

Saving the People Saving the Forest

Known as the lungs of Central America", the BOSAWAS biosphere reserve is the largest tract of tropical rainforest north of the Amazon basin. **Severe poverty threatens this reserve** as non-indigenous Nicaraguans and Hondurans (Mestizos) encroach upon the borders of the reserve, burning down the forest to grow their crops. These people, like the indigenous people, are victims of poverty and simply looking for land on which to grow food to feed their families.

Despite this fact, this reserve represents an area of **great importance for the planet**. It is a little studied tropical-rain and tropical-dry forest that is home to hundreds of species of birds, plants, animals and insects that have yet to be catalogued. In addition, this area is the winter home of birds such as the red-winged black-bird, the yellow warbler and the blue heron that we enjoy here in Canada every summer.

Satellite images of the reserve show that the forest exists only within the indigenous territories. It is obvious from these images that the buffer zones outside the indigenous territories, occupied by growing Mestizo populations of farmers, **has effectively been destroyed**. It is more important now than ever to support these indigenous peoples in an effort to save themselves and, by extension, save this incredible forest.

The health of the Miskito and Mayangna indigenous peoples in the region continues to be a tragedy. Last December, **six children died from complications of malaria** (anemia, dysentery, malnutrition) in a single community alone. In addition, the indigenous people continue to maintain their practice of auto-medication, which causes countless health problems and immunities to antibiotics. They often use expired medicines sold at the few local stores; medications that have often arrived originally as donations but are sold by local Mestizo merchants with instructions only in English.



The Nicaraguan Department of Health (MINSa) has **no plans to increase medical attention to this region**. Not in terms of staffing the health centers nor in the distribution of medicines to this region. This situation has been made worse by the recent withdrawal from the region of the OAS (Organization of American States), who had previously been collaborating with the MINSa on the infrastructure costs of health centers in the larger communities.

Incredibly, the **effects of Hurricane Mitch (1998) continue to plague these communities**, especially with regard to their health. When Mitch washed away all of the citrus fruit trees from the river banks, the indigenous population here was left without a major and essential part of their diet. Since 1998 some replanting has been done, but citrus trees take years to bear fruit. This means that the children in the area are growing up with zero vitamin C in their diets. As such, despite the fact that

they consume great quantities of beans (their diet consists **ONLY** of beans, rice, corn and bananas), they are unable to absorb the iron provided by the beans because iron absorption is aided by vitamin C. Thus, anemia is extremely common in the children and when malaria attacks an already anemic child it causes further anemia and even death.

The **Community Health Project for the Indigenous Communities of BOSAWAS** that Change for Children is implementing in the region places an emphasis on infant and child nutrition, on the use of natural medicines and on the distribution of vitamins. It is evident that alternative solutions and health education are urgent and essential for the survival of these communities. With the survival of the Miskito and Mayangna peoples, comes the survival of the forest in which they live. A forest that is important to us all.

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CHANGE FOR CHILDREN ASSOCIATION (CFCA) is an Edmonton-based non-profit, non-governmental organization with a 28-year history of working for sustainable, grass-roots community development in Latin America and the Philippines. Our development projects, their cost and priority, are determined by our Southern partners according to the needs of their communities. In Canada, our education program engages the public in a process of awareness raising, analysis and action on issues of global justice.

For this project, Change for Children gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the Alberta **Wild Rose Foundation** and the **Canadian International Development Agency**.

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This project takes place in twenty five communities in the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve in northern Nicaragua. Currently, **for the entire population of 8,923 people there are only two doctors and five nurses.** In addition to this, contracted medical staff are invariably not from the region and so, once they have completed their contract, they move to another region of the country and thus are not available to provide continuous health care in the native language of the patients.

There are also frequent occurrences of **death due to illnesses that are easily treatable**, such as malaria and Dengue Fever. Due to the limited economic resources of the population, inaccessibility of the communities, low education level and cultural traditions, community members often visit medical professionals only when their symptoms are already quite serious or too late for treatment. As has happened in other countries, due to armed conflict and the dispersal of communities, the traditional knowledge and utilization of medicinal plants to cure common illnesses is being lost.

This project **will provide accessible, sustainable, basic health care** in remote indigenous communities, developing local capacity by training health promoters in target communities. It will provide health manuals in the Miskito and Mayangna languages, medicine, supplies and medical equipment to each of the target communities. The main element around which the project revolves is traditional, natural medicine, as a means of prevention and treatment of common illnesses. In addition, the advantages and conveniences of modern medicine will be used as complementary factors, to ensure the timely prevention, diagnosis and treatment of the most common illnesses.



Three pillars of sustainability are combined in this project in a unique and innovative way. The social standing of women will be elevated because they are targeted specifically for training as health promoters and community leaders. Economic benefits will be gained by the promoters as their roles will incorporate an income generation opportunity that will directly improve their quality of life. Ecological health is also a key component of this project as it is crucial that the health of the indigenous population be assured in order to preserve this vital forest region.

The primary partner responsible for this project is the Nicaraguan NGO Centro Humboldt, a non-profit, civil society organization whose mission is to promote envi-

ronmental protection through sustainable development. The **Centro Humboldt has been working on environmental preservation and sustainable development initiatives with Nicaraguan communities since 1990.** Currently, the Centre is responsible for the execution of a Sustainable Development Project in the BOSAWAS funded by the Danish Government which involves the self-management of natural resources and indigenous territorial defense.

The Centro Humboldt will be **supported by two other Nicaraguan organizations**, Atencion Primaria en Salud (APS), and ADEPCIMISUJIN, the indigenous association that represents the Miskito and Mayangna communities in the Reserve. The mandate of the Association is to elevate the quality of life in the communities, to strive for the respect of their traditions, languages and cultural identity; to strengthen the practice of individual and collective rights, and to try to arrange for material, economic and technical assistance.



PLEASE SUPPORT THIS IMPORTANT PROJECT

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