

CASA RUIZ, S.A

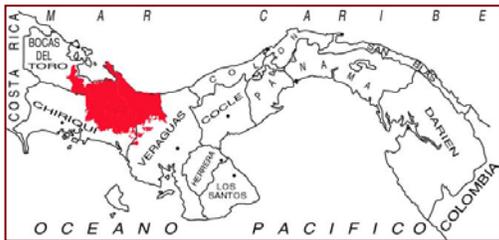
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TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY IN THE NGÄBE-BUKLÉ COMARCA – PANAMA Part A – The “Sribire Gwaire” Project Part B – The Organic Inspection

Part A The “Sribire Gwaire” Project May 2006



The Ngäbe-Buklé Comarca is the official Panamanian geographical area where the major indigenous group of Panama lives – Comarca established in March 1997 covering 1,350 Km². This indigenous group represents a population of over 180,000 people residing toward the western side of the Republic covering an area from slopes on the Pacific side to the Atlantic coastal border in the North.



In 1968 Dr. P. Young, an anthropologist from the USA published a book talking about this society. He gathered the information by living with the Ngäbes. After this compilation, the results were compared to a written work prepared by a Spaniard priest some time in the 1600. Both written observations agreed on the type of society the Ngäbes form showing the stability of its

structured community through time. The Buklé group is a smaller one that lived in the same geographical area. For this reason both communities were united in one Comarca. There are fifty four communities in the Comarca. For many decades and up to these days, the Ngäbe-Buklé community's major cash income is the coffee picking activity. They move from their area to the highlands of the neighboring Chiriquí Province, especially to Boquete and Renacimiento Districts where most of the coffee that is export from Panama is grown. With the experience gained in the growing areas, many of them grow small quantities of coffee in their region. The Arabica variety planted comes from the Boquete highlands. Their own cultural elements and the rather closed community



system allow themselves to be stable but at the same time reduce their participation in the present Panamanian economic system. Through their own determination and taking advantage of the resources available, they are capable of producing coffee that fulfills the requirements of an organic product. There is still a lot to be applied in their areas and knowledge transfer is taking place together with two organizations: Casa Ruiz, S.A. and the Peace Corp Volunteers. The “Sribire Gwaire” (“working together” in Ngäbe) Project is an effort of participants from the whole industry chain. The main objective of the project is to evaluate the economic feasibility of growing organic coffee for the European market with the highest quality possible the



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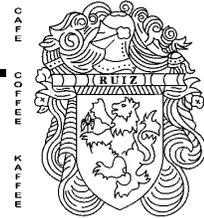
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growing area provides. This objective requires the organic certification from a market-recognized body, increase knowledge in growing activities required by the geographical area, processing the product following strict quality guidelines, finishing the preparation of the product and exporting it through an organization that complies with the organic procedures.



The Asociación de Caficultores “Sribire Gwaire” (ACSG) has five associates with around seven (7) Ha of land all close to each other. The labor is carried by the family unit residing in each area. Most of the processing is done by hand since there is no source of energy available but of the human capacity. As such, ACSG has the following challenges:

- to learn appropriate organic growing practices using the resources available in the area,
- to recognize the purpose of the record keeping in order to create their own effective growing systems based on the ecosystem's behavior,
- to practice adequate steps that ensure quality through the manual and semi-technified green coffee processing,
- to protect the semi-processed coffee from the environments negative elements (e.i. moisture),
- to be able to bring the coffee to the final milling preparation,
- to ship it to the international market.

Casa Ruiz, S.A. organic certification covers from growing coffee, to point of sale activities including processing and the exporting of green organic coffee as well as finished product (roasted & packed coffee). The certification process for ACSG was organized through Casa Ruiz, S.A. as well as the commercialization of the small coffee production available.

The Peace Corp volunteer in the area gets to find ways for co-creating elements required by the certification process but that are foreign to the Ngäbe culture. By living with them, the requirements of the market can be translated in actions and practices that make sense to the Ngäbes while complying with the quality expected from the area as well as for the certification



procedures. There are around eighty (80) kg of transitional organic green coffee from the ACSG group.



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Part B The Organic Inspection February 16, 2007

It was 9:16 am when we turned from the main Interamerican Highway North toward the Comarca (indigenous reservation). Gregory was the person in charge of guiding us up toward Hato Chami further up to Cuernavaca where we could leave the car. It was a beautiful day.



Half the road was paved and then the usual dirt road - covered by four inches of dust. In spite of some areas hard to drive through, we arrived at Cuernavaca at noon time. The view was great and the people were waiting for us. However, a little hiss warned us of a small cut on the right front tire. With a nail the cut was shut down and we hoped the tire was going to be in good shape at our return. We went to the little "town" since from there we needed to go up toward Mouiyeti where the farms were. Gregory told us it would take forty five minutes to get there climbing the mountain behind the "town" and into the path of the San Felix river beginning.



Climbing that mountain was the real challenge to all of us who spent most of our time in front of a

computer. Every fifteen steps we made a break to regain energy for the next part. At the peak of the mountain we looked down and our car has become a one-inch car – no wonder we were tired. Thanks to a girl and his little brother we were able to sip out of an orange to calm down the thirst while enjoying the sitting at the peak of the mountain with a rather an interesting wind blowing.

We continue the walk guided and encouraged by our little friend Julián who was always challenging us to do it faster. He really knew all the little turns and never missed on a "y." The times he went off the path was only to wait for us ahead sitting on a small rock – he knew the short cuts quite well. Walking the other side of the mountain was nicer although still doing some climbing. After a little while we got to a wooden door and crossed it. From there on the environment was greener and the breeze was fresher. We got to a coffee plantation that had a good amount of orange trees. It was time for another sip from a sun-ripen orange, one for the inspector, another for Julián.



