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**DEFENDING KUNA YALA:**

*PEMASKY, the Study Project for the  
Management of the Wildlands  
of Kuna Yala, Panama*

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*A Case Study for  
Shifting the Power:  
Decentralization and Biodiversity Conservation*

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**DEFENDING KUNA YALA: PEMASKY, THE STUDY PROJECT  
FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF THE WILDLANDS OF KUNA YALA (PANAMA)**

*Mac Chapin*

**Introduction**

In 1983, a small group of Kuna leaders and technicians initiated a project to set up and run a protected area on the southern border of their autonomous territory, the Comarca (Indigenous Reserve) of Kuna Yala, in the Republic of Panama.<sup>1</sup> The Proyecto de Estudio para el Manejo de Areas Silvestres de Kuna (Study Project for the Management of the Wildlands of Kuna Yala—PEMASKY), as it was called, was launched to defend Kuna lands against the encroachment of non-Indian outsiders; yet in parallel fashion it was seen by conservationists as a significant move to conserve the region's biodiversity (although this term was not yet in vogue at that time), and from this quarter it received substantial financial and technical support during its first years.

PEMASKY began amid considerable enthusiasm, both among the Kuna and throughout the international conservation community. This was the first time an indigenous people in Latin America had marked off a large chunk of virtually untouched rainforest—about 60,000 hectares—and set it aside as a nature reserve. The Kuna organized and managed this program themselves, with assistance from foreign advisors brought in on contract. The park's administrative center was located in Panama City and its field station was built at a site called Nusagandi, situated along the El Llano-Cartí road on the ridge of the Continental Divide in the *Serranía de San Blas* (the San Blas Mountains). The indigenous staff at one point grew to 23 people, including six park guards and seven members of what was termed the Technical Team.

From the Kuna point of view, the primary objective of PEMASKY was territorial defense. Although the Panamanian government had granted the Kuna legal dominion over their tribal homeland (the Comarca of San Blas) in 1938, non-Kuna squatters were moving into the area along the road, which was built in the early 1970s. Some had even taken up residence inside the Kuna Yala boundary. By the mid-1970s, the Kuna had established a small agricultural settlement

at the spot where the road broke through their border. When this effort at territorial protection proved unproductive, they changed their orientation toward protection of the forest.

Conservationists were anxious to work with the Kuna to erect a barrier against the spreading colonization along the road, and in this way halt deforestation and preserve the region's diverse biological patrimony. Clearly, here was a convergence of interests. The creation of a protected area surrounding Nusagandi was seen by both parties as an effective means toward achieving these two overlapping objectives.

Shortly after it was up and running, PEMASKY became well known throughout the world. It was touted as an example of an effective alliance between indigenous peoples and conservationists, and it became an inspiration for indigenous peoples everywhere. Articles were written about it—several by PEMASKY staff—and documentaries were filmed. International visitors streamed in to see the facilities and discuss plans for the park. Project leaders were invited to conferences in Costa Rica, Argentina, Brazil, the United States, China, and England. Awards were bestowed upon them and by the mid-1980s, the project had begun to take on a semi-mythic glow.

Then, at the apex of its fame, PEMASKY's image began to lose its focus. Less and less information about the project's activities came out of Panama, international attention flagged, and PEMASKY gradually, almost imperceptibly, drifted out of view. By 1990, people around the world were asking, "What ever happened to PEMASKY?"

This case study addresses that question. It discusses the background of the project and charts its evolution from a modest beginning through strong early years, its ambitious projections, its somewhat tangled growth, its eventual demise, and its legacy. PEMASKY was an experiment; a journey into new and largely uncharted territory for all of those involved. What occurred was a mixture of things—good, not-so-good, and terribly disfigured—that contained all of the ambiguities and contradictions that are commonly found, yet so rarely examined close up, in complex projects of this sort. The course it took was unique in some ways, yet in others it followed a well-trodden road that has been followed by many who have undertaken similar

initiatives in other corners of the world. This analysis may serve to inform some of us as to how we might make a better go of things the next time around.

### **The Kuna and the Comarca of Kuna Yala**

As many as 50,000 or even 60,000 Kuna presently live in Panama—the numbers are not precise.<sup>2</sup> The Panamanian Kuna inhabit four regions: the Bayano area of Madungandi, where approximately 3,000 Kuna live in 12 villages spread out over 1,800 km<sup>2</sup> around the lake formed by the Ascanio Villalaz hydroelectric dam (Guionneau 1995:108); Wargandi, a small enclave of three communities (Nurra, Wala, Mortí) nestled in the headwaters of the Chucunaque River, with a population of slightly more than 1,000 (Congreso General Emberá-Wounaan 1995:62); the communities of Púcuru and Paya, located near the Colombian border in the region of Takargun Yala, with a total of 467 people (Ibid.:63); and the Comarca of Kuna Yala, with a population that may exceed 50,000 people. The Comarca extends a distance of approximately 200 kilometers from Mandinga to the west along to the village of Armila, just short of the Colombian border, and has a land surface of 3,260 km<sup>2</sup>. Including the marine area, the Kuna calculate the total area of the Comarca to be approximately 5,500 km<sup>2</sup>.

When the Spaniards made their appearance in the region in the early sixteenth century, all Kuna villages were situated inland and the bulk of the population was spread out across the isthmus as far as the Pacific coast (Torres de Araúz 1972, 1980; Howe 1974:9-18; Stier 1979). The invaders established themselves at the spot that today is Panama City and began scouring the Pacific side of the isthmus for gold. Many of the Indians were driven into the thick humid forests of the north, where they attempted to escape epidemics of recently introduced diseases, conscription into the mines, and outright extermination. The Kuna's initial arrival on the Atlantic coast was no doubt spurred by the trade goods offered by pirates and traders who operated throughout the region's numerous coral reefs and labyrinthine mangrove estuaries during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Joyce 1933:xilxvii; Stout 1947: 51-54). By the middle of the nineteenth century, when the era of piracy had passed, the Kuna started transferring their villages to small coral islands near the coast, which were largely free from the insects and diseases which abounded on the mainland.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the newly formed Panamanian government—which had gained independence from Colombia in 1903—moved to bring the Kuna under its control. Panamanian police were stationed on some of the islands, and there were efforts to “civilize” the Kuna by outlawing rituals, forcing the Kuna to dress in “western clothes,” and teaching them Spanish. This project was brought to an abrupt halt in February 1925, when the Kuna, with assistance from the government of the United States, rose up in rebellion, slaughtered more than a dozen Panamanian police and Kuna sympathizers, and declared their independence. In March of that year, a treaty was signed “in which the Kuna promised their loyalty to Panama in exchange for the elimination of the police from all of their communities, with the exception of the modernist village of Narganá, and guarantees for their cultural and political autonomy” (Howe 1995:72; also see Howe 1998).

In the next decades, further gains were made in the Kuna's advances towards political control of the region. In 1938, the Comarca of San Blas was created with clearly defined borders. During the 1940s and 1950s, a system was formalized for the Kuna's sovereignty over the region. In 1945, an “Organic Charter” (*Carta Orgánica*), detailing the political organization and legal system of the Comarca was drafted. This was ratified as Law 16 by the National Assembly in 1953 (Howe 1995:71-74). This series of events has assured the Kuna a degree of autonomy in their internal affairs and their territory that is unprecedented among the indigenous peoples of Central America.

