



Good Practice Story Title: [Loving once again the Mayan Land in the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve](#)

Destination: Reserva de la Biósfera de Sian Ka'an, Quintana Roo, México

Country: México

Submitting Organization: Riviera Maya Sostenible

Category:

- Destination Management
- Nature & Scenery
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing

Destination description:

<https://www.gob.mx/conanp/prensa/la-reserva-de-la-biosfera-sian-ka-an-principal-reservorio-de-carbono-20727>

The [Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve](#) is a stunning protected area located on the east coast of the Yucatan Peninsula, in the state of Quintana Roo, Mexico. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987, Sian Ka'an is a jewel of biodiversity and an example of the incredible natural wealth that the region is home to.

Main Features

1. **Extension and Diversity:**

- [The reserve covers approximately 528,000 hectares](#), including terrestrial and marine areas.
- It includes a wide variety of ecosystems, such as tropical jungles, mangroves, cenotes, savannahs, and an extensive barrier reef.

2. **Flora and fauna:**

- It is habitat for a large number of resident and migratory birds, such as the rare jabirú (Jabiru mycteria), the largest stork on the American continent that nests in the area, as well as four endangered species: the jaguar, the tapir, the manatee and peccary.





- It houses a rich diversity of species. More than 300 species of birds, 400 species of fish, 100 species of mammals and 50 species of reptiles have been recorded.
- Among the emblematic species are the jaguar, the puma, the tapir, the manatee and various sea turtles. Birds like tiger heron, frigatebird, roseate spoonbill, pelican and many more.

3. Ecological Importance:

- Mangroves and coral reefs play a crucial role in protecting the coast from hurricanes and storms, as well as being vital habitats for many species.
- Forests and wetlands act as carbon sinks, contributing to the mitigation of climate change.

4. Tourist attractions:

- **Punta Allen:** A small, picturesque fishing village ideal for ecotourism, bird watching and sport fishing.
- **Muyil Lagoon:** Surrounding the archaeological site of its name, surrounded by mangroves, with the possibility of taking boat rides through the lagoon and canals built by the ancient Mayans.
- **Coral reefs:** Part of the second largest barrier reef in the world, perfect for diving and snorkeling.
- **Cenotes:** Underground caverns filled with fresh water, ideal for swimming and exploring.
- Chunyaxché Lagoon.
- **Natural and artificial canals created by the ancient Mayans.** Freshwater canals that connect lagoons for commercial purposes, where we find the first Mayan “Customs House”, built to facilitate the exchange of goods transported in canoes. Some were made by the Mayans by hand and others were created by nature.

5. Conservation and Sustainability:

- The reserve is a model of conservation, combining government efforts, NGOs and local communities to protect and manage natural resources.
- Promotes sustainable tourism practices and environmental education to ensure that future generations can enjoy this invaluable natural heritage.

Brief background of the destination

<https://www.mexicodesconocido.com.mx/muyil-y-chunyaxche-las-lagunas-de-sian-kaan.html>

Sian Ka'an, which in Mayan means “gate to heaven,” was declared a biosphere reserve in January 1986. The Reserve has an area of 528,148 hectares. Later, two more protected areas were added, and now it occupies an area of 617,265 hectares, which represents almost 15 percent of the total area of Quintana Roo.





The reserve is located in the central-eastern part of the state and has the same proportion of tropical forests, swamps and coastal environments, including coral reefs. In 1987, UNESCO declared it a World Heritage Site. In the north of Sian Ka'an there is a fresh water system, very clean and drinkable, made up of two lagoons and several canals. These lagoons are Muyil and Chunyaché.

THE CAYS

In Sian Ka'an the cays are channels or canals that connect the lagoons with each other. Its construction is attributed to the Mayans, who through them linked their inland centers with the coast.

PETENES: BIOLOGICAL WEALTH AND ISLAND PHENOMENON

Only in the Yucatan and Florida peninsulas are there petenes, which are isolated vegetation formations separated by swamps or water. Some have only a few species of plants. While others are complex associations type medium evergreen forest. In them there is a reduced version of the island phenomenon, that is, between two neighboring petenes there can be a great difference between their flora and fauna. The Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve has a rich and significant history in both natural and cultural terms. Here's a brief summary of his background:

History and Origin

Name:

- "Sian Ka'an" is a Mayan phrase that means "Origin of the sky" or "Where the sky is born," reflecting the deep and spiritual connection that the ancient Mayans had with this region.

Mayan culture:

- The region has been inhabited and used by Mayan cultures for thousands of years. The Mayans left their mark on the area through architectural structures, roads and canals that can still be seen today.
- Archaeological sites such as Muyil and Chunyaxché demonstrate the presence and activity of the Mayans in the area.

