

Sierra Viva: Coffee, Tradition, and Opportunities in Zongolica

The Sierra de Zongolica is located in the High Mountains of Veracruz (1), where coffee has been grown since the mid-19th century as an alternative to the cattle ranching and sugarcane cultivation that dominated the landscape since the 16th century. Nearly 50% of the land is used for agriculture (2), with coffee being the main crop for 36% of the population. Currently, it is estimated that more than 90% of the coffee is grown under shade (3), which offers benefits such as providing habitat for other species, improving air quality, regulating temperature, and serving as ecological corridors, among others.

Coffee plantations in the Sierra de Zongolica are developed on smallholdings (plots smaller than two hectares), totaling 6,650 hectares among the 3,300 producers living in this area. Due to its orography, most of the systems are located in areas with steep slopes (4). Moreover, its geography facilitates an altitudinal gradient that enables the existence of diverse species, climates, and ecosystems, with mountain mesophyll forest being one of the most abundant.

The landowners are usually older adults, who may have little command of the Spanish language. However, they are often assisted by family members to facilitate interaction with people who do not know how to say anything other than “ahmo” (no) and “quemah” (yes) in Nahuatl (5). It is also common for women to be in charge of the plots due to male migration, a situation that represents a greater number of responsibilities for them and is not necessarily reflected in a higher degree of well-being. Older adults and women usually participate in public programs due to the support these offers, both in terms of financial assistance and technical guidance. This is particularly relevant because it is common for people to sell their coffee cherries to intermediaries, and very few transform them into parchment coffee, much less into ground coffee.

Recently, there has been a growing interest in the conservation of natural resources and biodiversity, as well as in improving practices to add value to production in order to access a differentiated market and increase the economic income of farming families (6). In this context, thanks to the support of The Rufford Foundation, a research project was developed in which coffee-growing families will receive a manual of best practices to help them make the necessary adjustments to their management systems.