### **Box 1. The Comarca as a Decentralized Unit in Panama**

“Comarca” is not a clearly defined term in Panama, and indeed, it has different meanings for the four comarcas that have been established since 1938. The Emberá and Wounaan peoples received their comarca, the Comarca Emberá Drúa in the Darien, in 1983; the Kuna of the region of Madungandi, several hours to the east by car from Panama City, were granted their comarca in 1997; and the Ngobe-Buglé people, received their comarca in the same year. Territorial limits are just one piece of the agreement. The second piece is the political organization of the indigenous people, which in Panama is called the Congreso General.

All of the established comarcas differ with regard to their formal political structure and their power within the scheme of the nation. The Comarca as a geopolitical unit is notably variable in its effectiveness. The Kuna of Kuna Yala Comarca put their legal framework in place in the 1950s and have since grown to become a formidable political presence in Panama. The Emberá and Wounaan have a divided General Congress and have not yet succeeded in formulating their internal legislation; their power is consequently weak at both the community level and within the national context. The Madungandi Kuna, like their cousins to the north, have a relatively strong General Congress that predated formal creation of the Comarca, and it is likely that they will be able to manage their affairs—including their natural resources—with efficiency. The Ngobe-Buglé in western Panama have three separate General Congresses—one for each of the three provinces they share—and numerous factions within these. As a whole they lack political cohesion and decision-making strength.

#### ***Physical and Biological Characteristics***

The Comarca of Kuna Yala today is a roughly 20 kilometer-wide band of forest from the ridge of the Continental Divide down to the Atlantic Coast, and out seaward a kilometer or so. It encompasses more than 300 tiny coral islands offshore. At present, no all-weather roads connect Kuna Yala to the rest of Panama, and the only means of entering the region is either by launch from the Atlantic coast city of Colón or by small plane from Panama City.

Although no precise data are available on climate, San Blas is broadly classed as tropical rainforest with high humidity, a mean annual temperature of between 24 degrees C and 27 degrees C, and yearly rainfall that reaches 5,000 mm in the highlands and approximately 2,000 mm along the coastal plain. There is a dry season from January through March, during which strong winds from the north prevail, and a shorter, less predictable dry stretch from September to

November. These seasonable fluctuations in rainfall, however, have no marked effect on the vegetation, and the region is characterized by a full growth of tropical rainforest.

The Comarca of Kuna Yala has a reported 154 species of mammals, 33 of which are protected by law, and 550 species of birds, 12 of which are listed internationally as endangered. There are at least 30 species of reptiles and amphibians, and 45 species of river fish.

### *Subsistence*

The Kuna population in the Comarca is spread out among more than 40 small islands and 12 mainland villages. Most communities are tightly packed mazes of thatched houses, and range in size from less than 100 inhabitants to more than 6,000. The island communities invariably lie within half a kilometer of the coast, thus facilitating access to the mainland, where agriculture is practiced and where fresh water, firewood, and building materials are procured. In similar fashion, all of the Kuna Yala mainland villages are strategically located so as to regularly exploit both mainland and marine resources, with the exception of two communities situated more than an hour's walk inland at the western end of the reserve. Farms become more dispersed as one travels into the mainland foothills, and the northern slope of the Continental Divide is covered with intact rainforest. This is a buffer zone inhabited solely by wild animals, and occasional adventurous Indian hunters and medicine men following the region's few trails in search of rare plant materials. It is presently the only physical barrier that isolates the Kuna from the rest of Panama.

The coastal Kuna practice a mix of slash-and-burn and plantation agriculture on the mainland coastal strip, extending their activities back into the jungle two or three kilometers. The greatest concentrations of farms are located along the rivers or near the seashore, which facilitates transportation by canoe back and forth to the communities. The principal cultivated crops are bananas (as many as six varieties), plantains, sweet manioc, yams, taro, corn, white and red rice, coconuts, squash, sugar cane, breadfruit, chili peppers, and peach palm. Of these, the more important subsistence crops are bananas and manioc, both of which are farmed with slash-and-burn technology, and coconuts, which are grown on plantations and constitute the only

substantial cash crop in the region. Many of the coconut plantations are located on unpopulated islands.

The bulk of animal protein consumed by the Kuna comes from the sea, and it is rare not to find fish included in the daily menu. Those few island Kuna who own guns occasionally bring in game found in the lowland areas, but hunting is not a major source of food. The mainland inhabitants hunt far more frequently, although they seldom venture into the mountains of the Serranía (see Ventocilla 1992 for a thorough account of hunting in the western inland community of Cangandi).

One of the most outstanding features of Kuna subsistence is the total absence of cattle anywhere in Kuna Yala—a characteristic the Kuna note with pride. Small numbers of pigs and chickens are raised around individual houses on the islands, yet there is a reluctance to follow this pattern in most villages on the mainland, in deference to predators.

### *Social/Political Organization*

Village political organization is embodied in an institution called the “gathering” (*onmaked*), or, as it is generally termed in Spanish, the *congreso*. The gatherings, held nightly in most Kuna communities, are presided over by a governing body consisting of at least three chiefs, a handful of “interpreters” for the chiefs, and a varied collection of village elders, ritual specialists, and politically active younger men with a strong voice in community affairs. These men, who are the guardians of tradition, village business, and the tenor of moral conduct, meet regularly in a centrally located “gathering house” to perform or listen to chants dealing with mythological themes or recent historical events, or to discuss village matters. In recent years, Kuna women have been taking a much stronger role in village politics and have formed several Comarca-wide organizations.

Overarching this village political organization is the Kuna General Congress, which brings together all of the communities in the Comarca. Presided over by three *caciques* (village leaders), it is made up of delegates from the communities, political figures, representatives of Kuna labor

organizations such as the Kuna Employees Association (*Asociación de Empleados Kunas*—AEK), and professionals who serve as advisors. In recent years, the Congress has set up a permanent office in Panama City and has been active in negotiations with the government and international organizations.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Kuna society is simply that it has survived. After centuries of contact with Europeans and their Latin American neighbors, the character of which has frequently been violent, the Kuna have entered the twentieth—and now the twenty-first—century with their cultural and political autonomy intact, making them a rarity in a region marked by the alarmingly rapid disappearance of indigenous groups (See Howe 1998). Their native language continues in strong force, although many of the men also speak Spanish or English and the younger children in most villages are now learning Spanish in government schools. Traditional political organization and ritual, although they have been modified considerably in recent years, remain powerful and cohesive elements in Kuna society (Chapin 1983; Howe 1986). Cooperative labor is still pervasive in Kuna society. Beyond this, the Kuna consider themselves members of a unique ethnic group, and value their cultural identity highly.

### *Changing Realities*

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, pressures from within and outside Kuna society had begun to escalate rapidly and were making inroads on the insular existence the Kuna had led for centuries. The pattern of change varied widely from community to community, but it was present everywhere and was making an indelible imprint on the Kuna Yala population as a whole. Migration to Panama City and beyond was becoming common and widespread. It had gone beyond the population of young men by now to encompass entire families, and there was a permanence to the urban migration that had formerly been absent. Western education had reached the most remote corners of Kuna Yala, and the Kuna living in urban centers were surrounded on all sides by Panamanian culture. With improved communications and the resulting penetration of alien ideas on virtually all fronts, by the early 1980s, the younger generations were living in a world vastly different from the world in which their parents were raised.

To date, Kuna society has held itself together, to a great extent, because of its geographic isolation. Equally important, it has been able to adapt to the changing political realities in the region. The Kuna General Congress has transformed itself into a more permanent body with a center of operations in Panama City. It has moved to incorporate Kuna professionals and political leaders into its structure. It is developing mechanisms to solicit and oversee international financial and technical assistance for Kuna Yala. It is connected to the Internet.

