

September 2020 Sustained Grantee Spotlight: Community Cloud Forest Conservation (Guatemala)



WALC student Jessica gathers Cala' (Carludovica palmata, a type of palm) from her parcel. She sells some and brings some in for supper.

Rob Cahill, a founding director of Community Cloud Forest Conservation (CCFC), said that despite the challenges of COVID-19, work continues in Guatemala's Cloud Forest. And with food insecurity increasing, it is more important than ever.

August 2020 update:

Our 2020 started so well. We had just come off our best WALC (Women in Agroecology Leadership for Conservation) sessions ever in the fall of 2019. Thanks to DFW we were able to invite back the best and of the best to take advantage of our Advanced WALC Internship program for university students.

Having the funds to invite students to be a part of our team during the school year was a fantastic way to multiply the WALC effect. Week after week we had students from primary schools and secondary school visiting our center and learning from our Advanced WALC Interns. On weekends, these students would study at their different universities.

Everything was going great. We already had had over 700 secondary school students in our 2020 environmental education program. And we had had three primary schools from remote mountain villages in our Kids and Birds program. Our team of Advanced WALC interns could not have been doing a better job. Then COVID-19 came to Guatemala. First, we got word that school had canceled all off-campus field trips. Then we heard that boarding schools were sending their students home. Then we heard that all schools were closing.

Full stop. We gave our team the choice to shelter-in-place with us at our center or return to their homes and shelter-in-place there. For the first few weeks, we had 10 students remain at our center. We got a lot done in our agro-forestry parcels, reforestation, tree nursery, and other projects around the campus. Today, all but five of our team have returned home. Our Advanced WALC interns are still studying, albeit online only, and our interns are still a part of our team. Our interns visit WALC students in their neighboring villages, always being careful to socially distance and wear masks.

Our team continues to work and to study. We are connected as a team via WhatsApp and team members are also connected to most of the 240 participants in our two 2019 WALC sessions also via WhatsApp. COVID-19 has changed things for us. We no longer have the full dream team with us at our center that we started the year with. However, those same Advanced WALC interns continue to do the work of CCFC in their regions. We have formed two WhatsApp groups – a support network group for all 2019 WALC participants and another for all Advanced WALC interns. We continue to be in close contact with our team.



Advanced WALC intern Lilia Choc Acalja was invited to speak about WALC and the importance for empowerment education for young women at the local secondary school. Lilia reports that the teachers at this school have noticed the difference between their female students that have done WALC and those that have not. One teacher described it as a night and day difference.



Silvia Angelica Cu Caal shows off her harvest of dark leafy greens and tomatoes that she grew in her agro-forest parcel.

Today our work context has radically changed. Guatemala is under strict lockdown measures. Schools have switched to digital (virtual) online education. Most of our 2019 WALC students continue to study. The lockdown has made it difficult, and in some cases impossible, for people to get to work. In Guatemala, even before the lockdown, food security was a real issue. Last week the United Nations Agency on Food and Agriculture published a list of countries at risk of food-insecurity due to COVID-19. Guatemala was one of only a few counties in the western hemisphere to make the list.

WALC (Women in Agroecology for Conservation) has been a success this year, especially because of the need created by the pandemic. Every day we receive messages from our student leaders about how their agro-forest parcels are providing for their families in this time of need. WALC leaders are dividing and multiplying their seed sources and sharing with their neighbors. This year – more than in previous years – students are really grateful to have had the agro-forest parcels as a requirement of the WALC program.