

Vetiver in Ecuador

The first years

I have been working with Vetiver in Ecuador since 1997. In November 1996, I received 6 bags of Vetiver from the Center for Investigation in Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) in Cali – Colombia and introduced it with the strong belief that farmers would welcome the Vetiver System as a solution for the severe erosion problems – and decline in production – in their fields.

I distributed the booklets and CD's that the Latin-American Network (Jim and Joan Smyle) had sent me from Costa Rica to tens of Non-Governmental Organizations in the country. I approached ministries (Environment, Agriculture and Public Works), water companies and corporations with waste water problems. I also participated in symposiums, wrote articles in specialized magazines, organized interviews in TV and radio stations.

The outcome was very poor, only two companies bought Vetiver: a palm oil producing plant and a shrimp farm, both for the stabilization of the banks of the ponds. The NGO's never showed any interest.

Vetiver on my farm

In order to have a good showcase for the use of Vetiver, I designed induced terracing with Vetiver on my farm, combining citrus trees and pineapples with Vetiver hedges at an interspace of 6 to 7 meters. Within a couple of years, the effect was clearly visible and measurable: run-off had stopped and the amount of organic matter went up from 0 % to 3 %. The citrus trees produced abundant Tangelo and Lemon. Also, I planted a couple of hectares of pure Vetiver grass for production and business.

Community extension

With my own farm as a working example, I used every opportunity to explain the virtues of Vetiver in communities, schools and farmer organizations. The overall response was very poor. Only a few farmers understood the benefits and planted Vetiver hedges in their fields. I tried to understand why farmers would not be interested in an excellent tool to stop erosion and improve the productivity of their land. After discussing with agriculture field workers and having in-depth conversations with elderly farmers, the conclusion was that small-farmers in the region (and maybe in the whole country) are actually not interested anymore in farming. The low prices they get for their products, the meager productivity and the uncertainty of the whole operation discourages further farming. Earning a fixed (although modest) salary in the cities, the access to easy credit and consumer goods is much more attractive. Consequently, they consider the introduction of Vetiver in their fields as a waste of time, an extra burden which is not guaranteeing them a better economic situation in the short term.

Some farmers are stimulated by government projects to grow cash-crops, in other words to enter the world of agro-business. Therefore, they have to sacrifice the diversity and the biodiversity in

their farms. And with the help of chemicals they may indeed earn good money. But the least of their concern is adventuring with Vetiver hedges as the credit institutions hold them by the throat.

A different approach: Permaculture

Small-farmers in Ecuador are trapped by the economic system which focuses on big monoculture agro-industry. The principles of Permaculture and Agroecology are only applied by those people who have thoroughly searched and understood the importance of a different small-scale, family-based sustainable agriculture. Permaculture is not very well known yet in Ecuador but the number of eco-villages and intentional communities is growing. They adopt the Vetiver System as part of their field design. In recent years, I have sold a lot of small quantities of Vetiver and technical assistance to these new farmers and communities.

Big clients

As a consequence of the decision of the government to use the petroleum-dollars for massive public spending, new roads and infrastructure are being constructed in the whole country. The technical specifications of public works mentions Vetiver as a means to stabilize slopes on the side of the roads or to protect petroleum and gas reservoirs. Engineers, who had only an interest in concrete so far, now call me or write emails for further information. Usually, it is a contractor who actually purchases the bags of Vetiver in big quantities, in order to conduct the slope stabilization.

Conclusions

The reason government institutions and 'big clients' use Vetiver is not for improving soil fertility or establishing a system of induced terracing to improve production and farming conditions.

Obviously, it is financially satisfying to sell large quantities of Vetiver to road constructors, shrimp farmers, mining companies, African palm producers, etc., but I believe that the main objective of the Vetiver System is not to serve these big companies.

We should focus much more on the use of Vetiver for land restoration, erosion control, terracing in mountainous areas, etc., and improve living conditions of small farmers.

This is not easy as long as the global growth economy is pushing family farmers over the edge, and local governments still don't fully understand the importance of solid, locally organized and bio-diverse, sustainable family farms.

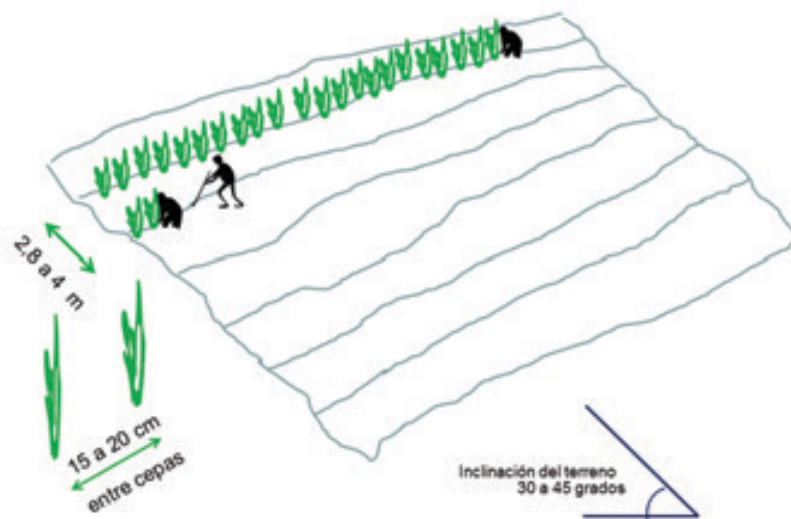
Ecuador, El Limonal, march 17 th, 2015

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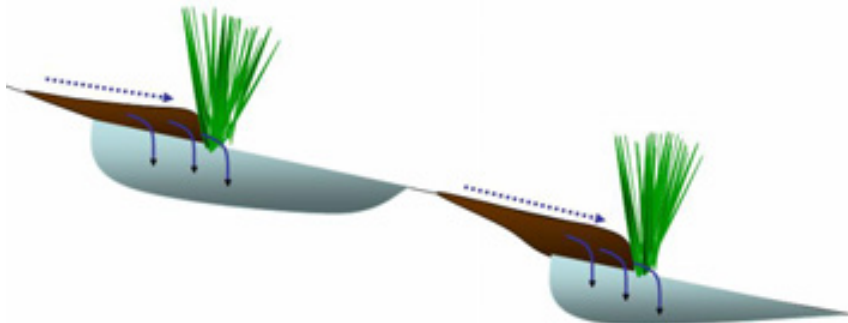
www.vetiverconsultecuador.blogspot.com







La barrera contra la erosión frena la velocidad y la fuerza destructiva del agua. El sedimento que el agua de lluvia arrastra, queda atrapado detrás de las barreras de Vetiver, paulatinamente formando terrazas inducidas.



Las barreras de Vetiver frenan la escorrentía. El agua filtra en el suelo, que retiene la humedad por más tiempo que cuando no estuviera la barrera.