Since 2009, the Rainforest Alliance, an international conservation organization, has been working with businesses and community organizations known as Agrupaciones Sociales del Lugar (ASLs), which hold logging concessions for much of the forest in the region. With support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Tinker Foundation, the Rainforest Alliance has helped those organizations to improve their stewardship of the land, worker conditions and market competitiveness.

The results have been outstanding: most of the forest businesses in the area have implemented sustainable practices and 70 percent of the concessions have earned Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) Forest Management or Controlled Wood certification, resulting in major improvements to the management of more than 350,000 acres (142,000 hectares) of forest.

The region’s five largest sawmills have also achieved FSC certification, which has helped to significantly strengthen market demand for logs harvested from the area’s certified forests. And to ensure that local communities derive full economic benefits from FSC certification, the Rainforest Alliance has brokered introductions between the ASLs and certified mills and manufacturing companies willing to pay a premium for certified wood.

“With the Rainforest Alliance’s help, we’ve improved almost every aspect of our organization,” says Alicia Organavia, a founding member of the Copacabana ASL, which manages approximately 38,000 acres (15,400 hectares) of forest near the town of Ixiamas. Since earning FSC certification, Copacabana ASL has been selling its wood to Ecolegno, a door and furniture manufacturer that exports to Europe. “The prices have improved because our forest is certified. We’re now earning more money and our members’ quality of life is improving,” explains Organavia.

**Responsible Harvesting**

Nelson Velazquez, president of Caoba ASL, explains that his organization didn’t even have an office two years ago. At that time, members simply sold logging rights to logging companies, which paid them a fraction of the market value of the wood. With the Rainforest Alliance’s assistance, the ASL set money aside to rent an office and purchase equipment ranging from computers to chainsaws. Caoba ASL now runs its own forestry operation, which provides work for its members, increases the organization’s earnings, and solidifies the ASLs control over the forest.
We’ve hired a forester and have improved our maps and forest management plan. Our people now understand perfectly how the forest needs to be managed,” says Velazquez. “The truth is that the members of the ASLs have become guardians of the forest.”

Velazquez explains that the ASL cuts fewer trees in each logging area than the companies did, and they take pains not to damage trees that will be ready to be harvested in another 20 years. They also prohibit hunting and have set aside an area of special importance for biodiversity conservation that is now off limits to logging. The Rainforest Alliance teamed up with the Wildlife Conservation Society to produce a guide to identify high conservation value forests, which has helped the region’s ASLs and companies protect such areas.

Guardians of the Forest

Improvements to forest management not only help to conserve the area’s remarkable biodiversity, they also ensure the sustainability of the ASLs as viable businesses. This is especially important because Bolivia’s forest concessions are increasingly threatened by settlers from the country’s highlands who are moving into the Amazon Basin in search of land to farm. If local people earn a good living from sustainable forestry, they’ll be more likely to defend their concessions.

On a national level, certified forest area in Bolivia decreased from 5.4 million acres (2.2 million hectares) in 2009 to 3.2 million acres (1.3 million hectares) in 2011, as the government transferred forest concessions from corporations to communities. Because most communities lack experience in forest management and business skills, they require extensive technical assistance if they are to manage their concessions sustainably.

Such pressures increase the need for demonstrating how local people can make a living from sustainable forestry and forest-based business. To do this, the Rainforest Alliance works with community groups and companies alike, promoting sustainable forestry while connecting FSC-certified operations with one another to create sustainable chains of custody from forest to factory. An example of the latter is COMARBOLO based in the Altiplano city of El Alto, which purchases and mills certified wood from Caoba ASL and San Antonio ASL and sells on to Dekma, a company that produces decking and lawn furniture for export to Europe.

By facilitating such connections, the Rainforest Alliance helps local groups build durable market linkages that spur further improvements in forest stewardship and the lives of people who depend on forests for their livelihoods. One of those people is Hiram Uzquiano, president of the FSC-certified San Antonio ASL. A single father, Uzquiano uses the money he earns from his ASLs sustainable forestry operations to raise and educate his son. “I hope we can keep our concessions for many years to come, so that my son can one day live from the forest as I do,” he says.

For more information about our work with forest communities and small enterprises, please visit www.rainforest-alliance.org/forestry/small-business