



Chewing Gum: transnational histories of consumption and production

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The 'boom' in chicle production, to meet demands for chewing gum from the United States, began during the first two decades of the twentieth century, and reached its peak in the early 1940s. It served as a marker for the transformation of the landscape and ecology of the east and south of the Yucatan peninsular in Mexico, paving the way for new land uses on the tropical frontier. It led to harvesting and production practices which are of contemporary importance, especially for the two protected tropical forest areas (global Biosphere Reserves).

KEY FINDINGS

- 1 Chicle production in Quintana Roo provoked internal divisions among Mayan leaders, but it also led to modernising solutions.
- 1 Sourcing natural chewing gum, and timber extraction began the process of clearing vast areas of tropical forest land in the period 1900-1940. Squatters and cattle ranchers completed this process, after 1940.
- 1 The chicle industry shifted from a relatively remote forest economy of primary resource extraction, mediated by private Mexican and American entrepreneurs, to a dependency of the Mexican state.
- 1 The Mexican state extended its control over chicle production and marketing through the co-operative movement, which also improved the incomes and working conditions of most chicleros.
- 1 The chewing gum industry, which had blossomed under family entrepreneurship in the United States

(Thomas Adams, William Wrigley etc.), acquired a completely different character in Mexico, where socialist organisations grew up to defend the interests of organised co-operative workers.

- 1 Even after 1978, when presidents of chicle co-operatives became more democratically elected and accountable, the Mexican state operated through a wholly owned purchasing arrangement (IMPEXNAL), which accumulated revenues.
- 1 By the mid-1980s chicle extraction and marketing became identified as a means of diversifying the forest economy of Yucatan/Quintana Roo, by providing ecological and social benefits.
- 1 Regulatory measures and product certification serve as obstacles to the sustainable production of natural chewing gum today, by creating bureaucratic hurdles that prevent small producers from meeting stringent quality controls.

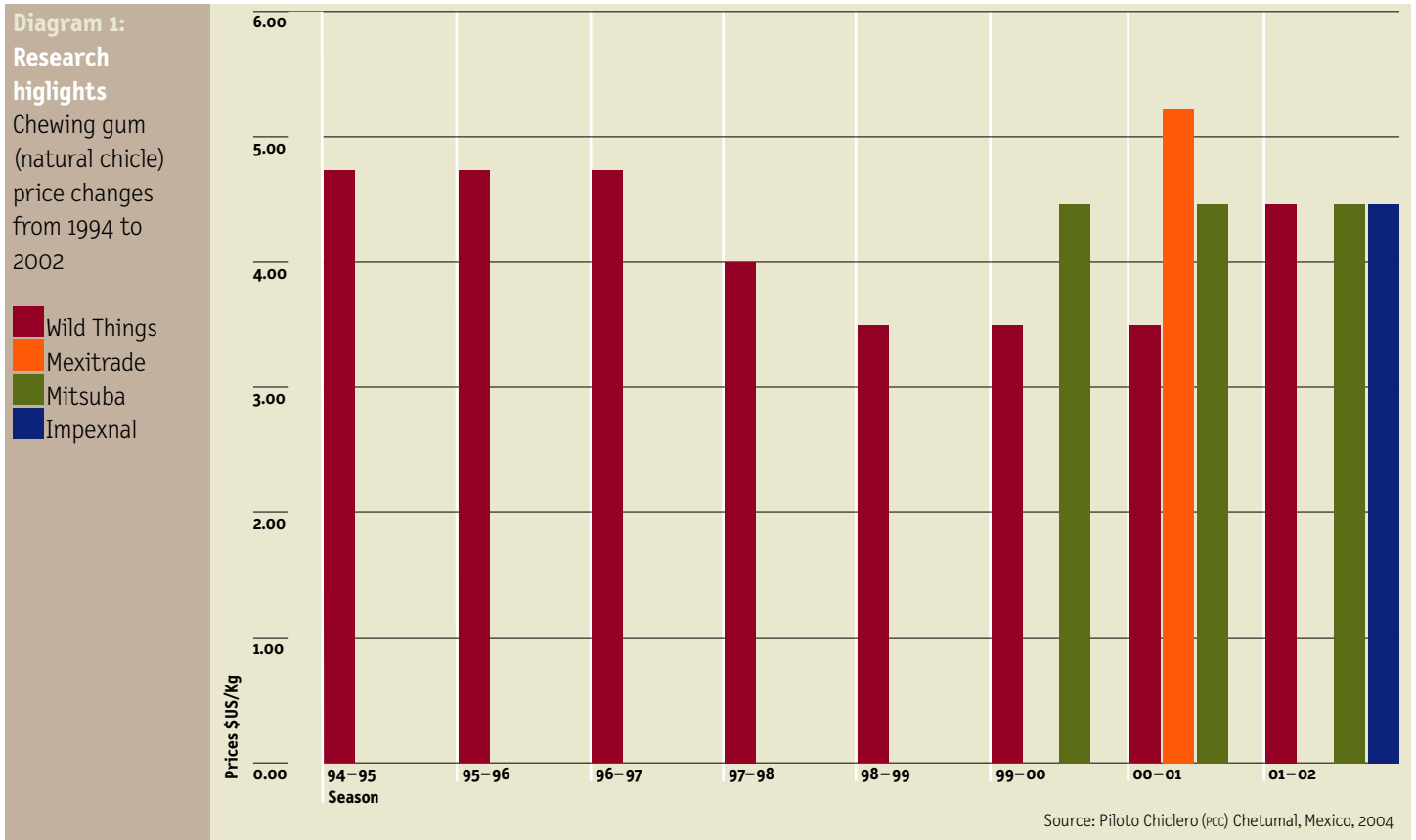
The researchers identified two main obstacles to the development of a natural chewing gum market: the bureaucratic burden and the personalised social relations around chicle, known locally as *coyotaje*.