Declaration as Reserve:

- [In 1986, Sian Ka'an was designated a Biosphere Reserve by the Mexican government, recognizing its ecological and cultural importance.](#)
- A year later, in 1987, it was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list for its rich biodiversity and unique ecosystems.
- <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/410/>





Geography and Ecology

- **Location:** Along the east coast of the Yucatan Peninsula, the reserve runs from south of Tulum to Punta Allen. https://simec.conanp.gob.mx/pdf_poligonos/97_pol.pdf
- **Ecosystems:** Includes ecosystems, rainforests, mangroves, coral reefs, coastal lagoons and cenotes, which offer vital habitats for various species of flora and fauna.

Ecological Importance

- **Biodiversity:** Sian Ka'an is home to incredible biological diversity, with numerous species of plants and animals, many of which are endangered.
- **Conservation:** The reserve is crucial in the conservation of species and habitats, in addition to serving as a model for the sustainable management of natural resources.

Tourism and Education

- **Ecotourism:** The reserve is a popular destination for ecotourism, offering activities such as bird watching, nature tours, diving and snorkeling in the reefs, and exploring archaeological sites.
- **Environmental education:** Educational programs are carried out to increase awareness of the importance of conservation and sustainability among visitors and local communities.

Summary of Good Practice Story:

[Community Tours Sian Ka'an](#), a tour operator of the living Mayan culture, was born as a cooperative formed by farmers transformed from extraction to conservation, originating from the central region of Quintana Roo. It emerged as a community initiative to improve the difficult economic situation caused by traditional extractive practices, such as logging, excessive exploitation of chicle and other natural resources, and subsistence agriculture.

Before the [declaration of a Natural Reserve](#), both by federal authorities in 1986 and international authorities since [UNESCO in 1987](#), on the territory of formerly unsustainable exploitation and guided by a clear vision and leadership rooted in the long history of their biocultural environment, demonstrated their capacity to adapt by developing a new productive activity related to tourism, while this tourism contributes to environmental conservation and the preservation of their Mayan language, culture, traditions and ancestral knowledge. A model of economic and social development has been generated, which integrates the tourism, fishing and academic sectors, within a framework of sustainability, recognized internationally. Today this company has been a significant regional leader, with a crucial role in the well-being and development of the local community. It has become a low-impact alternative tourism model and a key partner in the protection of the [Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve](#), as well as in promoting the rich Mayan cultural and linguistic heritage in the region. This case exemplifies how tourism can benefit local communities when managed responsibly and sustainably, giving local inhabitants a central role in this economic activity.





Issues faced:

The [local population in Chunpom](#) and other communities in the region faced a series of challenges that affected both their well-being and the conservation of the area. Here are some of the main problems:

1. Unemployment and Poverty

Lack of Opportunities: Faced with the strong economic development in the north of the state, in Cancun and the Riviera Maya, in the center and south of the state, local communities were kept outside the extractive model of mass tourism, without access to well-paid jobs or sustainable. Most of the economic benefits of tourism did not reach local communities.

Coupled with the concentration and economic dependence on tourism, which makes it very vulnerable to economic fluctuations, natural disasters and health crises, as well as changes in preferences or crises in the issuing markets.

2. Limited Access to Basic Services

Education and Health: Communities in Sian Ka'an often have limited access to basic services such as education and quality healthcare.

Infrastructure: Basic infrastructure, such as access to clean water, sanitation and electricity, may be insufficient in some areas.

3. Conservation and Management of Natural Resources

Land Use Conflicts: There is a tension between the need to conserve natural resources and the need to use these resources for local sustenance. Fishing and agriculture, traditional activities, can conflict with conservation objectives.

Training and Education: Lack of training in sustainable practices can lead to unsustainable exploitation of natural resources.

4. Climate Change and Natural Disasters

Vulnerability: Local communities are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels, more intense hurricanes, flooding, and changes in weather patterns that affect agriculture and fishing.

Adaptation: Adapting to these changes requires resources and knowledge that are not always available.

5. Participation and Governance

Local Involvement: Decisions on reserve management are often made without adequate participation of local communities, which can lead to the implementation of policies that do not consider their needs and traditional knowledge.

Trust and Collaboration: Lack of trust and poor communication between conservation authorities and local communities can make effective collaboration difficult.