### *Territorial Concerns*

Since the early 1980s, the Kuna have increasingly focused their attention on protection of their lands and management of their natural resources. One remarkable circumstance, which evolved largely because of chance, is that the legal limits of Kuna Yala coincide with the limits of what amounts to an ecologically viable unit. Kuna Yala is framed by the Continental Divide of the Serranía de San Blas to the south and the Caribbean Sea to the North, and the Kuna control the entire watershed. According to Ventocilla (1997:62): "All of the rivers of the Comarca flow into the Caribbean Sea. There are more than 20 large rivers in Kuna Yala that generally have beds less than 25 kilometers long and relatively small drainages, with certain exceptions in the western part of the Comarca."

Serious threats to the physical and political integrity of the Comarca began in the early 1970s. At this time, the Panamanian government began actively promoting colonization of remote regions of the country under the slogan "expansion of the agricultural frontier." Roads were built into the eastern half of Panama and peasant farmers and *terratenientes* (large landholders) seeking agricultural land began arriving in great numbers. The land bordering one of these roads, running from the peasant town of El Llano on the Pan-American Highway north as far as the Comarca border, was almost fully occupied by non-Indians by the mid-1970s. There was talk of extending the road down through Kuna territory as far as the coast, some 22 kilometers distant. This was to be the first road built into the Comarca from the outside.

Kuna defense of the border area was difficult because the Kuna had no physical presence along the mountain border. Virtually all farming is concentrated within a short distance of the coastal

villages, and the Kuna seldom venture into the solitary expanses of virgin forest stretching south from the outermost farms to the limits of the Comarca. While on paper they had legal title to all land within the Comarca, in the late 1970s and early 1980s they had no practical way of protecting what was rightfully theirs. The dividing line—along the Continental Divide of the Serranía de San Blas—had never been surveyed, and no one knew precisely where it was on the ground.

For several years, non-Indian colonists had been moving into the region on both sides of the divide. They cleared off plots of land, began to farm them, and were granted a crude form of “ownership” by the Panamanian government, on the basis of having used the land for some productive purpose. Their land claims were supported, at least tacitly, by the traditional concept of the “social use of land,” which holds that land not being occupied and put to some productive use may be taken by those with the determination to occupy and exploit it. As no Kuna were actively utilizing the vast stretches of forest extending deep into the Comarca, it was effectively wide open to outside colonists.

### *The Kuna Response*

In the mid-1970s, a Kuna youth, Guillermo Archibold, began travelling into the mountains near the southern limits of Kuna territory. He often traveled alone, spending long periods of time trying to establish a Kuna presence in the area through which the Panamanian road was to pass. He began farming there on a limited scale. In 1975, he led a group of volunteers, including several key Kuna political leaders, into the area and gained support for his agricultural project. The following year, Archibold and his colleagues received limited financial backing from the Union of Kuna Workers (UTK), an organization made up of salaried Kuna men working in the U.S. Armed Forces bases in the Canal area. The UTK (from 1983 the Kuna Employees Association—AEK), which was under the authority of the Kuna General Congress, subsequently became the managerial and financial force behind the agricultural project.<sup>3</sup>

These Kuna attempts to found an agricultural colony at the spot where the road broke through their southern border failed. The soils were poor, the topography was severe and marked by

precipitous hillslopes, and rainfall was more than double that of the coastal plains. Their attempts to establish coffee and other bush and tree crops failed, as did projects involving cattle raising—which was entirely foreign to them—and chicken production. It became clear that some other approach than agricultural settlement would have to be taken if they were to maintain their presence in the region.

In 1981, events along the road came to the attention of United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which had provided funds to the Panamanian government for the road's construction. After an initial study, natural resource management specialists from the Tropical Agriculture Center for Research and Teaching (CATIE) were brought in from neighboring Costa Rica to assess the situation. Preliminary findings were that the area should be left in primary forest. The Kuna project participants and the CATIE technicians began elaborating a work plan for setting up a 60,000 ha. forest park at the spot where the road broke through into the Comarca. The project center was a site called Nusagandi.

The idea of establishing a protected area—which was to be managed by Kuna staff with support from outside technicians—was met with enthusiasm on all sides. The CATIE technicians noted that the region was biologically rich and virtually unstudied. Because of its accessibility—it was three hours by four-wheel drive vehicle from Panama City—it could be set aside as a wildlife area with facilities for ecotourism and scientific research. The Kuna were not using the area for anything at that time, and the notion of protected areas already existed in Kuna culture, in the form of “spirit sanctuaries.” These sanctuaries belong to potentially dangerous spirits and the trees on them cannot be cut down for agriculture, although they can be used with impunity for collecting medicines.

The priorities of the CATIE technicians and the Kuna project participants differed. The technicians were most interested in protecting the forests and its fauna, while the Kuna, both those involved in the project and the Kuna community at large, were anxious to protect their territorial limits and, ultimately, themselves. Yet CATIE and the PEMASKY team focused on the same strategy, establishment of the protected area, as means to reach their objectives. At the

same time, the proposal that the project staff and CATIE began working on was in fact written almost entirely by the CATIE technicians, since the Kuna had no experience designing projects of this sort. Consequently, the project that was developed reflected the CATIE technicians' concerns much more than those of the Kuna.

### **The Study Project for the Management of the Wildlands of Kuna Yala (PEMASKY)**

In early 1983, the Kuna, working through the Union of Kuna Workers (UTK), formally presented their proposal to the Washington, D.C.-based Inter-American Foundation (IAF) for development of the Proyecto de Estudio para el Manejo de Areas Silvestres de Kuna Yala (PEMASKY). They also sought additional funding from World Wildlife Fund-US (WWF-US) and the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), a Smithsonian scientific research center based in Panama. Both WWF-US and STRI formed close collaborative relationships with Kuna staff. CATIE and the Tropical Science Center (TSC) in Costa Rica were to be contracted for technical services such as forest inventories, land use studies, and training. The UTK, which had already put close to \$70,000 in cash into the project, agreed to contribute an additional \$150,000 in cash and in kind.

The Inter-American Foundation approved providing a \$425,000 budget to the project over a three-year period. All of this money went directly to the Kuna and was managed by them. The Kuna participants put together a project team consisting of a Technical Director (Guillermo Archibold), an Administrator, a Secretary, and seven young Kuna professionals in what was initially called the "Planning Team" (and later, the "Technical Team"). This was new ground in every sense, for none of the PEMASKY staff had ever been involved in an endeavor of this type or magnitude.

During the first year, the PEMASKY staff took a variety of courses at CATIE in natural resource management, agroforestry, and environmental education, and began working with CATIE technicians on a management plan for the park. Construction of basic infrastructure was initiated at Nusagandi. PEMASKY set up an administrative structure to manage collaborative arrangements with participating national and international agencies, and to keep track of finances

that had begun flowing in from all quarters and were earmarked for a diversity of activities. They oversaw inventories of the flora and fauna of the region carried out by scientists from CATIE, STRI, and TSC. They made plans to demarcate the southern border of the Comarca and to deal with non-Indian colonists who had found their way into their territory.

In 1984, the project staff hired a natural resource management specialist, Brian Houseal, as advisor to the PEMASKY project. He was affiliated with CATIE and helped steer the fledgling Kuna staff through the activities outlined in the work plan. Among other things, Houseal was their guide in structuring the studies for the management plan and drafting the final document.

The first two years, 1983-1985, were marked by high enthusiasm on all sides. This was the first occasion on which an indigenous people in Latin America had set out to design and manage a protected area, and as such it attracted considerable attention from environmentalists, indigenous peoples, and indigenous rights activists throughout the world. At that time, there was a good deal of talk about the potential for a working alliance between indigenous peoples and conservationists, and PEMASKY seemed to fit the bill perfectly. There was even discussion of an indigenous-run Biosphere Reserve, the Biosphere Comarca of Kuna Yala (*Biósfera de de la Comarca Kuna Yala*).

