

THE LATIN AMERICAN VETIVER NETWORK

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Abstract

The Latin American Vetiver Network (LAVN) was established in October 1995 to disseminate and to assist with the exchange of information in Spanish regarding the use of vetiver grass within the region. LAVN has been successful in its goals of dissemination (as is indicated by an increasing membership, inquiries, and participation) but feels it has fallen short of a more active role in promotion of the technology. The latter is generally taken up by individual members or NGOs, which have been involved in outreach and education to convince others of its benefits. With limited resources (both human and financial) we have found that LAVN has the greatest impact via information dissemination instead of technology promotion, particularly when covering such a large region. Further promotion of vetiver grass technology (VGT) needs to be done on a smaller scale, no larger than country level, but better yet at an organizational level such as through NGOs. The paper reviews the experience and lessons learned by LAVN in its attempts to meet its objectives of disseminating information to Spanish speakers on VGT and to assist with the information exchange between network members. It draws some general conclusions on the role, instruments and approaches which may contribute to achieving greater success and impact in promoting and disseminating VGT.

Introduction

The Latin American Vetiver Network was started in October 1995 to serve the Spanish-speaking countries in order to expand the dissemination of VGT. Previously the only document available in Spanish about VGT was the “green book” (*Vetiver – The Hedge Against Erosion*).

LAVN has no institutional or organizational affiliation. There are a coordinator and a director who work on a voluntary basis out of a home office. The director, Jim Smyle, seconded from the World Bank to the Regional Unit for Technical Assistance (RUTA), has been able to devote some of his professional time to LAVN within the realm of his job identifying and preparing natural resource projects for funding by the World Bank. Most funding has come directly from The Vetiver Network (TVN), which covers costs for office supplies, copying, mailing of correspondence, information packages and newsletters, and printing of newsletters and other materials.

To kick off LAVN, the first newsletter in Spanish, *Boletín Vetiver*, was published in May 1996 and sent out to all members of TVN in Latin America. This first mailing reached approximately 400 members in 20 countries of North, Central and South America (Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Cuba, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico). The most recent *Boletín Vetiver* (#7 – September 1999) was distributed to approximately 723 members. The majority of our members are affiliated with NGOs and the second largest group is formed by university researchers and students and individuals who are interested in VGT. The smallest group of network members is composed of private companies and government and research organizations.

Goals of LAVN

The stated objective of LAVN is dissemination of information in Spanish about VGT, its applications and potential uses. The aim is to provide members with access to the existing knowledge about VGT for soil and water conservation, bioengineering and bioremediation, its application and potential uses and to assist in the exchange of information. The *Boletín Vetiver* permits users and researchers to share

their knowledge and experience with not only Latin America but also the world, through our link with The Vetiver Network. Additionally we have worked to increase network membership. The vetiver website and word of mouth have been the most effective means of increasing membership.

Activities to date have included the following:

- seven newsletters published in Spanish (*Boletín Vetiver*);
- Volume I of *Boletín Vetiver*, which contains newsletters Nos. 1-5 and a reference index;
- distributed vetiver videos (*Vetiver, la barrera contra la erosión*) in Spanish;
- sent out additional technical information on specific topics such as use of vetiver in coffee, mining rehabilitation, and bioengineering;
- sent out a questionnaire regarding the use and experience with VGT, in order to better understand members' needs;
- assembled a directory of the most active VGT users and network members;
- assembled a growing list of vetiver grass suppliers which is printed in each *Boletín* and posted on the LAVN website;
- provided networking assistance in the interaction of network members;
- started an electronic discussion group via Internet;
- provided materials to The Vetiver Network website;
- maintained contact and information exchange with other regional vetiver networks;
- obtained financing and provided technical assistance for the development of a compact disc and video on the use of vetiver in bioengineering;
- visited the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, twice to participate in training and information workshops and provide technical assistance;
- toured through southern Costa Rica to locate planting material for a project in western Panama;
- co-sponsored and participated in a workshop on the use of vetiver in bioengineering;
- provided a small grant for initiation of a vetiver nursery at an organic coffee farm;
- supported a local university student to research and write articles on VGT in Costa Rica; and
- answered hundreds of letter and queries.

