

# Ecotourism and Community Development In the Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve

Querétaro's Sierra Gorda Mountains, an intricate natural system of the Sierra Madre Oriental declared a biosphere reserve in 1997, are a world-class refuge for natural life. The 383,000 protected hectares in the Sierra Gorda, included in the UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves in 2001, are the scene for a growing grassroots movement for harmonious regional development and the conservation of natural resources.

## MOUNTAIN DWELLERS' MODEL FOR MANAGING THE PROTECTED AREA

In 1987, a group of local inhabitants, inspired by the call of Mother Earth and alarmed by the patent, rapid destruction of the forests, the drop in water levels in the springs and the disappearance of abundant fauna and growing soil erosion, decided to join forces and work to conserve the region's natural wealth. They





Daniel Munguia

▲ Community development is an important strategy in managing the protected area.

founded the Sierra Gorda Ecological Group (GESG), a non-profit, nongovernmental organization, whose aim was the protection and rehabilitation of the Sierra Gorda sanctuary for flora and fauna using an integral strategy that involved social and economic development for its inhabitants. After 14 years of hard work, GESG has managed to position its strategy in the region through three main programs: one on community development, another on sustainable production; and a third on public relations and fund raising. Today, GESG works with 30,000 local inhabitants, the Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve Office, local, state and federal authorities and numerous national and international organizations in the consolidation of a unique model for managing a natural protected area which grows stronger every day.

The Sierra Gorda, one of Mexico's historical, cultural and natural gems, is a region in which the human and natural systems enter into great contradiction. On the one hand, the existence of 14 different types of vegetation makes the Sierra Gorda the country's most ecologically diverse area. On the other hand, of its 100,000 inhabitants, 77 percent of those of working age earn less than U.S.\$7 per day. Natural wealth and human poverty in the same area plus inappropriate technological and political schema have increased the pressure on natural resources.

Given this situation, the GESG and the Reserve Office have turned to alternative social and economic development models in which resource sustainability and incorporating conservation into daily life emerge as a result of a love for the Earth and the knowledge of her essential cycles for maintaining life.

## FORESTS, COMMUNITIES AND CONSERVATION

In a corner of the Sierra Gorda, among green spots where breathing in tranquility is a daily experience, are the communities of Soledad de Guadalupe, El Cañón and San Juan de los Durán in the municipality of Jalpan de Serra. Baroque Franciscan missions, healthy pine and helm oak forests, the transparent Santa María River and attractive hilly landscape come together in a beautiful mountain portrait where its communities work to improve their living conditions and to preserve their beautiful natural surroundings. Going through these spots undoubtedly offers a wonderful opportunity for rediscovering the Mother.

To begin the adventure, we can visit the Tancoyol Mission, built by Friar Junípero Serra more than 250 years ago in the little town of the same name nestled in a small valley. Leav-

ing behind Tancoyol, we start climbing the craggy mountain slopes toward the San Juan de los Durán forests. In the matter of a few meters, the vegetation changes and cool air begins to surround everything. Halfway there, as though pointing to the transition between two types of vegetation, we arrive at Soledad de Guadalupe. Here we find a ceramics workshop operated by the women of the community: it is the result of inter-institutional efforts headed up by GESG with support from the Reserve Office, the Jalpan city hall and the Solidarity Fund. Among the pieces produced with local clay are cups, pitchers and simply designed plates, kaleidoscopic with the women's creativity.

The road continues and we come into the high part of the Green Valley mountain area. The wind is cool and the mountains seem to be covered with a green blanket. We come to the

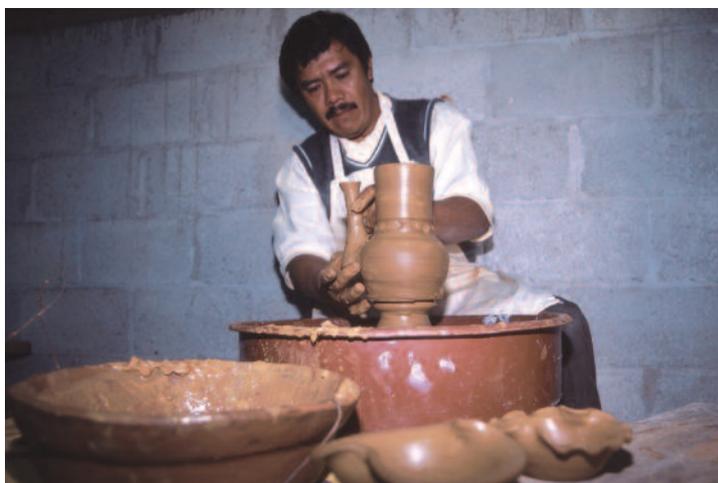


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▲ Visitors will have the opportunity of interacting with the mountain community and taking short trips to different parts of the surrounding area.



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▲ Each project is the fruit of more than a decade of ongoing work.

community of El Cañón. Here the inhabitants have organized to raise exotic birds. This productive project is also operated by different institutions and the community itself.

To get to San Juan de los Durán, we will have to go off the dirt road and take a little path that crosses a small green valley, at the end of which is this town made up of friendly, hard-working people. The carpenter's shop is the product of GESG promotional work which involved several government agencies and Shell Oil. Local inhabitants decided to build the Sierra Gorda's first community ecotourism site where they erected wooden cabins surrounded by wild foliage. Visitors have the opportunity of interacting with the mountain community itself; taking short trips to different parts of the surrounding area; eating regional dishes; taking horseback

or mountain bike rides; visiting caves and small waterfalls; taking high-impact walks to the Santa María River canyon; and seeing the Swallows' Sink Hole in the state of San Luis Potosí, an imposing abyss both for its size and because it is home to parrots and thousands of black-martins, whose comings and goings in the sink hole make for a unique, astonishing spectacle.

San Juan de los Durán and Soledad de Guadalupe are two of the productive projects the GESG and the mountain communities operate in the Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve. The model of inter-institutional and intersectoral work (including communities, authorities and civic organizations) that the GESG has developed in the Sierra Gorda is the fruit of more than a decade of ongoing work. Each project has different phases based on community organization, inter-institutional coordination, the donation of the land, support for the construction of necessary infrastructure and its equipping, basic and specific training, promotional activities and marketing and, finally, constant evaluation and monitoring.

The experience gained in the field has made it possible for the GESG to do effective fund raising for these projects, basing itself on the principles of co-responsibility and co-participation. The GESG hopes to improve the living conditions of the population and recover and conserve life in the sanctuary of nature that is Querétaro's Sierra Gorda. **MM**

#### INFORMATION

##### **Grupo Ecológico Sierra Gorda**

Juárez 9, Centro  
Jalpan de Serra, Querétaro  
México  
Phone: (52) (441) 296-0700

##### **Grupo Ecológico Sierra Gorda**

Arroyo Seco 306, La Estrella  
Querétaro, Querétaro  
México  
Phone: (52) (442) 212-3267

www.sierragorda.org  
e-mail: sierraqro@ciateq.mx