It was during this period of excitement that the temporary Planning Team was transformed into a permanent Technical Team. The project's two topographers were Kuna with professional training in surveying, both having studied at the Inter-American Geodesic Institute at Fort Clayton in the Panama Canal area. They worked with teams of community volunteers to demarcate close to 150 kilometers of the Comarca's border along the Continental Divide. A force of Kuna park guards was trained and deployed along the border territory. The buildings at Nusagandi were completed despite ongoing pressure from non-Kuna colonists. An additional facility was erected on the island of Cartí Suidup, along the coast. The PEMASKY staff traveled throughout Kuna Yala, giving individual presentations on the project to enthusiastic audiences. PEMASKY signed collaborative agreements with STRI, TSC, CATIE, and the Panamanian Ministries of Education and of Government and Justice. The collaborative agreements with the Ministries of Education

and Government and Justice involved negotiating the temporary use, with government salaries, of Kuna public employees in the PEMASKY project. PEMASKY also developed informal relationships with many other conservation organizations in Panama and abroad.

Many Kuna not directly involved with PEMASKY's activities became interested in ecological issues through their contact with the project. A newsletter called *Sapi Garda*, which included articles written by the Kuna staff on various environmental issues in the Comarca, was published on a semi-regular basis. The newsletter was part of an environmental education program supported by WWF-US, and it reached a wide audience in Panama, especially among the Kuna. As the staff became more acquainted with conservation and resource management issues through courses and conferences abroad, the project office became a magnet for young Kuna studying at the national university. Not only were the Kuna in Panama City taking an interest in environmental matters, concern in the communities of Kuna Yala over the disappearance of sea turtles and lobsters and the decline in fish populations and the degradation of coral reefs was now being cast for the first time in the language of Western science.

The Kuna people as a whole also became conscious of the advance of non-Indian colonists along their southern and western borders. This served to focus their attention on the threat and they began to devise strategies to firm up their control of the region. Demarcation of the border was a first step. Negotiation with colonists already inside the Comarca was next. This was followed by a program to establish a presence with agricultural plots at some of the more critical border areas.

Numerous visitors made their way out to Nusagandi during this period. Several film crews descended on the region to make documentaries of what was occurring. PEMASKY signed a formal agreement with STRI to host visiting scientists at Nusagandi in Kuna Yala, and STRI in turn gave the Kuna an office and other privileges at its headquarters in Panama City. The PEMASKY project became well known. In 1986, the Kuna were awarded an unsolicited grant for \$260,000 by the MacArthur Foundation. The following year they received the Global 500 Award and traveled to Brussels to receive it.

However, while PEMASKY seemed to many outsiders to be healthy and vibrant, the reality of the situation was somewhat more complex. By 1986, work on the management plan had stagnated, communication between the project staff and the communities of Kuna Yala had all but ceased, the staff was divided and had lost its bearings, and PEMASKY's contacts with international organizations had diminished drastically. There were accusations of misuse of project funds. By 1987, PEMASKY was running out of money, with no sense of how project coffers might be re-filled. The CATIE advisors had retreated. Most of the staff was dismissed in 1988 and little was accomplished at PEMASKY from that point on.

Virtually none of this was perceived by people outside the project. As the malaise progressed and paralysis set in, PEMASKY closed its doors, turned inward, sealed itself off from the outside, and hoisted up a facade of well-being. Few outsiders realized at the time that the bland facade being projected was a wall of defense to hide the project's acute internal confusion and lack of direction.

At this point there was considerable disillusionment on all sides. Both the members of the Technical Team and the park guards were bitter and resentful. The AEK's attitude toward PEMASKY alternated between apathy and hostility, and AEK was confused as to what to do next. Many people in the Kuna communities felt that PEMASKY had not lived up to its promises. Those outsiders who had some understanding of what had happened concluded that PEMASKY had failed. Each group involved had its own theories as to what had gone wrong, stemming from the different expectations regarding what PEMASKY was supposed to have accomplished.

In the end, PEMASKY as an organization failed to survive, but it did manage to effectively lay the groundwork for a string of projects, processes, and programs that have since proven critical in the Kuna's struggle to protect their lands and their culture. In fact, if PEMASKY had never existed, the Kuna would presently be without many of the technical and administrative tools that they are presently using to defend themselves. The project caused them to take stock of the rapidly advancing threats to their homeland, and respond with a variety of defensive strategies. It

gave them an appreciation for the fragile state of their own environment in the Comarca of Kuna Yala and started them on the path to find strategies to protect and restore their ecosystems. If PEMASKY itself never became a viable NGO, it implanted the seed for the creation of later, effective Kuna NGOs. These developments are best understood by taking a close look at some of the key elements of the PEMASKY project.

### *PEMASKY as an Institution*

From the beginning, PEMASKY had virtually no definition as an organization. Many outsiders assumed it was a non-governmental organization (NGO)—although in 1983 there were very few NGOs in Panama, and not many people at the time knew what an NGO looked like or how it was supposed to work. The truth was that PEMASKY was not an NGO or even a proto-NGO, but rather it was *sui generis*. Not even the Kuna were clear on what exactly PEMASKY was.

On the surface, and within the Kuna hierarchy, PEMASKY was a project managed by the AEK, which in turn was responsible to the Kuna General Congress (KGC). A closer look, however, reveals that things were much more complex. PEMASKY was a “project” that was structured somewhat like an NGO, but with no legal status as such and without some of the crucial functions of an NGO. All of PEMASKY’s funds were managed by their own Administrator, but the AEK was ultimately responsible to donors for use of the funds. It was also supposed to oversee all of the project’s activities, while at the same time not being involved in the daily operations. In this sense, it was functioning much like a Board of Directors, yet the AEK was structured like a labor union, without having legal status as such. The AEK was directly responsible to the Kuna General Congress. The KGC, which was made up of all of the communities of Kuna Yala, functioned in the context of PEMASKY much like a General Assembly.

What occurred was that PEMASKY evolved from being a “project” with a temporary lifespan into a permanent NGO-like organization during its first two years, yet it never developed the skills necessary for it to function as an NGO. At the time, there were no models the Kuna might have turned to for guidance, had they even understood what they needed. Neither could they get appropriate guidance from their outside advisors. Most of these were specialists in park

management or forestry or some form of biology, and institution strengthening simply was not in their bag of tricks; even the anthropologist who was managing the IAF grant at the time wasn't much help in this regard. None of the many courses the staff received dealt with organizational themes.

Because it was generally felt by outsiders that the Kuna were well organized as a group, most of those involved, the author included, assumed rather vaguely that the Kuna staff could manage the various project activities without serious difficulty. However, while it was true that the Kuna were very astute in the political sense, they had virtually no experience running the sort of program into which PEMASKY was rapidly evolving. As a result, PEMASKY sailed out into alien waters without the equipment or skills necessary to stay afloat for the duration. Its internal decision-making was never systematized, and very often got hog-tied when it had to wait for deliberations at the level of the AEK. The whole thing became further complicated because the AEK never had any understanding of the technical aspects of the PEMASKY project.

During PEMASKY's existence, many initiatives were begun and then dropped because there was no follow-up mechanism and no one person who was responsible for seeing things through. Cooperative agreements with national and international institutions were left languishing. Attempts to put strategies into effect died midstream. After the CATIE advisor left the project, many of PEMASKY's international contacts simply disappeared. Whatever the different parties involved had intended, PEMASKY was, in the end, returned to its original status of "project."

