



Photo credit: Wildlife Conservation Society

# Mesa Técnica in Guatemala

## Wildlife Conservation Society

### Summary

Established in 2015, Mesa Técnica is a partnership among three civil society organizations working to build capacity for wildlife trafficking enforcement in the northern Guatemalan department of Petén. The partnership includes the Wildlife Conservation Society, Environmental Justice Forum of Petén, and Asociación Balam. Select personnel from these institutions sit on a close-knit committee dedicated to pursuing investigations into potential wildlife trafficking offenses. The committee works in coordination with the relevant law enforcement authorities and collaborates to deliver specialized training workshops to build government and civil society capacity to combat wildlife trafficking. This initiative is supported by funding from the Governments of the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.): U.S.

### Learning Question Addressed:

What are good examples of systems, particularly judicial systems, that have made improvements in combating wildlife trafficking enforcement?

For nearly 20 years, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has provided support to Guatemala to improve rule of law, including efforts that have aided the fight against wildlife trafficking in the region. With the help of many implementing partners and the Guatemalan government, capacity has been built for security and justice sector institutions in the country through programs such as the Security and Justice Sector Reform Project.

Agency for International Development, U.S. Department of Interior, U.S. Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, and the U.K. Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund.

### Problem

Wildlife trafficking is devastating many species across Central America and the Caribbean. It is rapidly becoming more organized, sophisticated, and global in its operations, threatening to replicate the patterns observed in Africa and Asia. This illicit trade undermines local livelihoods and national economies, exacerbates corruption, and threatens national security. The rich biodiversity of the Maya Biosphere Reserve in northern Petén is being eroded by wildlife and timber trafficking, threats that will only intensify as the human population in the area continues to grow and penetrate deeper into the reserve. A lack of economic opportunities in southeastern Petén, combined with population growth, has resulted in Guatemalan communities illegally extracting wildlife from Belize. This is exacerbating political tensions between the two countries. Low enforcement capacity, inadequate legislation, weak political will, and persistent corruption have hampered effective enforcement efforts against wildlife trafficking in both countries. Civil society leadership is therefore critical to strengthen government commitment and ensure recognition of wildlife trafficking as a serious crime.

## Approach

Mesa Técnica partnership was established with the informal endorsement of the government's National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP). While the principal objective is to detain and prosecute wildlife trafficking criminals, the partnership also plays an instrumental role in building wildlife law enforcement capacity in both government and civil society in Guatemala and Belize. Mesa Técnica coordinates closely with government and civil society partner institutions on a case-by-case basis, and through the joint delivery of specialized training workshops.



Mesa Técnica members attend a workshop on international wildlife trafficking.

Members of Mesa Técnica meet on a monthly basis and maintain ongoing communication through a dedicated WhatsApp group. Potential wildlife trafficking activity is identified through social media searches, informant tip-offs, and information provided by partner institutions such as Friends for Conservation and Development in Belize. Follow-up investigations on particular cases are conducted in close coordination with the relevant authorities in Guatemala, in particular CONAP, the Civil Intelligence and

Nature Protection divisions of the National Police, and the Public Prosecutor's Office. Once an arrest is made, the Environmental Justice Forum of Petén provides legal support to help secure an appropriate conviction.

## Results

Mesa Técnica is the first and only partnership in Guatemala to effectively coordinate government and civil society efforts to combat wildlife trafficking, and initial achievements have been promising. In Mesa Técnica's first two years, the consortium's investigations led to three court cases related to scarlet macaw trafficking offenses. All resulted in successful convictions, and four individuals were prosecuted. Each received a five-year jail term, which could be avoided by paying \$1.50 per day of the jail term, plus an additional fine of \$1,350. These fines are believed to serve as a significant deterrent, as each macaw is valued at approximately \$810. The convictions were widely publicized in the local and national press and through social media posts, which received a considerable reaction from the public.

In addition, more than 350 person-days of training on combating wildlife trafficking enforcement have been delivered by Mesa Técnica partners, involving participants from more than 20 government and civil society institutions. Topics covered include the threat trafficking poses to Petén's wildlife, relevant national and international legislation, and specialized techniques for intelligence gathering and analysis. Feedback from participants on the quality and utility of the training has been overwhelmingly positive.

*About this case study series: In 2017, USAID collected [case studies](#) addressing the questions posed in the [Combating Wildlife Trafficking Learning Agenda](#). The finalists represent both USAID-funded and non-USAID-funded activities from around the world. The information provided in the case study series does not necessarily represent the views or positions of USAID or the U.S. Government.*

## Lessons

- **Establishing trust is key, especially when corruption is prevalent.** The success of Mesa Técnica can primarily be attributed to the close, collaborative relationships that were built (1) between individual members who are in continual contact so they would share and act on new information and (2) with personnel in relevant government enforcement authorities so they would take further action on intelligence.
- **Partnerships across national borders strengthen enforcement efforts.** The close coordination between Mesa Técnica and partner institutions in Belize, in particular Friends for Conservation and Development, has facilitated the exchange of information on cross-border wildlife trafficking and sharing of lessons learned. There is considerable interest in replicating the Mesa Técnica initiative in Belize and establishing an equivalent body to the Environmental Justice Forum of Petén to build capacity within the justice sector and provide legal support to wildlife trafficking cases. These cross-border civil society partnerships are also driving joint efforts to promote binational collaboration on efforts to combat wildlife trafficking at the government level.
- **Government commitment toward combating wildlife trafficking enforcement needs to be strengthened.** Without it, significant shortfalls in government budgets allocated towards combating wildlife trafficking mean that progress can be entirely dependent on short-term project funding.

To learn more about Wildlife Conservation Society, visit: <https://www.wcs.org>