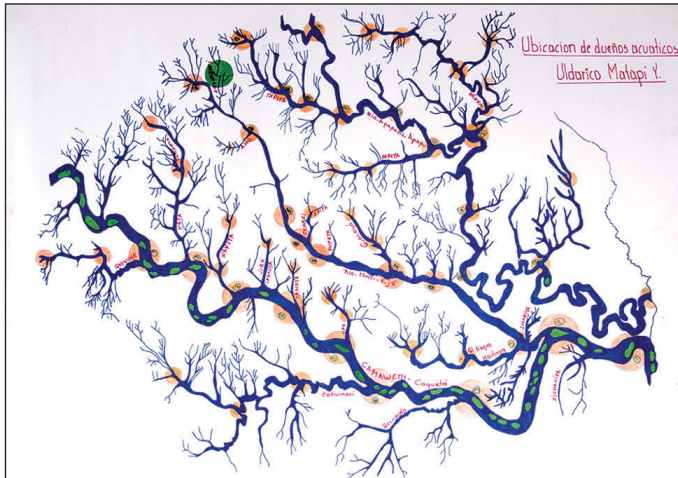
Figure 1. Four cultural areas of the Amazon Basin according to shamanic knowledge



Source: Matapí and Yucuna (2012)

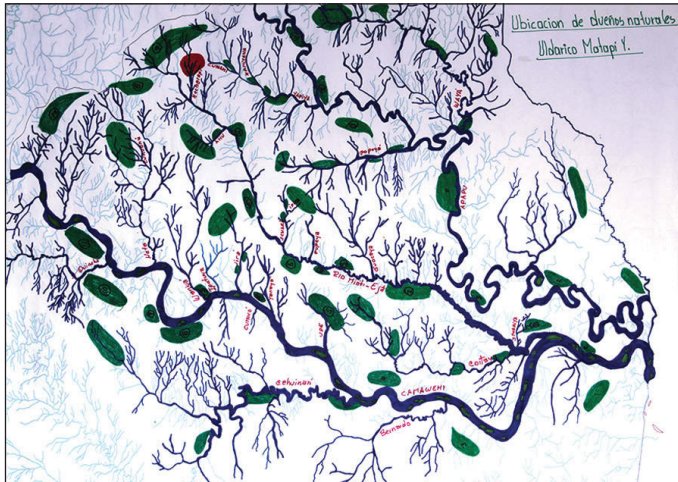
The place of birth and the multi-ethnic territory

The shamans consider the forest to be governed by spiritual owners. Spiritual owners are symbols of a great power that must be asked for permission to use the natural resources located in its domain. They may be understood as forces or entities from the supernatural world that supervise the appropriate use of the resources in a territory. For example, spiritual owners of the aquatic world create and take care of aquatic species, especially fish. When shamans ask permission of the water owners, they name, in a kind of recitation, all the related topographic features, including tributaries, creeks, lakes and lagoons — and the beings that inhabit them — along the Caquetá, Mirití and Apaporis rivers. They even include important aquatic sites located in flooded forests and areas where *canangucho* palm (*Mauritia flexuosa*) predominates, as well as rapids and backwaters (shown as orange circles in Figure 2).

Figure 2. Location of the spiritual owners of the aquatic world

Source: Matapi and Yucuna (2012)

The terrestrial world also has spiritual owners and their presence is recited in a mental journey that ascends from the mouth to the head of each river (Figure 3).

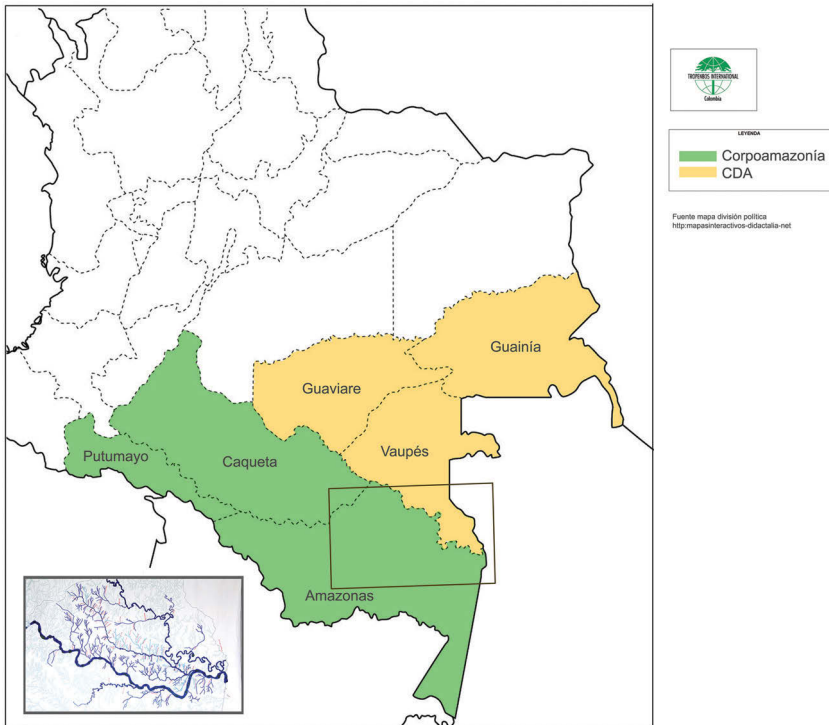
Figure 3. Location of spiritual owners of the terrestrial world

