

Fire Management in Tlaxcala, Mexico and the Story of How a SPA Project Helped One Woman named Lety

All of the major goals of my SPA project, Fire Management in piñón-pine forests in Tlaxcala, Mexico, were met. We completed 100 household interviews, conducted a forest structure and fuel study in 90 hectares of unburned, old(er) growth piñón pine forest. The local primary school regularly hosts environmental education activities and we have an active voluntary community fire brigadecomposed of 31 members.

Perhaps the most gratifying and successful component of this project has been the story of Maria Leticia García Reyes (Lety). As part of the fuel and forest structure study, I hired her, along with two university interns. Lety is a single, 37-year old woman, who worked for 20 years in DF as a maid and nanny before returning to SMC to help her ageing parents tend to their livestock and agricultural fields. Starting in May of 2012 she began to attend the English classes that I offered to the community. She never missed a class and was a quick learner. It wasn't until later that I learned that she only had a primary school level education.

In July I asked her if she'd like to work with me on the fuel and forest measuring project and she said yes. For over a month we worked together measuring DBH, tree height, surface and canopy fuel characteristics, and seedling regeneration rates. She learned how to use a compass, how to set up a plot, and more importantly she learned the reasons why and the importance of measuring all of these components in her forest. She was also an invaluable resource to the project as she knew many of the common names and uses of both the under and over story vegetation; her knowledge highlighted the immense biodiversity found in her forest.

Another volunteer, Noah Chutz at the CONAFOR Central Offices, learned of her involvement and invited her to present at an international conference on community participation in forest management. In helping Lety to prepare for the conference I learned more about what it had meant for her to work with me on my project. First, her brother had tried to forbid her from working in the "monte", saying that only men work up there. She quickly told him that it wasn't *his decision to make, and that if I, Rachel, another female, could work in the forest, than so could she. Also, by working with me she was once again able to earn a wage, something she had done for 20 years but lost once she returned home to her community.*



She also told me that before working in the project, she never much cared for her forest; now she realizes its value and hopes to protect it. When we went to the conference she was initially overwhelmed by all of the forestry "experts" and was very nervous to have to present in front of them. However, once she started to talk about her own experience and once she saw how receptive and interested everyone was in what she had to say, she quickly gained more confidence. By the end of the conference she was talking with representatives from government agencies and international NGOs and expressing her own opinions and thoughts without any fear! It was an incredibly fulfilling experience working alongside such an intelligent and strong woman.