HIGHLIGHTS

The Union of Chicle Co-operatives has been working to optimise chewing gum production and capture a bigger share of the market. The two aspects are intrinsically related. The main demand for natural chewing gum today is from Japan and the east Asian market. The texture, elasticity and capacity of natural gum to absorb flavours explain the Japanese preference for natural gum over the cheaper synthetic resin based on hydrocarbons, which is of inferior quality in all of these aspects. Therefore the union has emphasised quality controls during the re-hydration process, the

Chicle co-operative store, Quintana Roo, Mexico
Photo: Oscar Forero





enlargement of communication with chewing gum manufacturers and assurances on reliability in supplies.

The union has worked closely with the University of Quintana Roo to develop a machine that would help the processes of dehydration, through which the moisture is evaporated from the raw resin. There is already a prototype operating and it is expected that three of these machines will be operating during 2005–2006 season. This would enable most of the chicleros working within co-operatives to concentrate on extracting the resin and maintaining quality control. The union is also making arrangements for larger quantities of dehydrated resin to be treated in Mexico by Mitsuba, a Japanese processing factory now operating from Tijuana. The union will then sell the blended gum to third parties depending on specification established by the processing companies.

During the past five years the Union had entered negotiations with intermediaries and chewing gum producers in Asia, Europe and the United States. In Asia it had contacted the following producers: Lotte,

Gliko, Menjy Seika, Morichita, Hai Tai and Bolak, and the following intermediaries: Mitui, Mitsuba (now with a factory in Mexico) and Tong Se. In Europe the union worked with producer Gepa and intermediary Gum Base, and in the United States with the producers Wild Things and Glee Gum.

