



KFW



# **MALECU INDIGENOUS PEOPLE: HEART AND LIFE OF THE NATIONAL MIXED WILDLIFE REFUGE OF CAÑO NEGRO “TORO LHAMI”.**



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The Malecu community is an indigenous population in Costa Rica, located in the Northern Huetar Region of the country, specifically in the Municipality of Guatuso. It spans an area of 758.32 km<sup>2</sup> and is divided into 4 districts: San Rafael, Buena Vista, Cote and Katira. It borders to the North and East with the Municipality of Los Chiles, to the West with the Municipality Cañas and with the Municipality of Tilarán, to the Northwest with the Municipality of Upala, and to the South with the Municipality of Tilarán and with the Municipality of San Carlos. It was founded on March 17th 1970 and its capital is the City of San Rafael.

The Malecu indigenous population has three main settlements: Margarita, Tonjibe and El Sol, all located in the district of San Rafael of Guatuso. Its inhabitants were never subjected during the colonization period, and always maintained a strong cultural autonomy until the beginning of the XX century. Even though the Malecu's were severely impacted by the dispossession of their ancestral lands, the indigenous youth and elderly have been able to maintain their traditions alive and well.

The Malecu's are mainly dedicated to agricultural, hunting and fishing activities, as well as farming animals, however in recent years they have had to modify a few aspects of their traditional way of living and were forced to include new ways of livelihood, such as indigenous crafts and tourism.

The community has access to basic services such as potable water, electricity, education, security and health services. In regards to education, native bilingual (Malecu/Spanish) teachers and professors are hired to work at the local

schools, which teach about the Malecu indigenous culture and traditions.

Under this scenario, President Mr. Alfredo Acosta and Treasurer Mrs. Yorleny Arguedas from the Association for the Promotion and Revival of Malecu Cultural Traditions have shared the support received by the Central American Community Farmer's and Indigenous AgroForestry Coordination Association (ACICAFOC, for its Spanish acronym) and the German Development Bank (KfW) from the Federal Republic of Germany.

Mr. Alfredo explained that within the Malecu's vision of the cosmos, there are several cultural significant sites, such as the spring of the Celeste River, Frio River, Venado River, Pataste River, River of La Muerte, Venado Waterfalls and the “Toro Lhami” (Caño Negro) wetlands.

“Tocú iquiye, Toro Lhami i coto uli ma ir  
cata ni ninhafa mi fula marama”  
“Tocu said: here I gift to you Caño  
Negro to feast on fish and turtles”  
- Malecu Cosmovision





There has been a strong ancestral bond with the “Toro Lhami” wetlands; for over 400 years the Malecu community has frequently traveled to this special site to hunt and fish for food and to elaborate indigenous musical instruments.

Visiting this site meant travelling over 50 kilometers (taking approximately 2 weeks) on foot and canoes dugout out of Ceiba and Cedar Trees. This was a religious voyage, where traditional dishes were prepared from animals, fish and fruits that were hunted and gathered along the way. This voyage had the purpose of strengthening and reviving the Malecu cultural identity, and served as a spiritual medium with Tocú, the creator.



However, these ancestral practices and traditions were interrupted in 1984, when the National Wildlife Refuge Park of Caño Negro (RNVSCN) was established through executive decree N° 15120-MAG. Then, in 1990, the RAMSAR wetlands convention declared it as a wetland of international significance.

These two events have not just seriously

limited the free access that the Malecu people had to these wetlands, but also allowed the exploitation of natural resources by non-indigenous people and greater tourism to the area.

The Malecu's have repeatedly expressed and submitted several petitions to the government on granting them continued free access and use of the wetland's resources for cultural purposes. However, the government authorities have yet to issue a positive answer.

*“We want to be free to exercise our traditional practices, to continue with our ancestral rituals and peaceful living in harmony like we had before, without being controlled or judged by government institutions that are fully unaware of our rituals or that limit our ancestral activities”*

- Alfredo Acosta.  
President of the Association  
for the Promotion and Revival  
of Malecu Cultural Traditions

Additionally, the Malecu people have been greatly affected by the incursion of non-indigenous people that have taken possession of entire farms within the indigenous protected area. The total territorial area of the Malecu community spans over 2994 hectares, but 85% of this area is currently in the possession of non-indigenous people. The battle to regain possession of these lands has been stuck in different lawsuits and bureaucratic procedures, and has also reduced the extension of land dedicated to agricultural production.

Another issue faced by the native community is the lack of financial credit options, primarily due to the fact that the members of this indigenous population cannot use their lands as collateral because their land cannot be lawfully held in distraint (or used as collateral) which limits their possibility for investment, and therefore the development of future endeavors.