Solution:

The formation of the [company Community Tours Sian Ka'an](#). As a local entrepreneurship initiative, it has managed to address and respond to all of these difficulties already mentioned in almost 25 years of operation, providing effective and sustainable solutions. Below are details of how this organization helps solve problems of unemployment and poverty, limited access to basic services, conservation and management of natural resources, climate change and natural disasters, and participation and governance:

1. Unemployment and Poverty

Job Generation: Community Tours Sian Ka'an creates jobs for local residents as tour guides, boat drivers and support staff. Currently the company is owned by 12 founding partners from the town of Chunpom, and employs 40 employees, most of them Mayans from the same town or nearby communities, and indirectly provides benefits to other companies and ventures from which it provides products and services to carry out their activities. This provides a stable source of income and diversifies the economy, with benefits to dozens of families in the locality.

Local Entrepreneurship: The organization promotes entrepreneurship, helping locals develop and manage their own tourism activities, which increases their economic independence. Community Tours Sian Ka'an generates indirect and direct benefits throughout the community tourism value chain which means guaranteeing sales for artisans, beekeepers, farmers who produce primary consumer products for visitors.

2. Limited Access to Basic Services

Infrastructure: Part of the income generated by Community Tours Sian Ka'an is reinvested in the community to improve basic infrastructure, such as access to renewable energy, through solar cells, access to drinking water and sanitation, thanks to recovery works of rainwater and wastewater sanitation, internet access and educational programs for children in the community, and other public service management benefits.

Education and Health: Economic benefits are also used to improve access to health and education services, offering educational programs in subjects such as tourism, entrepreneurship, bird watching, and programs on Mayan culture, language and heritage, as well as and health campaigns in the community.

3. Conservation and Management of Natural Resources

Sustainable Tourism: The initiative promotes sustainable tourism practices that minimize environmental impact and educate visitors about the importance of conservation. The tours are designed to be environmentally friendly and to avoid the degradation of natural habitats.

Environmental Education: Community Tours Sian Ka'an provides environmental education to both visitors and local people, encouraging greater awareness and participation in the conservation of natural resources.

4. Climate Change and Natural Disasters

Resilience: By diversifying income sources and encouraging sustainable practices, the community becomes more resilient to the impacts of climate change and natural disasters. Economic dependence on sustainable tourism can reduce vulnerability to extreme climate changes.

Adaptation: Community Tours Sian Ka'an promotes adaptive practices, such as mangrove reforestation, which protect the coast against storms and hurricanes, and help mitigate the effects of climate change.



Monitoring. The cooperative's own activities in the Biosphere Reserve promote shared management in monitoring and care with authorities, academia, civil society and national and international NGOs.

5. Participation and Governance

Community Empowerment: The initiative is based on the active participation of the local community in decision-making and management of tourism resources. This empowers residents and ensures that their voices and needs are considered.

Inclusive Governance: Community Tours Sian Ka'an works closely with local authorities and non-governmental organizations to ensure inclusive and equitable governance. This encourages effective collaboration and sustainable management of the reserve.

Regional leadership. With the impulse of the [Sacred Paths initiative](#), CTSK strengthens its ties with other communities in the region, establishing an alliance that diversifies its offer of tourist services, strengthens activity throughout the region by calling on a group of companies to associate to provide complementary services, and transfers its model and example with great leadership and sense of solidarity, to strengthen ties and economic flows at the regional level.

Results and Benefits

- Among the achievements, a result of the coordinated work, stands out the implementation of conservation strategies that include surveillance, biological monitoring, attention to environmental contingencies, regulation of land use, and sustainable use of natural resources, among others.
- **Poverty Reduction:** By providing jobs and economic opportunities, the initiative helps reduce poverty and improve the standard of living of the local community. The company today serves more than 11,000 visitors a year
- **Improvement of Basic Services:** The income generated contributes to improving access to basic services, benefiting the entire community
- **Conservation Success:** Education and sustainable tourism practices help conserve the biodiversity and unique ecosystems of Sian Ka'an
- **Greater Resilience:** Economic diversification and adaptive practices increase community resilience to climate change and natural disasters
- **Participation:** Including the community in decision-making and management of the reserve strengthens governance and ensures that policies are more effective and accepted by local residents

Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:

In the heart of the [Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve](#), a group of local residents, led by two visionary leaders, Alberto and [Román](#), embarked on a mission to transform their community. Surrounded by a rich Mayan cultural heritage and an ecosystem of unmatched biodiversity, both understood that the key to facing economic and environmental challenges lay in community cohesion and sustainable adaptation. This group achieved the convocation of community actors to ensure that local interests and needs are prioritized, and the formation of a cooperative company based on dialogue, collaboration and teamwork, taking advantage of the strong tradition of cooperation of the Mayan culture, ensuring that decision-making was carried out collectively.





Their participation in training programs was key, where they acquired skills in project management, leadership and problem solving. Despite economic and material limitations, their commitment and determination allowed them to find innovative solutions and mobilize resources.