### ***The Management Plan***

When the Kuna technicians began to put their program together, one of the primary tasks given them by the CATIE advisors was development of a management plan for the protected area. The Kuna had no experience with this sort of thing, and even the broad field of environmental conservation was new to them. Lacking experience, the Kuna staff could do little but follow the instructions of their advisors from CATIE. In retrospect, they now say they were timid to the point of passivity; not only did they lack the self-confidence to express their opinions about what was going on, but they were at the time virtually without opinions.

In this context, CATIE imposed a model of the sort it was using throughout Central America. According to the CATIE advisors, this model was a variation on the methodology described in former CATIE professor and wildlands professional Kenton Miller's book *Planning National Parks for Ecodevelopment* (1978), which had been developed during the late 1960s and 1970s from Miller's work and observations in Latin America. In their work with PEMASKY, the CATIE advisors considered this book their "Bible," a "template" for developing management plans.

There were several problems with fitting PEMASKY to this "template." First, as wielded by the CATIE technicians, PEMASKY's scope and geographical range, broad to begin with, grew to the point where it was so ambitious that it became unmanageable. What began as a blueprint for activities within the projected 60,000 ha park area gradually expanded until it came to encompass the entire Comarca of Kuna Yala, including the marine ecosystem. Components and sub-components were added as if there were no limits to what could be embraced, and since the Management Plan was not pegged to a budget, the plan took on a floating, unreal aspect.

As developed, the Management Plan had the following components and sub-components (PEMASKY/AEK 1990):

1. Program of Environmental Management
  - a. Sub-Program of Protection
  - b. Sub-Program of Resource Management
  - c. Sub-Program of research, monitoring, and scientific cooperation
2. Program of Public Use
  - a. Sub-Program of Environmental Education/Interpretation
  - b. Sub-Program of Nature Tourism
3. Program of Traditional Use and Appropriate Development
  - a. Sub-Program of Agroforestry and Rural Extension
  - b. Sub-Program of Aquatic Resources
  - c. Sub-Program of Art and Indigenous Architecture
4. Program of Operations
  - a. Sub-Program of Administration
  - b. Sub-Program of Planning
  - c. Sub-Program of Construction and Maintenance
  - d. Sub-Program of Training

Quite simply, there were not enough resources—human or financial—to carry out this agenda. Nor was there much political will on the part of Kuna society to carry it out, except for a few selected pieces.

Second, the Miller model for this management plan made no provisions for the particular circumstances of indigenous communities. Many of the components and sub-components enumerated in *Planning National Parks for Ecodevelopment* had been designed for a completely different audience, and were inappropriate for the Comarca. For example, the environmental education component was based on teacher modules designed in urban areas of Costa Rica. The ecotourism component, built up from capital-intensive Costa Rican examples, was unrealistic in the Kuna situation for a variety of reasons and never functioned. To begin with, the increasing military repression of Panamanian dictator General Manuel Noriega's National Guard provided a less-than-ideal atmosphere for tourism of any sort during that period (Chapin 1990). The program of scientific studies, in which outside scientists came into the region to do fieldwork, went relatively well from the scientists' point of view, but the inability of the Kuna staff to orient research toward practical results that might benefit Kuna communities made the entire enterprise seem too narrowly academic and, ultimately, irrelevant to the Kuna.

The agroforestry component of PEMASKY, involving demonstration plots that were promoted as somehow combining the best of Western science with the best of traditional Kuna practice, produced little more than an article (Castillo Diaz 1985) and a couple of cleared fields with several untended crops that soon dried up and were absorbed by the surrounding forest. An attempt to create a kind of arboretum ended up with a collection of unmarked trees surrounded by felled brush, and was soon abandoned.

At the same time, the management plan did serve several purposes for the Kuna. First, it provided the PEMASKY staff with a framework for understanding the Comarca in Western scientific terms. Development of the plan was itself essentially a research project in which the Kuna staff gathered information on the physical features of the region, worked with scientists on floral and faunal inventories, and systematized what was known of the ecosystems of Kuna Yala

as well as of all of eastern Panama. The Kuna staff read large numbers of related articles, reports, and books. They received training courses at CATIE and benefited from the visits of scientists to the PEMASKY project offices in Panama City, Nusagandi, and Cartí. Without the specific task of developing the PEMASKY management plan, it is doubtful that the Kuna would have known of any other way to go about structuring the development of the program.

Second, the environmental education component was reoriented by the Kuna so that it eventually became more relevant to the Kuna reality. Valerio Núñez, the member of the Technical Team in charge of this component, shifted from the initial misdirected strategy to working with Kuna teachers and students on popular education. This evolved into a book, *Plants and Animals in the Life of the Kuna* (1995), which he co-authored with Jorge Ventocilla of STRI and Heraclio Herrera, a Kuna botanist and member of the PEMASKY Technical Team.<sup>4</sup> A further outgrowth, with several of the same Kuna and STRI participants involved, has been the development of a Workshop of Children's Art, in which environmental education is directed toward children in the Kuna communities through the medium of art.

Finally, over a two-year period spanning 1985 through 1987, the two Kuna topographers led over 400 volunteers from nearby communities to survey and mark more than 150 kilometers along the Continental Divide. What is interesting about this activity is that while it was the top priority of the Kuna, in the management plan it appears as no more than one among several activities in a single sub-component (the Sub-Program of Protection, under the Program of Environmental Management).

Although the Management Plan came to dominate the workdays of the Technical Team for several years, the general Kuna population was not interested in it, and would not have been even had it been functional in the sense intended by the CATIE advisors. In reference to PEMASKY, Kuna society was concerned with two primary objectives: demarcation and protection of the Comarca border, and sustainable agricultural production. The talk about nature trails, ecotourism, scientific research, and wildlife management did not catch their attention. In 1987, the PEMASKY Technical Team presented the Management Plan in a Kuna General Congress held

in the community of Achudupu. It was in near-final form and the Congress approved it. On the one hand, the PEMASKY technicians say that the Kuna people did not understand much of it. On the other hand, the latter took it as a list of all the things PEMASKY was going to accomplish. When little of the Management Plan was ever translated into action, community members criticized the project staff.

In the beginning, the Management Plan was seen by the PEMASKY Technical Team as the centerpiece of their defense of Kuna territory; it was a justification for leaving the region along the Continental Divide in protective forest. Following this reasoning, the potential designation of the Biosphere Reserve was perceived as an important, if largely symbolic, step toward protecting Kuna Yala from outside colonists. Yet as time passed, the Kuna General Congress became more effective on the political front, and the non-Kuna colonists who had been clearing farms on Kuna lands were being coaxed out of the Comarca. Kuna society as a whole attributed less importance to the Management Plan as a means of defending their territory, and the plan was never completed.

As one of the CATIE advisors has said, the management plan was “a leaky life raft,” but for a time, it was “the only life raft around.” CATIE's technical assistance at the time was essentially the latest word in the area of natural resource management and, as such, was the best to be had, and the Kuna needed orientation. Perhaps the life raft would have been seaworthy if the CATIE technicians had made more of an effort to understand the Kuna— how they were organized, what their priorities were, how the communities could become more involved in the projects— and modify their methodology accordingly, but this did not happen. PEMASKY was something new for everyone. In the thick of the action, no one was clear on what was happening or on how to adapt a model not devised originally to work with indigenous peoples.