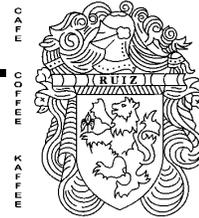
We also helped Julián getting some oranges for his family. The oranges were delicious especially because we have arrived to the meeting place - a set of houses all together on a flat area – after two hours of walking and no lunch for us, only oranges – hard to walk up with a full stomach. We decided not to stop but to start the inspection right away after catching our breaths. We would go up to the farthest farm and then from there to the other two farms who were close by. After that we would do checking of the fourth, fifth and the processing area or beneficio. Looking to our back



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we got a glimpse of what is a great view from that very interesting place.



We kept on walking. We crossed a small stream that we know triple its size during the rainy season. Then we needed to climb on the other side to get to Bernardo's Farm. Finally we arrived to the farm and the work started. The inspector made all the questions taking notes on a small yellow pad – we were very glad not to be carrying any extra weight at all. Bernardo explained what he had done in the previous year.



We continue the walk toward the next area to be inspected. However we made a stop for a bite at Bernardo's farm home. It took us a little extra time to get there since it was built almost at the top of the property – smart common sense, avoiding any type of problems with flooding. Arriving there was great. He had a "hamaca," a place to sleep and a place to cook. During the times when he needs to work on the farm, he takes all the family to avoid the long and

sometimes dangerous back and forth walk. Two small packages of cookies were offered among all of us by our faithful companion Julian.



The Association works together along with their families. It is a family activity to take care of the coffee and other products. Although not much is really done based on a technical knowledge, much of the activity is by observation and practices learned while the Ngäbes work and pick coffee in Boquete and other coffee areas. We found old coffee trees (some forty or fifty year stumps) and very new trees. There are some areas where the coffee looks very good for the season – although still another dry month ahead.



As an average, the area seems to be suitable for growing coffee. Some variety seems to show better health while other ones seem to suffer the most during the dry season. Half of the plantation is on a slope in all the farms that were verified. They are in the process of learning what practice



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makes more sense for soil conservation according to the resources at hand. The walk continued and needed to cross the stream again on an upper section. Thanks to the "engineer" we had a bridge out of stones placed at the proper way.



In the next farm we were able to see the other side of the small canyon that is formed by the stream. We were going a little bit up and a little bit toward east (?). We made no effort on wasting energy and every chance we had we took a nice seat on the available stone while sharing information about the activities around growing, picking and processing coffee with the resources available.



We crossed a piece of land that was also a coffee area but not belonging to the association. Then we got to the third farm. The coffee looked good on this farm that also had a form of a canyon - although there was not a stream there. It was with great pleasure that, after walking a little bit more, we were able to see the houses at Mouiyete. We saw the coffee drying. It was very nice to realize we had just finish checking three of the five farms and were ready for the meeting. It was at this area where all the members of the association were able to get together.



All of us were invited to drink a small cup of Kool-Aid while the inspector had the meeting with the members of the group. Here we checked the beneficio (green coffee processing plant) and a pilot worm culture organic compost project that is carried out in the same place.



After this checking we were ready to come down checking other farms in the way out. They looked



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the same just with variations depending on the type of topographical area the farm was. The project is almost a big family project. Most of the time the people in a small community are related one or another way. It is hard for the coffee owners to hire labor force. They all together are the labor force. This is what allows them to be successful in the process of affording to have the farms running.

We finished at 4:40pm and required to walk back to the place we left the car. Walking down the mountain was a different physical experience. There is no way to let you get too fast, running the risk of rolling down the mountain. So, patience and securing every step was the pace.



We arrived by the car at 5:30pm. We checked the tire and it was in a good shape. There was no time to do too much because we wanted to come down as soon as possible. With a lot of care we drove up the mountains with those roads dry full of stones and carved by the previous rainy season. Some areas looked different from the time I drove in – it must be that I was just looking at the road. We drove up and down, right and left, bordering the mountains always driving closer to the mountain side rather than the edge one. We reached the area where three tractors had spread out new material to fix the road. We found them previously going up in a different place

The area we visited can be seen in a Google's view as it is shown below. The farms are located just a little bit east of the two small clouds in the middle of the picture, where the green area is.

which meant they were working all day long. The new material was dirt with stones removed from their previous place and still splattered all around. By this time it was completely dark and the beam lights were shining on the dark yellow dirt.

Suddenly, the car falls into a hidden hole and there the tire went completely flat. Few meters ahead there was a safe place to park and fix the tire - we could see from that spot the San Felix city lights down below. We tried to fix the tire but the nuts were so tight that even with the help of other drivers there were still stuck. Finally, the socket we were using gave up.

The cellular worked from that spot (we had had no signal until that moment) and we were able to call for help. A car with tools, two mechanics, and two more helpers left Boquete to go and meet us. We just needed to wait, so we took a time to rest and admire the immensity of the dark sky real full of stars as I have never seen before, accompany with a nice cool breeze. At 11:00pm a beam of light shoots straight toward the sky and we knew that in a few more minutes the help was going to be there – they were driving up the hill in front of us. It took not too much time to fix the tire and all of us left the spot. The paved road was not too far. We reach the Inter-american highway and head out to Boquete. Closer to the city of David we made the last stop to get for all of us a cup of warm chicken soup. All of us arrived in Boquete the next day at 2:00am.

Preparing this coffee for the external market is a task that now has new meaning. There is plenty of work up in that area. There are people full of hope that works through the rainy season to be able to bring the coffee out in the dry season when the roads allow that to take place.



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