Source: Matapi and Yucuna (2012).

Shamans have detailed knowledge of all the features of the Mirití, Caquetá and Apaporis rivers in the area. They feel that the management of the territory also requires a deep knowledge of its geography. A fundamental concept for indigenous people is that the territory is shared; it is structured by an intricate set of inter-ethnic relationships and by social rules and rituals among the Caquetá, Mirití and Apaporis communities. The territory may be considered a management unit in which more than 30 ethnic groups

Sustainable Development of the Eastern and Northern Amazon (*Corporación para el Desarrollo Sostenible del Norte y el Oriente Amazónico*, or CDA) is the agency for the northeast Amazon, including Guaviare, Vaupés and Guainía provinces; Figure 5).

Figure 5. Overlap of political, administrative and traditional divisions



Along with these institutional entities, the National Authority for Aquaculture and Fishing (AUNAP) operates at the national level and is responsible for the management of fishing resources in the Amazon's water bodies. This institutional structure separates the management of aquatic (AUNAP) and terrestrial (the *Corporaciones*) landscapes.

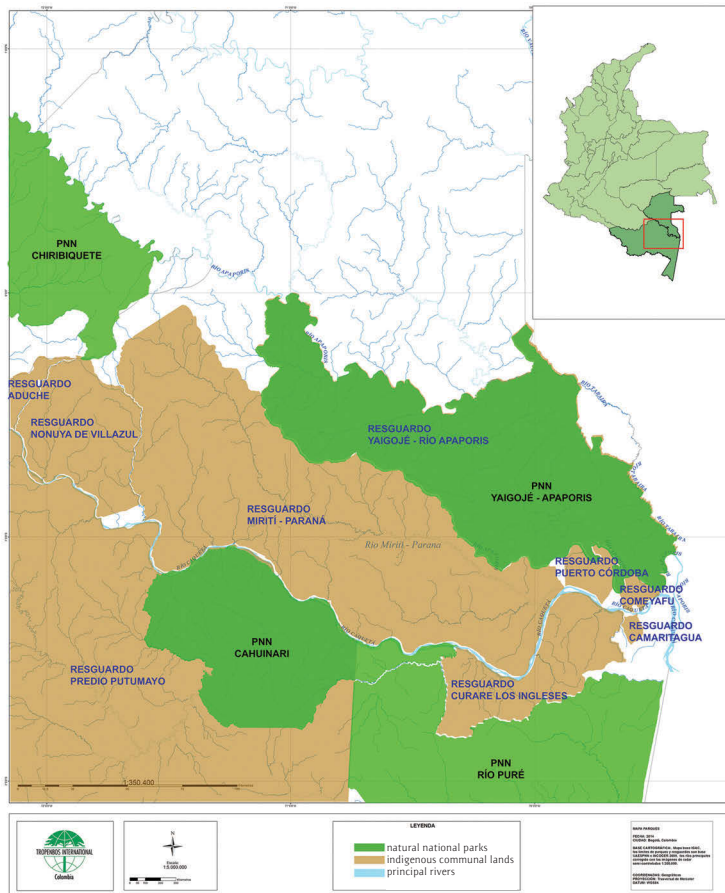
The overlap of national parks and indigenous *resguardos*

Protected areas and indigenous *resguardos* are an important part of the administration of landscapes and natural resources in Colombia. More than 30 million ha of the Colombian Amazon have been designated as protected areas and they have become vital to the conservation of rainforests in the country.

Colombian legislation allows for an overlap between indigenous territories and protected areas, which are part of the national park system. Within this legal framework, many national parks have been established in indigenous territories in the last 30 years. This is a consequence of the compatibility between indigenous territories and protected areas in terms of conservation.

The past decades have seen both collaboration and conflict between indigenous authorities and the national parks agency. Although many co-management schemes and management regimes have been developed, some people feel that new protection categories are needed that recognize the conservation role and autonomy of indigenous communities. Some indigenous *resguardos* completely overlap national parks; this may require a new governance framework that simultaneously guarantees the autonomy of communities and the conservation objectives of the park. New institutional platforms for co-management processes are being planned by Colombian authorities. Figure 6 shows overlapping protected areas and indigenous territories in the Colombian Amazon.

