

# Closing Dissertation Fieldwork: Ecuador 2014

By: **Audrey Joslin**  
Texas A&M University  
Geography  
Email: [joslinau@tamu.edu](mailto:joslinau@tamu.edu)

Since 2012, I have spent a total of 21 months living and working in the Ecuadorian Andes to complete my doctoral dissertation research. The goal of my investigation is to study the process of translating a water trust fund into on-the-ground conservation intervention to protect the high-altitude humid grassland called *páramo*, an ecosystem that is home to many endemic species and vital to human communities for its services of purifying and regulating water supplies. The water trust fund is called FONAG, short for *Fondo para la Protección del Agua* (Fund for the Protection of Water), and began in 2000 through a partnership between The Nature Conservancy and the public water utility company of Ecuador's capital city, Quito. The fund has grown to over US\$12 million from the initial investment of US\$ 21,000, and its interest and outside donations are applied towards páramo conservation in Quito's surrounding watershed.



More than a financial mechanism, however, FONAG is also an organization that designs and implements conservation interventions in rural communities that hold areas of páramo. Since its inauguration, it has served as the model for at least 32 other water funds that focus on conserving vital ecosystems within watersheds<sup>1</sup>.

My approach to studying FONAG has been to follow the commodity chain of ecosystem services that moves from the producers to the buyers. With a group of constituents paying into the fund that, in addition to the founders, now include two private beverage bottling companies, Quito's public electric utility company and another international NGO, FONAG can be understood as an urban buyer of ecosystem services that transfers funds to rural communities for adjusting their land uses and accompanying labor practices for the sake of conserving páramo. In this way, these communities become the human proxy for 'producers' of ecosystem services. As a benefit (i.e. payment) of putting labor towards redirecting land uses in the páramo, FONAG supports communities with what it calls ecological-productive activities in an in-kind exchange, leading supporting international organizations such as the constituent member The Nature Conservancy and donor U.S. Agency for International Development to discuss the water trust fund as a program of market-based conservation called Payments for Ecosystem Services<sup>2</sup>.

Despite the financial successes of FONAG and its prolific replication throughout the Americas, there has been little analysis on the interaction of FONAG within the communities. The evaluation of economic impacts, for example, have proven complicated particularly in separating the impacts of FONAG from other influential variables, such as other NGOs working in the community<sup>3</sup>. One objective of my dissertation research therefore focuses on the experiences of the communities that are targets of FONAG's projects. Specifically, I investigated FONAG's interaction with enrolling communities, the labor practices that communities were asked to provide as a part of these programs and the spatial (re)arrangements at the sites in the communities that required labor for FONAG's projects. During the months I spent in Ecuador,

I conducted interviews, worked alongside community members on a FONAG project, observed meetings and other interactions between community members and FONAG officials, and walked transects through communities to document FONAG's spaces of intervention.

When preparing to go into the field to conduct my closing work over July and August 2014, I recalled conversing with a participant in one of the rural case study communities in 2012 and how she had expressed frustration with previous researchers that had come and gone without returning anything. My aim during my final field season, then, was to return preliminary results of my study as well as to get feedback from those who had provided data. I wondered: *Did I understand the participants correctly? Was I missing anything from my interpretation? How would the participants reflect upon the presence of FONAG, a year or two later from my first visit?* The process of research, particularly when working with human subjects, is one in which data is being co-created by the researcher and the participant.

To initiate these discussions, however, my challenge was how to put my results in a form that would be accessible, useful, and interesting to the participants. With the majority of adults in the case study communities holding a level of formal education in primary school or below<sup>4</sup>, a variation in reading abilities would be expected, and participants of the communities were not likely to respond well to a written paper. I wanted to create something that was interactive, enjoyable, and demonstrated appreciation to participants.

My thoughts turned to the photographs I had taken during the course of my fieldwork. With permission, I had photographed people and properties as community members worked on FONAG projects or gave me tours of FONAG intervention sites. As I visited with participants in their homes, they would occasionally bring forth treasured old photographs of their families and show them to me with pride. Typically rural farmers from lower socio-economic backgrounds, they frequently did not have many photos because cameras were



expensive to purchase. A particularly poignant moment occurred in which a woman wistfully told me of how her daughter's only baby photo had been lost in a fire.

I decided to make small albums for the groups and individuals that had participated in the study. In lightweight plastic binders, I put together the photos that pertained to them, drew maps of the community and the sites of FONAG interventions, and wrote brief summaries of what I had learned from the case study community to which the participants pertained. Then, I went to visit. In the four case study communities, I gave the albums to a leader in the group that was working closest with FONAG after visiting with individual participants after discussing the album and giving them copies of any individual photos.

While this process may appear relatively simple, there were a few challenges in this task. When I began my study in 2012, I had extremely limited funding and did not know that I would be able to return to the four case study communities in the future. When interviewing individuals, I often did not retain full names, and sometimes assigned codes immediately without a name, which meant that I would occasionally get a name wrong when looking for an individual. After some explaining on my part, the confusion would be cleared up and invariably I was teased about my mistake.

The responses to the visits were heartening. I was able to visit 12 participants of the study, and roughly 60% of the participants recognized me immediately, and the other 40% remembered me after a brief reintroduction. Depending on the time I located the individual, I was frequently invited to lunch, and would often pass the day helping with chores like shucking corn or moving cattle between pastures. Participants clarified any questions I had from my previous visits, and on several occasions I was given a tour of new changes in the community or property. Participants met the photos I presented to them with smiles and comments. They regularly added detail to my maps and my explanations.

The use of the albums was an effective meth-

-od to return feedback to participants directly involved in the study, and provided me an opportunity to validate my findings. Furthermore, the physical copy of the album is also an artifact that participants can show and discuss with other community members. This addresses complaints that researchers rarely share the results of their study, which may contribute to participant research fatigue and reluctance to engage with researchers in the future.

This work in July and August 2014 has been but one small segment of my dissertation work. However, my overall hope is that the knowledge generated from my research will have both theoretical and concrete applications for academics and conservation practitioners regarding market-based watershed conservation connecting the urban and rural spheres.



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