

**Lacandon Eco-literacy Program
Summary
June 21, 2007**

Suzanne Cook has been working in the northern Lacandon community of Naha' for nearly two decades, filming their cultural traditions and documenting their language and traditional knowledge. She has a large corpus of audio-video recordings and transcribed texts, which are deposited in electronic archives at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, The Netherlands. The corpus contains approx 250 recorded texts and images, and ethnographic data, and a modest trilingual (Lacandon/Spanish/English) field dictionary. It contains 600 names Lacandon folk terms for the flora and fauna of the region.

Despite the large volume of data, much remains to be documented, especially in the area of Lacandon traditional ecological knowledge. In spite of her best efforts, there are many gaps in the inventory. More species need to be identified, and, for many of those that are known, their ethnographic roles need to be uncovered. This information needs to be collected as soon as possible, given the continued degradation of the Lacandon forest and the speed with which native traditions are disappearing.

To date, no comprehensive research on the ethno-ecology of the Lacandones has been attempted. Of the few studies that have been carried out, most are presented as word lists; some of the terms are provided with short descriptions that cover a few of their cultural roles (Baer and Merrifield 1971, Boremanse 1981, Kashanipour and McGee 2004, Tozzer 1907); Bruce (1979) goes further, by providing the names of animals that the Lacandones associate with specific dream symbols and prophecies. While the existing literature contains some information on Lacandon plant and animal classification systems, and identifies medicinal uses of a number of wild plants, none of it has been given an adequate ethno-linguistic treatment, which would include related cultural data. A full study is needed, to fill gaps in the research literature, and to preserve Lacandon ecological knowledge.

The eco-literacy program Cook envisions would encompass three interrelated components: an ethno-biological inventory of the Lacandon folk nomenclature and descriptions provided by Lacandon consultants, with cross-references to Spanish, English and scientific terms; a corpus of audio-video recordings and transcribed texts that bear on the cultural significance of the flora and fauna, such as their place in Lacandon mythology, religion, folklore, and material culture; and literacy primers, based on traditional ecological themes provided in the corpus.

The inventory will be implemented on the computer, containing hyperlinks in each entry to the relevant record texts. A printed version of the inventory will also be generated and re-formatted, e.g., larger font and illustrated with color photos, maps, and children's drawings, to suit the needs and interests of the Lacandon community. The primers will take the form of booklets, although in the future, I envision producing interactive, electronic books with links to the inventory and recorded texts.

Because this is a large undertaking, Cook will approach it as a series of smaller projects, each focusing on a section of the inventory, such as different life forms, e.g., birds, mammals, plants, or on cultural domains, e.g., material culture, religion, medicine and curing. In each mini project, the three components--the inventory, recorded texts, and primer--would be developed simultaneously. The advantage to this approach is that within a relatively short period of time a comprehensive inventory and related materials can be produced that will meet academic standards and will be immediately useful to the Lacandon community. It will be a useful base for the development of additional culturally based teaching materials.