Figure 6. Overlap of national parks and indigenous resguardos



An overlap of physical territory may suggest that there is an overlap of management criteria. However, many conflicts arise because neither the national park authorities nor the indigenous *resguardos* have a thorough understanding of the traditional territory or the shamanic concept of it. From a practical perspective this has generated cultural fragmentation within the territory and its landscapes and in the governance of natural

resources. It is necessary to structure relationships in a way that combines shamanistic concepts and western governance parameters within protected areas. This would include developing programmes for cultural strengthening.

In spite of the conflicts caused by overlapping jurisdictions, progress has taken place; agreements between government institutions and indigenous authorities have been formulated. Almost five years ago, for instance, Yaigojé Apaporis National Park was declared in the Yaigogé indigenous *resguardo* as a result of a fruitful process of inter-institutional dialogue and coordination. The resulting agreement jointly protects the subsurface resources from mining exploitation (*resguardos* do not include ownership of underground resources; protected areas protect them). The creation of a large national park — about one million ha — over the entire area of a *resguardo* was a request by the indigenous community. This was unprecedented, and showed the scope of action that political-administrative negotiation and inter-administrative coordination allows. In the long run, this cooperation will support the protection of natural resources. The agreement also demonstrates the need for tools for environmental management and for strengthening the dialogue and interaction between public institutions and indigenous authorities.

Holistic landscapes and intercultural governance

The shamans' traditional concept and knowledge of the territory is sophisticated and detailed, and considers the rainforest from a holistic perspective. This complex and integral understanding of the territory needs to be incorporated in political-administrative decision-making. It is vital to recognize the importance of the shamanic world, the origin of the territory, cultural networks and the interactions among ethnic groups in order to incorporate indigenous knowledge in the conservation of the Amazon's tropical forest. According to the Environmental Information System of Colombia, the best-conserved areas correspond to the presence of indigenous communities since 43% of the forests are concentrated in *resguardos*. The use of traditional management strategies can help ensure that small agricultural plots restore into mature forest.

The great *maloca* of the indigenous peoples is undergoing wrenching changes, and in many cases is disappearing due to sociocultural, political and economic upheavals that affect every ethnic group and region. It is necessary to recover the cultural foundation of shamanistic knowledge and build processes that support dialogue with shamans. Including traditional knowledge in new decision-making processes will strengthen local governance. All of these processes will be much stronger if they take into account the ecological and cultural principles of traditional management used by shamans.

As mentioned, the traditional territory of the Yucuna-Matapí contains six political divisions, four national parks,⁴ and ten indigenous *resguardos*.⁵ Local people must promote an awareness and understanding of this traditional territory among government institutions and strengthen indigenous organizations so they can consolidate multi-ethnic associations and Traditional Indigenous Authorities (*Asociaciones de Autoridades Tradicionales Indígenas*, as set out in the Constitution) that respect ethnic interactions, shamanism and rituals. At the same time it is necessary to strengthen a dialogue platform

and coordination mechanisms so that fragmented territories become governable holistic landscapes that integrate economic, social, cultural and environmental components in the well-being of communities and forests.

Endnotes

1. Several cultural and ecological principles are followed: the territory is a multi-ethnic space where each group has its own mythical birthplace and its own ritual duties for harmony's sake; each group knows the toponymy of its traditional territory; everything in nature has a spiritual owner and nothing may be used without permission; the *maloca* is the basic unit for interacting with nature; the shaman is in charge of keeping a harmonic relationship with all the spiritual owners; each ethnic group has been assigned a specific set of plants, cultivars, animals and fish for their use and care; and each group recognizes specific sacred plants, animals and sites.
2. Through traditional education, shamans learn stories, chants and recitations with complex information about the forest. These teachings are passed from generation to generation.
3. In the late 1980s, the Colombian government recognized *macro-resguardos* in Amazonia; one of them, Predio Putumayo, has more than five million ha.
4. They are Chiribiquete, Yaigojé-Apaporis, Cahuinarí and Puré.
5. They are Predio Putumayo, Mirití-Paraná, Nonuya-Villazul, Aduche, Monochoa, Amenane, Puerto Córdoba, Comeyafu, Camaritagua and Curare Los Ingleses.

Reference

Matapí, U. and R. Yucuna. 2012. *Cartografía ancestral yucuna-matapí. Proyecto Cartografía cultural del noreste amazónico*. Ministerio de Cultura, Patrimonio Natural-Fondo para la Biodiversidad y Áreas Protegidas. Bogota: Tropenbos International Colombia.