

From researcher to facilitator of cooperative learning: donning different hats for more effective problem-solving research in tropical conservation and development

**Diana Alvira**<sup>1</sup>, Karen A. Kainer<sup>2,3</sup>

1 School of Natural Resources and Environment, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

2 School of Forest Resources & Conservation, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

3 Tropical Conservation and Development Program, Center for Latin American Studies, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

Developing effective problem-solving research in tropical conservation and development requires that the student has an understanding of the complex links between social and ecological systems and an assortment of aptitudes, skills and abilities. Therefore the PhD student needs to extend beyond disciplinary boundaries, work in teams, create networks, establish partnerships at different levels, communicate in non-academic formats, and reflect critically on his/her own perspectives and actions. We present the process of developing an interdisciplinary ecology dissertation focused on understanding the complexity of factors affecting forest outcomes on smallholder landholdings in a forest frontier region in Amazonian Ecuador. The approach of this dissertation evolved to not only objectively analyze forest frontier dynamics, but also to engage community participants in the research. Methods used, activities programmed, and length of time the student-researcher spent in the study area facilitated relationship building and trust among members of the community and government authorities. The openness of the research approach resulted in organic emergence of learning platforms. In essence, this expanded the role of the researcher from objective collector and analyzer of data to a facilitator of learning. Activities promoting joint learning included: parish workshops, participatory mapping, farmer-to-farmer exchange visits, inter-parish group knowledge exchange visits, reinvigoration of the farmers' market, and the first fair of native plants and seeds. Research oriented to interdisciplinary problem-solving forces engagement of multiple stakeholders. In turn, this extends the dissertation timeframe required to understand problem realities and develop the trust, partnerships, and learning opportunities that satisfy the multiple actors involved.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary Ecology research, Learning platform, Participatory research

Contact Information: Diana Alvira, School of Natural Resources & Environment, University of Florida, PO Box 110410, Gainesville, FL 32611-0410, USA; Phone: 352-846-2156; Fax: 352-846-1277; Email: tita@ufl.edu