### ***Relations with the Panamanian Government and National NGOs***

The Kuna maintained coolly cordial yet distant relations with the government of Panama during the life of the project. Panama's military regime, in power since 1968, had no policy of aggression toward indigenous peoples, yet it had little to offer them either, except permission to

carry out certain initiatives on their lands. Consequently, there was no opposition by the Panamanian government to the Kuna effort to establish a natural protected area inside the Comarca. At the same time, the Panamanian government offered no material or technical support.

In the early and mid-1980s the Panamanian government had little interest in natural resource management and conservation, and no more than an extremely weak capacity to do anything along these lines. In 1973, the government had created the National Directorate for Renewable Natural Resources (RENARE) within the Ministry of Agricultural Development (MIDA). USAID entered the picture in 1979, first providing funds to RENARE with a plan to develop it as an institution, still within MIDA, and to increase public awareness of the importance of natural resource conservation.

This arrangement was not entirely satisfactory. According to a 1991 USAID document, “in 1985 RENARE could not be considered fully effective as a natural resource management agency” (USAID 1991:5). RENARE's functions within the ministry were “limited to an advisory and normative role,” and MIDA's priorities often conflicted with those of RENARE, to the detriment of the latter. Scarce staff, funds, and equipment were consistently diverted from RENARE and assigned to MIDA activities. RENARE simply had no power within the Panamanian government bureaucracy.

In 1986, USAID again stepped in, this time with a more ambitious proposal—and more than \$35 million—to strengthen the Panamanian government's capabilities with conservation and natural resource management. Keys to this strategy were:

1. Elevation of the status of RENARE to be the lead agency of government on natural resource management and environmental matters;
2. Full operational authority to that lead agency for regulating natural resource use and for managing public lands; and
3. Its control and continuity of income from forest and water concessions, permits, fees and fines authorized by law.

These criteria were met with the passage of the Panamanian Law 21 on December 16, 1986 by a unanimous vote of the legislature. This law created the National Institute for Renewable Natural Resources (INRENARE) as a semi-autonomous agency of government within the Ministry of Planning (MIPPE). At this point, however, negotiations bogged down "as relations with Panama began to deteriorate and as a consequence the project was not initiated" (Ibid.). In short, INRENARE had been created but then left without resources to function. To compound these difficulties, during this period General Noriega and his National Guard used INRENARE for their own purposes, the least of which was conservation. The institution was riddled with corruption, and international conservation organizations sought ways to protect Panama's dwindling forests and their biodiversity by funneling money to conservationist NGOs such as the National Association for the Conservation of Nature (ANCON), a partner of the Nature Conservancy. This situation prevailed until General Noriega was overthrown by the U.S. Military's invasion of Panama in December 1989.

When the Kuna were first putting their project together in 1983, RENARE was a small, ineffectual division within the Ministry of Agricultural Development. It had nothing to offer the Kuna at that time, nor were prospects any better after it became INRENARE in 1986. PEMASKY's budget was larger than anything either RENARE or INRENARE could offer, so there was no incentive for the Kuna to become involved with those agencies. In fact, there was ample reason for the Kuna staff to minimize their dealings with these agencies, given the confused state of affairs in that ministry.

In 1983, there were few Panamanian NGOs working with natural resource management or conservation, and all of these were small and under-funded. These few were surprised at PEMASKY's sudden appearance, the project budget it commanded and, as time moved forward, the reputation it was gaining as an innovative, exciting project. At that time, all of the conservationist groups, including PEMASKY, were neophytes and there was a strong feeling of kinship. There was considerable exchange of information among all of them, and the Kuna

benefited from the experience provided by these circles. At the same time, there were very few collaborative projects carried out and, in the end, the Kuna did their work largely on their own.

### *Project Funding*

It is not easy to reconstruct PEMASKY's financial history in the years between 1983 and 1992. Kuna accounting, especially in the later years, was opaque, and no thorough audit has been undertaken. None of the bilateral donors have held on to systematic records of their grant making to the Kuna during that period. The AEK contributed around \$70,000 before international donations began arriving, and also gave considerable in-kind support. When funding from the outside began, however, the AEK stopped providing cash to the project, even though it was stipulated as counterpart in a number of donor budgets. PEMASKY definitely received at least \$765,500 from the Inter-American Foundation between 1983 and 1991; \$159,000 from WWF between 1983 and 1989; approximately \$300,000 from the MacArthur Foundation between 1986 and 1991; and various smaller sums from STRI, Cultural Survival, and a variety of other organizations. The total amount of cash PEMASKY received from outside funding agencies during this period topped \$1,225,000.

STRI, at its Panama City offices, provided considerable in-kind support to PEMASKY in the form of office space, equipment and vehicles, use of the STRI phone for international calls, and use of the STRI herbarium, library, and photocopy machines. Half of STRI employee Jorge Ventocilla's time was donated to the PEMASKY project so he could work as a member of the Technical Team. STRI also functioned as a filter through which visiting scientists had to pass to carry out research in the Comarca; this made sure the Kuna were involved in outsider scientific research projects at the Nusagandí site, and mediated when frictions or misunderstandings made their appearance.

Seen in retrospect, the PEMASKY project assuredly received too much money, too fast. Beyond the initial programming there was little coherent planning for the expenditure of project funds. At the start, it was easy money. This lured the Kuna into thinking that down the road there would be

more easy money and that all the fixed costs they were piling up would be funded on into the future.

When the Planning Team became permanent and the Kuna staff ballooned to 20 people in late 1985 (PEMASKY/AEK 1986a:3) and to 23 by mid-1986 (PEMASKY/AEK 1986b:5), they were spending upward of \$100,000 annually on salaries alone. The staff included a Director and a Sub-director, four technicians, two cartographers (topographers), an architect, two carpenters, a cook, eight park guards, an administrator, an accountant, and a secretary. Counting transportation, food, maintenance, office expenditures, and a variety of other expenses to support this huge staff, the Kuna were spending more than \$200,000 per year in fixed costs alone. PEMASKY was also spending money on outside consultants for various studies, paying the salary of the full-time CATIE Advisor in forest park management (Brian Houseal), paying for staff to take training courses at CATIE, bankrolling construction at Nusagandi and Cartí, and supporting other miscellaneous activities. In 1984, the project budget was approximately \$340,000; it dipped to close to \$200,000 in 1985 before rising to \$300,000 in 1986 (Ibid.).

Given these expenditures and the lack of any systematic fundraising mechanism, it should have been clear to someone that the project would run out of cash within a few years. Several haphazard efforts were made to raise funds, with little success. WWF-US provided support for the environmental education component, which endured for a few years, but from outside donors, little was forthcoming for PEMASKY's other components on a sustained basis. As the project's budget neared depletion in early 1987, increasingly desperate efforts were made to raise funds. Proposals for various activities were written up and sent out, but none of this was systematic and there was virtually no success. One critical factor was that many of the international funder contacts had disappeared with the exit of most of the CATIE advisors around this time.

### *Coordination in Three Worlds*

PEMASKY simultaneously inhabited three distinct geographical and cultural regions: Panama City, where the primary project office was located; Nusagandi, isolated on the ridge of the Continental Divide; and the communities of Kuna Yala.

The office in Panama City was the primary work site. It housed virtually all of the project's documents and had equipment for working on the Management Plan, proposals, and letters, although it never had a computer. It was the base from which project staff dealt with government agencies, Panamanian NGOs, institutions such as STRI, and international donors and technicians. All of the families of PEMASKY's Kuna staff lived in the city. This was, in a sense, their home, where they felt most comfortable.