Financial Support of the Network

To date we have received US\$8 000 from The Vetiver Network for network activities. Additional funds were collected, which include the 1998 Vetiver Prize for Soil Conservation (US\$1 083) and a small donation of a lottery prize (approximately US\$663). A Knowledge Management grant of US\$42 000 from the World Bank was made to RUTA and LAVN for a regional workshop in El Salvador in May 1999. There is no NGO status for LAVN due to the bureaucracy involved in the process. Knowledge that the LAVN office would not likely remain in Costa Rica after our return to the United States (there exists no obvious candidate in Costa Rica to take over the network) has contributed to this decision.

Effectiveness of LAVN

LAVN has been very effective in the dissemination of VGT throughout the Latin American region. Our membership has grown by no less than 81%, from originally 400 members to more than 720 members currently (the growth is actually closer to 90% due to removal of members from the network that have moved and left no forwarding addresses). All new members receive at least each of the newsletters published to date in addition to a Spanish copy of the "green book". Requests for information and membership currently come primarily via the Internet and often members request membership for colleagues, associates and organizations.

Recently more specific requests have come in for information on the use of vetiver for land reclamation, infrastructure stabilization and rehabilitation. In such areas, we have been able to use the expertise of other TVN members outside the region (for example, Paul Truong for land reclamation and use of vetiver in highly saline environments and Criss Juliard for details of the program for road rehabilitation in Madagascar).

Furthermore the development of the electronic discussion group, although not as active as we might have hoped, gives an opportunity for individuals to ask questions and receive answers (usually from the LAVN coordinator and director) which are shared with the group of subscribers. Archives of the discussion group are available on the TVN website and also are printed in the newsletter. The discussion group was initiated at the El Salvador workshop among the participants having email accounts and then opened up to the remaining LAVN members with email accounts who responded to a subscription form.

Generally LAVN has been effective, based on the growing membership and the obvious increase in sources of vetiver grass available to potential users. This means that there is more grass being grown and more people are interested in obtaining it. This is a priority function of LAVN.

Where LAVN lacks effectiveness is possibly in getting information to users on specifically requested topics. The reason for this is the inability to translate large volumes of information into Spanish at short notice. Correspondence is normally answered within a day and information packages sent out within days of the request (on average), but providing information on specific and technical issues generally takes a great effort and it is sometimes difficult to reply rapidly.

Also, we feel that our effectiveness in getting feedback from our members and in locating the vetiver activities of non-members has been limited. We know that there is a lot going on of which we have no knowledge. We constantly stumble on references (written, oral, second-hand) to activities, projects, people, etc. But we cannot seem to effectively inspire people to generally keep us informed. Only about 15 members provide information/feedback of any type on a regular basis (more than once or twice a year). For those active members and champions of vetiver we are grateful. For the rest, we are frustrated.

Promotion of VGT

Promotional activities are defined as organization of and participation in workshops, providing demonstrations and technical assistance, establishing nurseries, etc. During the past four years we have travelled to Oaxaca, Mexico, twice to participate in vetiver promotion at workshops at the request of an active NGO network there which was able to convince a financing agency to pay our way. In May 1999 LAVN co-sponsored a 2 ½-day workshop in El Salvador on use of VGT in bioengineering. The workshop in El Salvador (bioengineering workshop for post-Hurricane Mitch reconstruction – experiences with the use of vetiver grass for infrastructure protection and stabilization) was financed through the Knowledge Management Fund of the World Bank and co-sponsored by RUTA, NOBS Anti-erosion and LAVN. Forty-two people from nine countries attended the two-day workshop, which included panel discussions, technical presentations and a full-day field trip to observe vetiver used in both bioengineering and watershed rehabilitation projects.

Knowledge management funds from the workshop were also used to develop an eight-minute video (*Vetiver: the hedge for bioengineering in the protection and stabilization of infrastructure*) as a tool to promote the use of vetiver for infrastructure protection and bioengineering. This and a compact disc focusing on bioengineering are distributed to those who request them at the cost of mailing. We then request that they make at least two copies of the video and give those copies to others for further dissemination. The Spanish version of the video *Vetiver – the hedge against erosion* is sent, free of charge, to LAVN members who specifically ask for it.

In spite of the above activities, LAVN feels that it has not been extremely active or successful in this area. Our lack of promotional activities is the result of several factors.

