



## Success Stories

### Educate for conservation: the Sierra Gorda Earth Centre (Mexico)

*by Roberto Pedraza Ruiz*

#### Working from the bottom up



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Since its foundation 25 years ago, Grupo Ecológico Sierra Gorda I.A.P. (GESG) has been raising awareness among the population about their surroundings and natural resources. This has been the cornerstone of its activities. Such work is especially important considering that a significant section of the natural capital of the Eastern Sierra Madre, the second largest mountain range in Mexico, has been depleted in areas where productive activities have been carried out: activities which have not lifted anyone out of extreme poverty.

This region, known as the Sierra Gorda since the colonial period, is today the most eco-diverse protected natural area in Mexico. At the same time, it forms part of the UNESCO MAB Programme's International Network of Biosphere Reserves and, with its five XVIII century missions, its rich cultural heritage has been recognised as a World Heritage Site.

Today, the Sierra Gorda is a region where local society has set a unique precedent for social participation in conservation, cleaning-up and regeneration of areas degraded by productive activities. In most part, this is due to the development of a successful environmental education programme that, without fail, has reached, on average, 16,000 students and parents per month since 1987. Throughout the programme, local educational and teaching authorities have shown good will via their participation. This has aided a significant and favourable change in the local population's attitude towards the environment and natural resources. This programme has been described as unique to Latin America due to the scope, penetration and revenue raised. GESG has been building processes and skills from the bottom up, with a team of teachers who have remained committed since the beginning: they have helped to change the mindset of the local population.

The Sierra Gorda project is all-encompassing: in addition to its core theme of education, it has also been able to carry out watershed and soil restoration works, reforestation and environmental service payments. Furthermore, it operates the only rural recycling network in Mexico; it

coordinates productive diversification in rural communities; operates eco-tourism activities and looks to transform the Sierra Gorda into a tourist destination. It possesses a capital of accumulated experience and it is ready to transfer and share this experience.

### **Building skills for a sustainable future**

Skill-building in protected areas in Mexico and Latin America is directed at a diverse audience which includes students in rural schools and housewives or personnel from other protected areas. As a result, the range of topics and participants varies greatly. For this reason, it is a priority to transfer knowledge and experience that has been tested in the field. As Martha Ruiz Corzo, founder and director of GESG notes, *“we (GESG) have been managing and consolidating a real-life conservation project over the past 25 years, with a variety of partners and national and international allies. Now is the moment to “tropicalise” our experiences and knowledge, and make it accessible to producers and forest owners living in extreme poverty without it having to cost them anything.”*

Due to the aforementioned, the Sierra Gorda Earth Centre was born, capitalising on a series of best practices, local experts and others from outside the area. Within a few years, it has collected a variety of eminent speakers and instructors for its curriculum. The translation into Spanish and the adaptation of the didactic material of the UNESCO programme, “Teaching and Learning for a Sustainable Future,” was a local initiative. This material is magnificent and was evaluated by the Mexican Government through the Secretary of Public Education, with which the Earth Centre offers an onsite and virtual diploma for teachers and the general public. Its impact on graduates of the diploma is reflected in a comment made by Teresita de Jesús Rojas, a teacher who began the course in 2010: *“Firstly, I would like to congratulate everyone from the Sierra Gorda Earth Centre because you have given us a life experience. When they talk about sustainability on other courses it is just talking, with a pen and paper, whereas here we went into what health is, holistically speaking, which we hadn’t found on any other course, and I’ve taken many. From the first class, when you started to transmit the love that you feel for our Earth, our only home, we began to perceive it and I experienced substantial changes in my life, in my family’s life, in the lives of those who I love because just like you, I began to say ‘hey! This is happening...’ My commitment is to continue on this learning path and, believe me; this radically changes lots of things. Would I recommend the course? Believe me, I’ve already began to recommend it, congratulations!”*

This diploma is made up of 25 modules which deal with all topics related to sustainability and include case study projects and examples from around the world. The texts were developed by leading experts on the issue whilst numerous internet links enrich the diploma. The Earth Centre has been able to cater for different needs and, today, offers diplomas, degrees, courses and workshops to 3,500 students. Those enrolled include personnel from NGOs, personnel from other protected areas, rural farmers, national and foreign post-graduate students, teaching staff and the general population of the Sierra Gorda. Our wide spectrum of activities has allowed us to put together a curriculum for different levels of training. In addition, we have integrated the Environmental Education Programme’s content and themes which we have been developing in the Sierra: this will permit us to substantially extend the educational programmes on offer in the Sierra Gorda and neighbouring areas. The Earth Centre is currently taking off, with an increasing demand for its services and educational programmes that have solid backing from civil society.

### **Further information:**

[www.sierragorda.net](http://www.sierragorda.net)

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As lead agency for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), UNESCO promotes an education that allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future.

Education for Sustainable Development means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; for example, climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction, and sustainable consumption. It also requires participatory teaching and learning methods that motivate and empower learners to change their behaviour and take action for sustainable development.

It engages people through innovative ways of learning about biodiversity by focusing on education and training to address the interlinking issues of ecosystems and livelihoods, the interactions of nature with culture, society and economy, and the actions we can take without affecting our quality of life.

Biosphere Reserves are sites recognized under the UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme which innovate and demonstrate approaches to conservation and sustainable development. The Decade offers an opportunity to develop and enhance the concept of Biosphere Reserves as learning sites for sustainable development, and strengthen their education and outreach programmes.

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