Kuna Yala's communities, of course, held PEMASKY's most important constituency—the people whose lands and natural resources the project was fighting to defend. They wanted to be informed about the project's activities on a regular basis, community by community. This was a huge order. Kuna Yala contains more than 50 island and mainland communities spread out along some 200 kilometers of coastline. They are reachable only by small aircraft, canoe, or on foot. Some of the communities are acculturated and open to outside ideas. Others are extremely traditional, to the point where they screen their people from other Kuna communities and vigorously block out foreign ideas.

During the first year, 1983-1984, the PEMASKY technical staff spent time in some of the major communities, explaining the basic outlines of what was planned, discussing the threats to Comarca lands, and discussing the project's objectives. The communities wanted to be informed, and they also wanted concrete results. When it became apparent that, beyond demarcation, PEMASKY staff could deliver on virtually nothing projected in the management plan (villagers were particularly interested in agricultural production), incentives for the staff to visit the communities dropped off. Cutting this out of their itinerary found some justification in that the communities were extremely difficult and costly to reach.

Nusagandi, located along the Continental Divide in the forest, was envisioned by CATIE as being the primary center of the project, yet it was difficult to reach, a three- to four-hour drive from Panama City over a treacherous road in the rainy season. Even less propitious, there was no nearby community and Nusagandi was extremely isolated, without electricity or a telephone.

Each of these three areas—Nusagandi, Kuna Yala's communities, and Panama City—had a different dynamic and atmosphere, and linking them in any coherent fashion immediately proved a challenge. Logistics were cumbersome and expensive. As confusion mounted inside PEMASKY and financial resources diminished, the difficulties of communication and transportation among these three worlds proved too much, and all attempts to link them were abandoned.

### **PEMASKY's Image**

“The Kuna Park,” as it came to be known throughout the world, was a very special initiative. This was the first time, at least in Latin America, that an indigenous group had taken it upon itself to create its own protected area, set up a management system, and run a wide-ranging program that simultaneously protected the Kuna homeland and conserved the region's biodiversity. It was lauded by both indigenous peoples and conservationists as something to be emulated.

Articles about the park began appearing (Breslin & Chapin 1984; Houseal et al. 1985; Wright et al. 1985; Chapin 1985; Tangherlini & Young 1987; Gradwohl & Greenberg 1988:81-83; Archibold 1990, 1993). The project was the lead story in the January 1984 issue of USAID's internal newspaper, *Front Lines*, claimed the cover of WWF-US's 1985 Annual Report, and was subsequently written up by CATIE.

Positive publicity, it was felt, would help the project; but things rapidly got out of hand. Before PEMASKY had managed to take more than a few steps, it found itself enshrined in the pantheon of quasi-mythological success stories. People everywhere were desperately searching for

successes as a counter-balance to the deforestation and general environmental pillage taking place throughout the tropics. PEMASKY was precisely what they were after. It contained all the right elements—an alliance between indigenous peoples and conservationists, indigenous defense of its ancestral homeland, a Biosphere Reserve run by Noble Savages, a botanical park and wildlife refuge, and scientific tourism—and the word spread widely and fast.

The PEMASKY staff became famous, and with fame came the responsibility of maintaining its image of success. Looking back on that period, staff members complain that they had been made out to be the Great Conservationists, which was not only a caricature but also a tremendous burden to carry around. When serious trouble began to appear in late 1986 and early 1987, they fought hard to keep up the appearance of a successful project. They felt that this was expected of them. As their difficulties multiplied internally, the staff shielded them from view by generating a parade of static images, to the point where it appeared that the project was frozen in time, like an insect in amber. There was no visible evolution onto higher ground, and outside observers, unable to perceive anything novel or particularly eye-catching, soon tired of the show and moved on to other pursuits.

What PEMASKY and its Kuna participants were supposedly doing was touted as an inspiration to all other indigenous peoples. According to Gradwohl and Greenberg (1988:83), “the success of the Kuna's efforts has already made it a model for indigenous groups in the Americas.” Much was expected of them, and they didn't want to show weakness. At the same time, they sensed that if they discussed their problems openly and sought help, funders might be spooked. The wider the gap between appearance and reality became, the more energetically the Kuna staff of PEMASKY protected their image. They had become accustomed to the adulation and were reluctant to lose it. The Kuna were so enveloped in their own favorable press that they were suffocating.

### **PEMASKY's Legacy**

As a formal “project,” PEMASKY had its share of confusions from the date of its creation in 1983 through the dismissal of the Technical Team and the virtual cessation of field activities in

1988. In retrospect, it is easy to point out errors, failures of judgement, and areas where deficiencies of one kind or another steered the project toward breakdown. Too much money was pumped into PEMASKY before it had the capacity to manage it effectively. The matter of what PEMASKY was—an NGO or a project or a plan-writing exercise or something else—never got sorted out, and in fact, it was given virtually no attention. The management plan paradigm, or at least the particular plan template chosen, was not appropriate for the Kuna and no serious attempt was made to adapt it so it would be. Each group involved in the project had its own set of objectives and priorities, but there was little interest in discussing them as a group and figuring out how they might fit together as a coherent whole. PEMASKY developed no mechanism for ongoing fundraising capability so that it might become a permanent entity, either as an NGO or a “project.”

It is quite likely that had some of these issues been addressed, the end result would have been more favorable to everyone, but this did not happen. There was very little real experience to guide this enterprise. While there was considerable enthusiasm and generally high-minded intentions, the methods for realizing the original vision simply didn't exist.

At the same time, the Kuna population managed to draw a number of extremely important benefits out of the PEMASKY project. Much of what they accomplished was not explicit in the work plan as it was developed. The positive outcomes occurred largely as a result of Kuna initiatives, and they unfolded quietly, almost behind the scenes, as the more formal activities on the work plan were being overseen by the CATIE advisors. A number of the most important Kuna actions only began to bear fruit after PEMASKY had run its course and the Technical Team had dispersed.

### ***Territorial Protection***

Demarcation of their territorial limits and protection of the Comarca with patrols of park guards satisfied the primary Kuna objective for launching the PEMASKY project. Because of PEMASKY, the Nusagandi center was built and has served as the operational headquarters of the demarcation project. Through this effort, the Kuna began a process of consciousness-raising

regarding the threats to their border region. This led to a continued focus on the need to patrol not only the Nusagandi area but also more critically threatened areas to the west. Demarcation efforts later continued with a Kuna NGO, the Napguana Association, and then through the Kuna General Congress. More than 60 non-Indian colonists that had established farms on Comarca land were negotiated out. By the mid-1990s, the Kuna had moved into contested border areas and established their claims through agricultural colonization projects.

### *Environmental Education*

Environmental education began rather poorly with urban Costa Rican models, evolved into a school-based program in the Kuna communities, and has taken several fruitful roads since then. In 1991, Jorge Ventocilla, Rutilio Paredes, and Valerio Núñez—all members of the PEMASKY Technical Team—combined with the Kuna artist Ologuagdi on a coloring book, *We, the Children of Mother Earth (Nosotros, los Hijos de la Madre Tierra)*, depicting the relationship the Kuna have with their natural environment. The first edition of this book was in Kuna and Spanish. Since then, a version in Spanish and English has appeared. It has a preface by the First Chief (Cacique) of the Kuna General Congress and was published by the Panamanian Ministry of Education (Ventocilla & Ologuagdi 1991).

Ventocilla, Núñez, and Heraclio Herrera later worked on the book, *Plants and Animals in the Life of the Kuna*, which has been published in English and Spanish. This book offers a thorough introduction to the Kuna and their natural environment. It contains information on terrestrial fauna, medicinal plants, the *ueruk* palm (used for thatch), lobsters, marine habitat destruction, Kuna hunting practices, and the pressures of overpopulation. Above all, it is a clear-eyed examination of the Kuna's difficulties in maintaining the natural equilibrium of the ecosystem in the Comarca. As such, it is a positive step in the direction of seeking solutions to problems that are facing indigenous peoples everywhere.