- Our area of coverage is very large – a total of 20 countries spread between approximately 30° N and 55° S latitude and 35° and 117° W longitude, thus it is difficult to organize or attend to promotional activities with a small staff and a lack of institutional association or support.
- Financially all travel is paid for personally. Where VGT is in use in watershed management and natural resources projects, LAVN can only provide information, whereas direct technical assistance or training would be much more effective. With only two people involved in the administration of the network, personnel resources are spread quite thin for any further activities.

There are currently no other Spanish-speaking “vetiver consultants” within the region aside from NOBS in El Salvador, but technical assistance is not their core business; though some are developing in Mexico, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Honduras, Chile and Ecuador.

- Finally, language has been a barrier. The coordinator spoke no Spanish prior to living in Costa Rica and although currently fluent, making presentations and making all information of interest available in Spanish has been difficult. Volunteers within LAVN have been used for translation and editing services, but there are limitations to the efficiency of this. The LAVN one large promotional activity, the workshop in El Salvador, has shown its effectiveness through the resulting activities carried out by many conference attendees and the references which have come about since then. Following are some of the activities of conference attendees since May:
 - Workshop organized by CARE Honduras on vetiver for watershed management and road construction;
 - Development of mother nurseries and micro-nurseries and planting of hedges by CARE Honduras;
 - Coordination between CARE Honduras and Chiquita Brands/Tela Railroad Company for locating and planting vetiver for joint nurseries;
 - Protection of drainage canals with vetiver in banana plantations in Honduras;
 - Development of additional nurseries and plantings in Costa Rica by Chiquita Brands;
 - Week-long workshop on organic agriculture in Costa Rica given by a workshop participant and which included a vetiver component;
 - Development of a proposal for the establishment of a vetiver nursery as a source of planting material for environmental conservation and stabilization of infrastructure projects in Honduras;
 - In Panama the Rural Poverty and Natural Resources Project has given talks and practical seminars about VGT and disseminating copies of the video and it plans to establish eight nurseries;
 - The US Army Corps of Engineers and the Inter-American Development Bank are both calling for use of VGT in landslide and road stabilization; and
 - A small but tangibly growing interest is being felt in VGT for infrastructure and roads in the Costa Rican, Nicaraguan and Honduran ministries of Transport.

Also as a result of the workshop there has been increased correspondence between many of the workshop participants and LAVN. A follow-up assessment of workshop participants’ vetiver-related activities and promotion is planned for May, one year after the event.

There has been success in the promotion of VGT in the region through a number of dedicated individuals and groups. Three projects received grants from the TVN Support to NGOs program, namely PCERS (Oaxaca, Mexico), Fundación Golondrinas (Ecuador) and Sociedad Conservación Aragua (Venezuela). Promotional activities in these projects included workshops, technical demonstrations, nursery establishment, etc.

Aside from the effectiveness of their promotional activities, another benefit which came out of these projects was that we were able to confidently refer other interested vetiver users to these groups for technical advice and potentially as sources of planting material. Even more important to us now is that these groups will likely be tapped to officially take over networking responsibilities for either their region or their country.

Decentralization of LAVN

Because of our departure from Costa Rica scheduled for July 2000 we intend not only to transfer LAVN to another coordinator, but also request the participation of individuals in other countries to act as local coordinators to disseminate technical information, improve promotional activities and further gather information on the use of vetiver in their regions or countries.

Ideally LAVN will be transferred to an organization or individual that has both the interest in running the network and, equally important, an association with an organization which would support its

activities in terms of both the time required and some of the basic overhead costs. Such an organization might include a university, a technical school, an NGO or a private company. Responsibilities would include at least maintaining a database of members and user profiles, publication of the LAVN newsletter, and directing inquiries to the appropriate regional coordinators.

Smaller regional coordinators would be identified based on their participation, interest, motivation and desire to carry out the responsibilities of the coordination for their region. Optimally there would be coordinators for each of the 20 countries in the region. If a country at that time does not have the expertise or interest, then a coordinator from an adjacent country could take on the responsibilities. The responsibilities foreseen for these local coordinators would include dissemination of vetiver information packages (newsletters, “green book”, etc), maintaining and expanding a database of vetiver users, nurseries and other sources for planting material, providing country/regional updates and articles to LAVN for inclusion in *Boletín Vetiver*, etc.

