

Yorkín

Something important we recognize, with regards to protecting our basin is that if we do not work to protect this side of the streams and rivers, the other side is going to be hurt. The idea then is that all sides of the river are united, and recognize that we all take care of our basin, to ensure that the river will not die.



YORKIN RIVER, A MAIN TRANSPORTATION AND EXPORT HUB OF THE SIXAOLA RIVER BASIN

Since the day I was born, I am here in Yorkín. I am the president of the Binational River Basin Group of indigenous community leaders. We are a group of women. For two and a half years since 2013, we have engaged in a watershed and basin committee with the objective to protect our rivers and our *basin*. Here, we have four communities across the Sixaola Basin:

Darkin, Waba, Yorkín and Shuab. These are the four communities of the Yorkín River in the Sixaola River Basin. Our current working group emerged in response to impending damage to our natural resources— water especially. Damages to these resources is a situation that we would very much like to escape and prevent altogether if possible here in Yorkín and across the basin. We have witnessed people that come into the basin without permission, and cut the trees down across our lands. This affects the system as whole, causing erosion in the streams, hurting the fish populations, and so on. We would like to create policy and protective measures to prevent these types of activities from happening in our basin.



TRANSPORTATION ON THE YORKÍN RIVER, MIDDLE BASIN, THE SIXAOLA RIVER BASIN

Within our working group, there is a committee of indigenous residents that works specifically to protect our water. If we do not protect it, then we die. If we protect our waters, we protect our culture, and all that is of the nature of God, and that is of the creation of our God, *Sibu*. From our culture, it is understood that we must protect and care for our waters,

because God left us this land. He left everything for us, and this is why we are joined as we are — of one culture. We unite to protect our rivers. The basin has several streams and rivers. In our part of the basin, we have large rivers that are the Yorkín and the Skui and the Brai. We are working hard right now as ever, in our efforts towards protecting all of these.

Currently, we want to learn how we can assist the residents of the basin. We want to improve the quality of life for all, both the people and the environment. We do this by helping the river. We're asking, "How can we prevent deforestation?" We would like to educate people not to cut the trees down, as this negatively effects the river systems by enhancing flooding events for lower-basin residents. By providing informative workshops, we are exploring how to motivate basin residents to consider the decisions they make to benefit themselves and their livelihoods, in parallel with efforts to support the health of the environment and the basin.

A fundamental goal of our basin committee is to safeguard the waters so that they are not contaminated. Occasionally, as human beings, we sometimes use chemicals, and we do not realize to what extent this practice is polluting the water. We do not realize that what we allow to enter our streams, will also harm the water we use and the fish in the streams, our food, it harms them too. We don't want to arrive at a place in time where we realize that we have not done enough for our waters. Therefore, we are putting strong efforts within our committee by creating awareness of what we cherish.



FIGURE YORKÍN, BRIBRI TERRITORY, MIDDLE BASIN, THE SIXAOLA RIVER BASIN

We are lucky here in our basin, as the two countries are united, and our indigenous communities are united, also. However, at times, we have threats from people who are not indigenous and who come from outside the basin. The residents that I speak of, are those who are tending livestock, especially next to the river systems in the lower basin nearer to Panamá, and unfortunately do so without having developed conscientious practices, and worse, the policies that are in place, further allow these practices to continue. Nearer to Costa Rica, this problem is lesser in this region of the basin, due to the fact that our communities here have a right to the land, which is of the Bríbrí territories.

Certainly, I can tell you the story, as it is known not just here, but all over the world, that the natural caretakers of nature are indigenous residents. We were gifted this land—no one else. It is our responsibility to see that it is well kept. We know how to handle our own affairs as we always

have, ever since our ancestors walked out of these rivers. They taught us that we can use everything we have in the forest, in the water, everything — everything, but because we are a part of this everything, we are aware that we must measure every decision with a ruler. If someone comes in, and does not do this, we will all cease to live.

