

Eco-Friendly Fronds for Palm Sunday

UMinn Researcher Tapped for Sustainable Palm Study

By Pauline Oo

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Palm fronds are popular in floral arrangements any time of the year, but on Palm Sunday they have a symbolic and historical meaning. Church congregations in the United States buy more than 300 million fronds annually to commemorate Jesus' return to Jerusalem.

In 2002, the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation (NACEC), which was set up by the North American Free Trade Agreement, hired University of Minnesota [the U] researcher Dean Current to study the palm trade between the United States and its southern neighbors, namely Mexico and Guatemala. He was asked to find out if the plant could be sustainably harvested and to figure out if it could generate a better income for the communities that harvest it.



Eco-palms in action. Photo: Dean Current.

"In many cases, they were overharvesting," says Current, a forest economist in the U's Center for Integrated Agriculture and Natural Resources Management at the Department of Forest Resources.

Local contractors hired villagers in Mexico and Guatemala and paid them by the volume, no matter the quality they delivered. This meant that 50 percent or more of what was brought in was discarded because it didn't meet the needs of the market-- the fronds were too small, blemished, or missing leaves. The perfect frond, adds Current, should be 18 to 22 inches long without mold or any brown and black spots.

Current was also tapped to survey U.S. churches on their interest in buying sustainably harvested palm fronds. The positive response paved the way for Eco-Palms, greener and fair-trade palm fronds.

More than 360,000 Eco-Palms were shipped to 1,400 U.S. church congregations, including a U.S. Air Force base in Okinawa, Japan, in advance of Palm Sunday [in 2007]. In 2005, just 5,000 [of the environmentally-friendly] palms were sold to 22 churches.



*A villager in Santa Elena, Guatemala, sorting Eco-Palms.
Photo: Dean Current.*

Pronatura, a nongovernmental organization in Mexico, has been training the communities to be more selective when cutting the fronds so the harvesters don't also unwittingly contribute to the deforestation of the rainforest that supports their livelihood. "If you take off too many leaves you can damage or destroy the plant," says Current.

Current and his U colleagues administer the project from the U's Twin Cities campus in St. Paul. They take orders from churches across the nation, and pass them on to Hermes Floral in St. Paul, which handles the monetary transactions and shipment of the fronds. Current says it takes three to four weeks to move the palms from forest to consumer, and about half of the orders come from Lutheran churches, thanks to Baltimore-based Eco-Palm partner Lutheran World Relief.

An average order is 260 stems. "But we have some Catholic churches that order up to 4,000, and some that order 20 stems," says Current.

Each eco-friendly frond cost 22 cents, which is more than double the cost of other fronds, but Current says the price includes 5 cents to help the local harvesting communities with social or development projects such as building schools or providing healthcare or insurance.

The harvested Eco-Palms are sorted and bundled by the women in the communities instead of a distant warehouse, providing jobs where once there was none.

"One of the strengths of our work with the Eco-Palms are the partnerships we have formed with the communities, Christian organizations, environmental non-governmental organization's, international institutions, the private sector, and government agencies in Guatemala and Mexico," says Current. "It's a real tribute to the University of Minnesota outreach efforts and our ability to work effectively with a broad range of partners, and it has required that level of cooperation to attain what we have."

Dean Current can be reached at curre002@umn.edu for questions and comments.

Did you know?

Guatemala has what are called "community concessions," government land in which the rights to harvest, say timber and palm, are given to the community. "It's a better way to protect forests rather than declaring them a preserve," says U researcher Dean Current.

"Most governments that have these important areas don't have many resources to protect them, but if they enlist the community—give them a viable option from the forest to live on—then they become an ally in protecting it. And they can do a much better job than governments often can. Around the world, you're seeing more countries giving more use rights to communities in forest areas."

Photo Captions:

Eco_palms2:

A villager in Santa Elena, Guatemala, sorting Eco-Palms. Photo: Dean Current

Eco_palms1:

Eco-palms in action at a Lutheran Church. Photo: Dean Current