From the cultural perspective, the Malecu people have lost many of their culturally significant sites to the hands of non-indigenous landowners, who refuse to grant them with access to such sites. Due to access limitation to historically and traditional areas used for hunting animals and sourcing other ingredients, the Malecu's have lost great part of their gastronomic traditions (iguanas, turtles, tropical gar fish, and other animals)

Similarly, the inhabitants of the Malecu settlements have suffered tremendous discrimination, harassment and misunderstanding by the authorities and from neighboring communities, which actually considered them as poachers and destroyers of wildlife. This, however, has been a complete misunderstanding and ignorance that has prolonged for decades on the indigenous culture and traditions, their ancestral culinary practices and the spiritual importance when consuming these animals.

Under this framework, the Association for the Promotion and Revival of Malecu Cultural Traditions, a community-based organization with the purpose of fostering the development of traditional indigenous activities of the Malecu people, with the support of the Integrated Indigenous Natural Resource Management Program funded by the German Development Bank (KfW) from the Federal Republic of Germany implemented in 2019 a

sub-project called "Malecu Indigenous People: Heart and Life of the National Mixed Wildlife Refuge of Caño Negro "Toro Lhami".

This sub-project had the purpose of strengthening the integration of the Malecu culture and improving their conditions of life by promoting the enjoyment of their rights in "Toro Lhami" and by generating tourism activities related to their culture. The subproject had a total investment of EURO €89.700; 44% of these funds came from resources obtained from local contributions of the community. The project has benefitted 120 Malecu families directly and over 600 Malecu families indirectly.

Specifically, the project sought to strengthen the Malecu cultural identity through the elaboration of a document that included the cultural significance of "Toro Lhami", a regulation that provided access to the Refuge, and a proposal for their participation in the sustainable management of the wetlands.

Additionally, the conditions of life of the Malecu people were improved through the implementation of ethnic ecotourism activities, the construction of lakes in order to reproduce fish and turtles for their culinary traditions, and for the transportation of tourist and access to "Toro Lhami".

In terms of results, this subproject facilitated the elaboration of a document that collected the fundamental basis of the cultural significance of "Toro Lhami" for the Malecu, as well as a regulation to access the Caño Negro Refuge by the Malecu indigenous people and a wetland management proposal based on ancestral knowledge to perform traditional indigenous practices at the site.

The project also funded the acquisition of a small boat to travel to Caño Negro to allow the Malecu to exercise their rights on traditions and customs related to the refuge site, and facilitate the transportation of products, to transport trees to reforest the Refuge, to transport clay used in the elaboration of crafts, as well as offering tours and other services to tourist.

The two lakes built to reproduce fish (tilapia, mojarras and guapote fish) and turtles were remodeled. These species are extracted from the Refuge under an agreement established with the Ministry of the Environment and Energy. The community made improvements to the lakes because they considered that the authorities were embarrassing the Malecu because of the type of animals that they ate. The association granted access to the indigenous settlement population, especially the elderly, to their ancestral products that were previously obtained at the wetlands. Through these actions, the Malecu were able to offer tourist a true traditional ancestral way of serving food, including having these products available during the off-season as well.

A Communal Malecu “Toculhon Marama” Museum was built, which houses all documentation related to their indigenous culture, murals with historical traditions and customs of the Malecu, an exhibition room with photographs of the main species of fish, turtles and iguanas found at Caño Negro and a library with reference and audiovisual materials on the Malecu culture.

After the subproject was implemented, the impacts or effects on the improvement of the quality of life were visible in the benefitted population, mainly in terms reviving the cultural identity of the Malecu people and improving the incomes of families.

The actions developed by this subproject have allowed reviving the indigenous gastronomy of the Malecu people, by using local original ingredients that have a special spiritual connection with their creator. This indigenous population also has an important collection of texts that tells about the history of the Malecu people, their cosmovision and main traditional manifestations (celebrations, dances, chants and others)



Regarding the economic improvement of the community, the Malecu people have improved their capacity of attending and providing services to tourist that visit the area, which has benefitted them by generating greater economic income that is distributed throughout the community, which in turn improves their access to foods, goods and services.

In conclusion, thanks to the support of the German Cooperation Agency and ACICAFOC, the Malecu people have been able to significantly improve their conditions of livelihood, through the revival of cultural practices and traditions from their indigenous identity, the recognition of their significance and the value of their rights as indigenous people with the governmental authorities and citizen of the country in general.





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