

## International Experience Award: Oaxaca, Mexico

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View looking out over Oaxaca City

### Research Topic: Investigating Land Management and Food Sovereignty in Oaxaca, Mexico

#### Learning experiences:

I had the opportunity to interview:

- An eco-tourism coordinator in La Nevería
- Two employees at Puente a la salud comunitaria, a local non-profit dedicated to food sovereignty
- An employee at Educa, a non-profit that works in part to support community land rights
- A professor studying food systems in Oaxaca

I was also able to conduct site visits and attend a number of workshops and presentations, including:

- A visit to a local community shared agriculture (CSA), initiative where I participated in the weekly harvest and spoke with farmers
- Visits to several local and regional food markets
- Visits to several farms, some private, some communally-managed
- A visit to a communally-managed forest and ecotourism initiative
- Two Oaxacan cooking workshops
- A presentation by C.A.C.A.O, about the challenges of small scale chocolate production
- A presentation by Puente about the current state of health and food sovereignty in Oaxaca

#### Context:

From April 7-17 2016, I travelled to Oaxaca, a state in Southern Mexico that is famed for its rich cultural and biological heritage, but that struggles with some of the highest poverty rates in the country. Although farming is widely practiced in Oaxaca, the state is facing an obesity epidemic and threats to food sovereignty. Although the context of Oaxaca's food system and land management strategies is unique, several lessons can be applied to the Canadian context.

#### Research Topic:

Land management is intrinsically tied to food security and food sovereignty. The way we use our land and how we develop our natural resources has profound effects on

local people, especially those who rely on the land for subsistence activities, such as hunting and farming. In both Canada and Oaxaca, many resource rich areas are located within traditional Indigenous territories. Oaxaca is home to sixteen different Indigenous groups. The state's hilly landscape means that many of these communities are remote. Subsistence agriculture plays a key role in food security for most of these peoples. For the resident Indigenous communities, there are a number of parallels between the land management challenges of Northern Canada and Oaxaca, including tenuous food security, high rates of obesity and development pressures on their traditional territories. Co-management is a common land management strategy in Canada, whereby the federal government and Indigenous groups share decision-making power. During my time in Mexico, I was eager to learn about alternate land management strategies, such as communal land management, and hear about the effects of de-centralized management on local people.

Travelling  
between two  
villages in the  
Sierra Norte,  
that engage in  
inter-  
community  
communal  
land  
management



A privately owned agave plantation in the Valle Central

### Research Findings:

Land ownership in Oaxaca can be private, “ejido” or “comunidad agraria”. Ejido and comunidad tenured lands are communally managed. Ejido lands were redistributed to communities after a series of agricultural land reforms, whereas the comunidad lands are often traditional Indigenous territories. I visited a number of communities in the Sierra Norte just North of Oaxaca City who manage their forests, farms and communities through communal land management. An inter-community assembly meets to make decisions about the location of farms, hunting limits and the extraction of forest timber. A resident of one of these communities told me that decision-making



power lies in the hands of the people, not the federal government. However, from other interviewees, I heard that government programs and subsidies still influence resource extraction and farming practices to an extent. For instance, many interviewees complained that government subsidies target only large-scale farms. Regardless, the decision-making power of these communities is still much higher than in Canadian co-management regimes. Although it may not be possible to entirely attribute Oaxaca's rich biodiversity to communal land management, it likely plays a key role. To ensure their continued survival, these communities have an innate interest in ensuring responsible resource management. By regulating extractive activities, communities can continue to practice subsistence agriculture and benefit from local resources in the long-term. Communal land management gives these communities greater control over their food systems and more decision-making power over what they eat, which contributes to greater food sovereignty.



Corn has been a staple Mexican crop for thousands of years. Mexico is home to incredible genetic diversity of corn.



Giant agave plants in the Sierra Norte

### Reflections

The International Experience Award provided me with an incredible opportunity to learn about land and resource management in an international context. It was inspiring to see Oaxaca's vibrant civil society first-hand. The sheer number to NGOs, cooperatives and engaged citizens made it easy to attend a number of workshops and talks during my visit. Although communal land management faces some external pressures, it offers communities greater control over resources use, which has powerful implications for food sovereignty and biodiversity conservation since decision-making power is in the hands of community members. Could some of these lessons be applied to land management in Northern Canada?