Although some studies suggest that there is only limited potential for 'organic' chewing gum, the union has considered renewing the organic certificate it had obtained for the co-operative of Hoh Bec and to seek to obtain the same certificate for other *ejidos* of Quintana Roo. However, a complication has arisen, as this certificate, which was granted by Certimex, is valid in the United States but not in Europe. A decision concerning the desirability of further investment in 'organic certificates' has not yet been taken by the co-operatives. As in other cases of naturally produced goods, the barriers to sustainable development have in part been erected by the industrialised world, much of which pays lip service to fair trade and sustainable sourcing of products.

Another aspect in which the union has advanced relates to fiscal administration. The fiscal regime has been partially reformed in Mexico during the last presidential period. The current federal government under President Fox has launched the 'Proyecto de Seguridad Social' (Social Security Initiative), which aims to incorporate all workers in some form of social security. All employers that want to operate legally must obtain the Ceduca Unica de Identidad (CUI), a governmental registered employment code through which employers can claim a contribution from the state for their employees. The state contribution should equal the amount contributed by the employer. All co-operatives and federations have obtained these CUIs as a means to facilitate state investment. The co-operative badly needs central investment of this kind: the marketing strategies of the Plan Piloto Chiclero (PPC) during the year 2002–2003 were funded under a subvention scheme of the Federal Economic Secretary.

Earlier last year (2005) the PPC and the union began a process of merger. Both of them had agreed that the formation of a unique consortium would enlarge the opportunities for commercial operations. They had already applied for a government licence under the name of 'Consorcio Corporativo de Productores y Exportadores en Foresteria FCL'. This merger will provide a further boost to development of marketing strategies for natural chewing gum in Mexico. It remains to be seen, however, whether it will contribute to the development of a buoyant and robust market for natural chewing gum outside Mexico, which would bring advantages to forest workers, the Mexican state and new groups of consumers interested in a natural product that is traded fairly.

MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- 1 Sustainable forest products need to be considered within the context of communities, livelihoods and cultures. There are no 'general rules' in their development, other than the need for grass-roots involvement from the inception.
- 1 Systems of personalised social relations and networks, such as 'coyotaje' are capable of operating within the structures of the state as well as those of the market.
- 1 Some products lend themselves more easily to 'fair



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trade' promotion and marketing – they are often high 'value-added' products, destined for niche markets and associated with high-income consumers. Chewing gum is a cheap product associated with a mass market.

- 1 The project utilised novel forms of dissemination – television and radio interviews, a Web page designed for schools, and popular magazine articles – to communicate the importance of conserving tropical forests and preserving the cultural memory of their populations.

- 1 The research benefited enormously by working closely with a trusted local community museum in Mexico, and from the assistance of the families and descendents of chicleros.

THE STUDY

Chewing Gum: transnational histories of consumption and production was funded by the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption research programme and ran from March 2003 to September 2005 (grant number: RES 143-25-007).

The project team was Michael Redcliff, Graham

Findings:

Chewing Gum: transnational histories of consumption and production

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Three principal research methods were employed: 1) archival research in Mexico City, Merida and Chetumal, concentrating particularly on the chicle co-operatives' archives; 2) interviews with surviving chicle workers (chicleros), contractors, co-operative representatives, representatives of PPC, and the Mexican government (secretary of Agriculture and Natural Resources), and natural gum producers (Glee Gum/Verve); 3) interactive workshops organised in conjunction with the Museum of the Caste War, a community museum in Tihosuco.

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Forero O. and Redclift M. **The Role of the Mexican State in the Development of Chicle Extraction in Yucatan and the Continuing Importance of Coyotaje**, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 31 (1) 2006.

Redclift M. **Chewing Gum: Mass Consumption and the 'Shadowlands' of the Yucatan**, in Brewer J. and Trentmann F. (eds.), *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), chapter seven.

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Redclift M. **Chewing Gum: The Frontiers of Taste** (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Redclift M. **Chewing Gum and the Shadowlands of Consumption**, *Revista Mexicana del Caribe*, Año VIII, (15) 2003, pp. 159–168.

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CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME



The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context. The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- 1 to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- 1 to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- 1 to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- 1 to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- 1 to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- 1 to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

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