Actual promotional activities would be determined by the individual regional coordinators based on their abilities (i.e. financial and personal) and commitment to carry this out. This would include organization of and participation in workshops and demonstrations whenever possible. Many of the individuals being considered for coordination positions are already promoting VGT within their own organizations, regions or projects. There is a great need in all countries for the participation of knowledgeable and experienced vetiver users to give presentations and demonstrations of VGT. It is hoped that these more local coordinators will be able to help fill this need and also train others to do the same.

What Have We Learned?

LAVN uses a single office to network, gather and disseminate information to its members in the Latin American region. The years of experience have revealed the following:

- Members generally request information on the following: (a) source of planting material; (b) how to become a member of LAVN; (c) requests for general VGT information (“green book”, newsletters) or more specific articles, documents and technical information relating to special interests; (d) letters of support and membership; and (e) sources and help in financing projects. A recent questionnaire that we sent out to the other vetiver networks indicates that these are substantially the same questions and requests received by them.
- The most serious concerns or problems expressed are: (a) high-altitude limitations – there has been some concern and lack of support for the use of vetiver at elevations above 2 500 m in the Andean countries (predominantly Bolivia and Ecuador) where there has been a perceived lack of growth; (b) potential for weediness – in Chile it has been extremely difficult to find plant material although several members there are interested in starting vetiver propagation and planting programs¹; (c) lack of planting material – many members feel that if they cannot immediately obtain the desired quantity of planting material for a project then it cannot be done. It has been difficult to convince individuals that they should start with planting a nursery and aggressively propagate vegetative material for their needs a year or two down the road. You could say that lack of planting material forms a barrier to progress; and (d) lack of financing for projects – many individuals lack access to financing for individual projects or start-up costs to get nurseries going. Understandably there is a great deal of frustration among people and there has been no easy answer as to where they should go for funding, although local support through government and donor projects (especially bilateral) and developing relationships with private companies is encouraged.
- Interests of LAVN members vary widely to include: general use in agriculture for erosion control; its role in organic agriculture; coffee plantations; oil production; bioengineering and infrastructure stabilization; soil restoration and land reclamation in disturbed areas and mines; in-vitro propagation; how to develop a nursery; other uses and products; cost information for

¹ The phytosanitary regulations in Chile are so strict that it has been suggested that it would be impossible to successfully bring in material and there is a general opinion that vetiver, being an imported plant, will bring them nothing but trouble.

applications and propagation and nursery development; etc. Often new interests are generated by the information coming out of the network (e.g. by providing information on artisan uses of vetiver, the network began receiving significant numbers of requests for more information).

- There is a small number of LAVN members who write from once a year to several times per month to update us on such themes as how their plants are growing, their progress in projects (both underway and in the planning stage); frustrations with either the plant itself or more likely government bureaucracy and disinterest; new sources of planting material; change of addresses, etc. These people are the lifeblood of the network and should be encouraged as much as possible. They would also be the easily identifiable prime candidates for funding should such an opportunity ever become available.
- Efforts to increase membership such as mass mailings are generally not worth it. On several occasions we sent either letters of invitation to join the network (with a “green book” enclosed) with little or no response. A worthwhile task would be to follow-up on activities and progress of existing members who have written for information or updated the network in the past and invite them to contribute to the newsletter in the form of articles.
- No matter what is written in newsletters, people will write and ask for the same information. This may be an indication that much of the same information, variously presented, should be recycled and summarized in future newsletters.
- We would recommend further translating into Spanish as much technical information as possible and making it available to members. Although there is a significant number of members who speak and are able to correspond in English, LAVN needs to be able to provide all existing information and data in Spanish. This can be done by having LAVN reside with a native Spanish-speaking coordinator and also by increasing the pool of technical assistance experts to both help answer inquiries and provide personal technical assistance.

Conclusion

The role of LAVN is to gather information for further dissemination. This is currently accomplished through a single LAVN office which carries out correspondence with a growing membership, provides contacts and technical information when requested, and publishes a newsletter. As LAVN is transferred to another office and coordinator, it is anticipated that its role might be expanded to increase effectiveness and influence of networking in the region through further promotion and increased participation. This could hopefully be accomplished through the development of locally situated network representatives and offices. Such a change would require additional financing through fund-raising activities, project support, corporate/industrial sponsorship or the selling of technical assistance services. This is a challenge that we hope to overcome as we transfer the network in the year 2000.