Aware that they needed external support, they sought the collaboration of government agencies and NGOs. These institutions offered training programs in sustainable tourism and entrepreneurship, tourist guiding, boat navigation in the Reserve's channels, equipping community members with technical and practical knowledge. Multisector alliances allowed the creation of educational programs that transformed the way the community interacted with its environment.

Community Tours deeply values its Mayan heritage. In the experiences of Community Tours, the key to sustainable development is integrating ancestral knowledge into tourism and conservation practices.

Achievements and Results:

- Formation of a Mayan cooperative company, dedicated to offering unique, genuine ecotourism experiences in the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve.
- Offer of alternative tourism, based on the experience of interaction and enjoyment of nature and the ancient Mayan culture,
- Solid company, with trained personnel, certified by national government bodies and international certifying institutions, which is why it achieved recognition from local and international tourism companies, and trust as a provider of quality tourism services that include transportation, local gastronomic experience, visit guided in various languages, to archaeological sites and natural areas of great beauty, as an operator authorized to operate in the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve.
- Likewise, its strategic alliance with community companies from other nearby towns and regions allowed it to expand and diversify its service offering.
- The quality and solidity of its business model and participatory and sustainable governance management is the basis on which its leadership in the region is based, which places the company as a work and operating model for other Mayan cooperative ventures in the region.
- Association of local actors for the creation and operation of a Mayan cooperative company.
- Adaptation from an extractive vocation based on the exploitation of natural resources, to a tourist service activity, based on the care of the environment, and the preservation of local identity and culture.
- Great financial and economic stability and solidity, with +20 years of operation.
- Constant training and professionalism, with quality and sustainability certification from national and local government institutions, as well as international certification bodies, such as Green Destinations.

Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues

1. Collective Nature of Mayan Culture
2. Leadership, Future Vision and Adaptation Capacity
3. Training, professionalization, hand in hand with Government Intervention and NGOs





4. Creation of a local Cooperative Company certified for its professional and sustainable management practices
5. Millennial Roots and Cultural Adaptation

Community Tours Sian Ka'an has developed a comprehensive approach that takes advantage of the collective culture of the Mayan community, its capacity for adaptation and resilience, government and NGO support, and the creation of a cooperative company to promote sustainable tourism and improve the local living conditions, not of a person, but of the families involved in their previous extractive activity and more, extend the opportunity to other inhabitants of that and other Mayan communities, and achieve, from this vision of COLLECTIVENESS FOR THE GREATER GOOD, to be an agent of awareness for the care, respect and restoration of natural assets to each of its visitors.

Lessons Learned and Advice:

Challenges while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.

- Tourism can be good, if managed responsibly, under principles of nature conservation, participatory governance with benefits for local resident communities.
- Difficulties in acquiring new knowledge about business activities, tourism, food and beverages, and group management.
- Changes from traditional paradigms, where “killing a bird was almost natural, to be able to take a good look at it”, to being GUARDIANS OF THE NATURAL TREASURES OF THE SIAN KA'AN BIOSPHERE RESERVE, while allowing themselves to dedicate time to preservation of their ancestral knowledge and rituals, which preserve their sacred relationship with nature.
- Difficulties in adapting to the vulnerability of tourism activity, sensitive to external factors such as climate, epidemic crises, economic instability in source markets.

Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice

+20 years of company operation. With high standards of operation, installing QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY as a constant, thus raising the prejudice of a Mayan cooperative that has no legality or quality, until it becomes an ICON OF QUALITY, SERVICE, COMMITMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY.

Economic strengthening, care of nature and preservation of Mayan culture and identity.

Tips for other destinations

Your suggestions or recommendations for other destinations facing the same issues or implementing similar solutions.

- Community-based tourism, organized from its origin, offers real opportunities for communities to share their knowledge and values with visitors, maintaining the purity of their traditions,





ceremonies, rituals and traditional way of life, without making tourism the only source of income, and without losing authenticity.

- The path of certifications, quality, training and integration of information technologies, as well as citizen science, undoubtedly makes an enormous difference in its potential success, sustained and sustainable, inclusive and reflective.
- It is key to seek solid organization and participatory governance of local actors, based on shared benefits.

Seek collaboration with public institutions and organizations that offer training opportunities for professionalization and quality certification models and sustainable management





Recognitions and Additional References

VIDEO STORY: [Amando de nuevo la Tierra Maya en la Reserva de la Biósfera de Sian Ka'an.mov](#)

[Green Destinations GTG Level 2 Silver Certification](#)



[Moderniza Ecoturism Certification from SECTUR México](#)



<https://www.siankaantours.com.mx/?lang=en>

<https://www.instagram.com/communitytourssiankaan/>

https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064194691167&locale=es_LA

<https://simec.conanp.gob.mx/ficha.php?anp=97®=11>