Two years ago, our group went with IUCN to Guatemala and met the binational basin shared between Guatemala and Mexico, where they were beginning to make efforts towards protecting their rivers. This exchange was to encourage myself and our group members to exchange experiences and to return to talk with people in the community about what we learned. Throughout these two years, our basin group has been liaising regularly to discuss the needs of our basin. In the case of the shared river basin in Guatemala, unfortunately, their group did not put forth strong efforts to collaborate across their basin. The result, is that they are now saying if they had started to coordinate immediately, their rivers and issues they face with regards to water security could be lesser today.

Our basin group and efforts, are another story. Our group began to do the necessary work immediately. We talked to agricultural producers across the basin to ensure that they carry out their farming practices without chemicals. Simply, if a farmer chooses to cultivate organic crops, they will not pollute. This is a key reason why our group gathers together, regularly — we are fighting the battle. Sometimes it's more visible than others, but we do this in order to see what can be done for and with the residents of the greater Sixaola River Basin community.

We believe that if residents are well-informed, a greater consciousness will enhance people's practices. In turn, the quality of our

waters is improved and the quality of life for residents across the entire geographies of the Sixaola River Basin become a reality. For this reason, we are fighting, so that everyone can have a healthier future by way of upholding a greater awareness of the importance of protecting our natural resources in the basin.

The other thing is that we are threatened with hydroelectric. They (the governments) want to join the Rio Yorkín with Rio Brai to a hydroelectric power venue, and we do not want that because that will end the only large river we have. It is our responsibility to see how we can protect this river; we are bound it. I do not know what else I can say about this except, for us as Bríbrís, our appreciation for nature runs deep. For us, if others touch nature that we are connected to, for example our rivers or the trees, it hurts us, we feel it. It is as if we cut a foot off or a hand. This has been the real struggle as indigenous to think that if we do not work as hard as we can, if we do not fight, others will come and cut our feet off...

Our experience as indigenous residents, we can certainly share this experience with residents outside our community. We would like opportunity. We can tell our stories that explain these deeply-seeded connections, because we care about nature as indigenous, and because it hurts us when we do something to nature — the water, forest, birds, fish, all of this. For us, every part of nature, it is paradise, and we defend it because God said, “I leave Paradise to you and if you do not take care of it, then there are the consequences.” Examples of these consequences that are happening today can be readily seen... climate change, and all that.... Well, we still have it.



FIGURE THE CHANGUINOLA DAM, THE CHANGUINOLA RIVER LOCATED OUTSIDE OF THE SIXAOLA RIVER BASIN, PANAMA.

What we know is good for us as indigenous is that water is life. We cannot live without water and it is considered sacred because if it's over, you cannot get more. The only hope is that you try to return to rebuild as it was. And that costs many years and all the while, many people suffer. For us, the water is a living thing. Thus, it is not necessary to meddle with water.

When the rivers are full of water, it's possible that you can see something that does not matter. It's a feature on the landscape. But in our culture, it's a living thing, giving instruction. Something that is not dead, but rather, *she* is alive. But what happens in many other cultures and in human belief, is that we do not believe in that. Here in Yorkín, God cleanses us with water and so *is* our culture cleansed — we are clean water. More specifically in our culture we are clean like chocolate and water! We believe that *cacao* (chocolate) is the wife of *Sibu* because she meets and delivers what

God says; she provides what grows and nourishes all of our bodies and spirits. But other indigenous, other communities across the world, have their own experience of water, and they can share with us, that is our hope. And they can say what if all of what I am saying is true or not?

For us, we are continuously learning more while we are in the fight for healthy waters in the basin, this is what most motivates me to protect them, the knowledge we gain throughout this process, and also to make people aware of these learnings. Sometimes, people who are not indigenous do not understand us. They think that we get upset over environmental issues for fun. But it is not that, that is not the truth. Rather, the indigenous are always looking forward to the future. And others, not. With this, sometimes there are consequences experiences for the people that do not see the future ahead. If something will happen one may not know, but we as indigenous, we know.

My grandmother told us all of these things—you are the ones who care for everything, and it is you who will be what will suffer if you do not. But not now, and I leave everything for you to guide them along, the rivers, but if you are not guided, you will suffer with the rivers, the environment, and everyone else. So, taking care of our rivers, and taking care of our basin, that is what we do.

This text is an excerpt from *“Navigating Cultural Currents: The Sixaola River Basin Story, that can be found here:*

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