Since 1993, Ventocilla, still with STRI, has worked with representatives of the Duiren Youth Union (*Unión de la Juventud Duiren*), a Kuna NGO, to organize a series of children's art workshops dealing primarily with environmental issues. With financial support from WWF-US,

STRI, the Canadian Embassy, and the U.S.-based NGO, Center for the Support of Native Lands, a network of workshops has expanded to undertake various related activities, including poetry, drawing, music, dance, and theater. Each year they organize a Kuna Children's Art Festival.

### *Kuna NGOs*

Although PEMASKY was not an NGO, it engendered a cluster of projects and NGOs that have carried on the work it initiated. Kuna NGOs created in the late 1980s and 1990s include the United Kuna Association for Napguana (*Asociación Kunas Unidos por Napguana*), the Dobbo Yala Foundation (*Fundación Dobbo Yala*), the Kalu Koskun Institute (*Instituto Kalu Koskun*), and the Osiskun Foundation (*Fundación Osiskun*). Overarching these NGOs is the Institute for the Integrated Development of Kuna Yala (*Instituto para el Desarrollo Integral de Kuna Yala*—IDIKY), part of the Kuna General Congress, and considered its “technical wing.” IDIKY was created to oversee the activities of the different Kuna NGOs, coordinate their efforts, and help them with the administration of outside assistance.

PEMASKY as an organization has been revived in limited fashion; it has the same acronym, but is now the Ecological Program rather than the Study Project (*Programa de Ecología* instead of the *Proyecto de Estudio*). As of late 1999, its Director was Geodisio Castillo, one of the original project technicians. The United Kuna Association for Napguana and the Kuna General Congress have been working on demarcation of the western border of the Kuna Comarca with Enrique Arias, one of the original PEMASKY topographers. Guillermo Archibold, PEMASKY's original Director, heads up the Fundación Osiskun, which addresses marine issues. Valerio Núñez was until recently the Director of IDIKY and Heraclio Herrera was the Director of a recently completed European Union-financed project in sustainable development (DESOSKY). Still another former member of the Technical Team, Arnoldo de León, is currently working on the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor project, based in Panama.

### *Comarca-wide Consciousness Raising*

Before 1983, few Kuna—even those with a university education—were familiar with the basic concepts of conservation biology, nor did they know what “conservationists” were. The young

professionals who were to form the Technical Team of PEMASKY hardly knew more about these things. However, once the project got underway, this situation changed rapidly. "All of us were bathing in new medicine," says Guillermo Archibold, PEMASKY's Director at the time. This new medicine was the broad field of conservation, and they bathed themselves in it with enthusiasm. PEMASKY technical staff received training at CATIE and the park guards were given both training and assistance on site. The project's topographers took courses at the Inter-American Geodesic Institute, and gained invaluable knowledge of the land features of the Comarca during their demarcation work. Numerous young Kuna, inspired by the example of PEMASKY, studied biology, geography, economics, agronomy, anthropology, and a variety of other related courses at the National University. PEMASKY assembled an impressive library of articles, reports, and books dealing with biology, conservation, and indigenous affairs.

This saturation of the Kuna in biological issues has resulted in several interesting developments. First, it has given them an awareness of ecological processes, from both the Western scientific and traditional scientific perspectives. Thus, they have incorporated conservation provisions into internal Comarca legislation, revised by the Kuna General Congress and in 1995 submitted to the National Assembly for approval. The new version contains a section (Chapter VII, Articles 52-55) dealing with natural resources, which are defined as "patrimony of the Comarca" (Art. 52). It seeks to give the Kuna rights to sub-surface minerals, which would reverse the Panamanian government's traditional control of mining concessions.<sup>5</sup> The new conservation provisions also provide oversight in the conservation and rational utilization of natural resources, including flora and fauna, soils, and marine and lacustrine species, in coordination with Panamanian national authorities (Art. 53). Article 54 of this Kuna General Congress legislation pays special attention to the protection of lobsters, regulating their exploitation by imposing closed seasons. These seasons are to be determined by regional authorities who also are to prohibit "methods and techniques that permit large-scale exploitation" and lay the groundwork for establishing, through the General Congress, marine and terrestrial protected areas "for the conservation and reproduction of species" (Art. 55; see Ventocilla et al. 1995:117).

Another observable and significant development has been the ability of the Kuna to deal with Western scientists on a more equal footing. The Kuna are now better equipped to negotiate cooperative agreements that are to their advantage, or to block scientific research altogether, as they sometimes do. These skills have been employed in various interactions with STRI and with STRI-sponsored scientists during the late 1980s and 1990s.

### **Conclusions: The Kuna and Decentralization**

Kuna Yala has been a “decentralized” territorial unit since the 1930s and a Comarca, which combines a defined territory with an autonomous political government, since 1953 when Law 16 was ratified by the Panamanian National Assembly. This law effectively gave the Kuna self-rule, providing the political-legal framework within which the Kuna could manage their lands and natural resources. This law's passage did not reflect an intentional effort by the Panamanian government to delegate power to an ethnic minority. Rather, it was an arrangement the Panamanian government was pressured into making—one conditioned by a series of historical circumstances. The end result, however, has been a decentralized decision-making entity that is unique among the indigenous peoples of Central America.

PEMASKY developed within the framework of the decentralized Kuna Yala Comarca and was thus able to operate free of the confining grasp of the national government. It had its own legal status and could receive funds from international donors. PEMASKY managed more than \$1,200,000 during the course of the project. There were difficulties here—the Kuna lacked experience with such a large sum of money, and there were some accounting “errors”—but when all was said and done, the Kuna were able to accomplish a number of things that only they saw as important. Had the funds been managed by the Panamanian government, few if any of the Kuna priorities would have been addressed. Had PEMASKY's chief advisory body, CATIE, been in charge of the budget, it is reasonable to assume that CATIE's priorities would have been attended to before those quite different ones of the Kuna.

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<sup>1</sup> This region has traditionally been called San Blas. In recent years, the Kuna have changed the name to Kuna Yala ("Kuna Territory").

<sup>2</sup> Census counts are unreliable due to the difficulties of carrying them out in remote communities of Kuna Yala, and because the Kuna are dispersed throughout the country, with the major concentrations being in Kuna Yala, Panama City, and the city of Colón. The 1990 national census counts 47,298 Kunas throughout the republic, but a higher number is probable. Some have estimated that there are as many as 15,000 Kuna living in Panama and Colón cities alone. There are in addition three small settlements in Colombia, inland from the Gulf of Urabá.

<sup>3</sup> The UTK changed its name to the Association of Kuna Employees (AEK) in 1983. This change was made to secure legal recognition by the government of Panama, which was not anxious to legalize a "workers' union."

<sup>4</sup> The Spanish version (Ventocilla, Núñez & Herrera 1997) was published in Barcelona two years later; a more recent edition (1999) was published by the Abya Yala Press in Quito, Ecuador.

<sup>5</sup> Control over this set of natural resources has long been a concern of the Kuna. In a General Congress in 1981, delegates discussed their proposed modifications to Law 16 in the internal legislation of the Comarca. Arguing that they must gain control of the sub-surface, they described the Earth as an incarnation of "Great Mother, and thus mining is the same as cutting open one's mother's belly or even incest." Belly-slicing sums up much of what the Kuna dislike about Western medicine (Howe 1986:68).