Waving goodbye to slash-and-burn

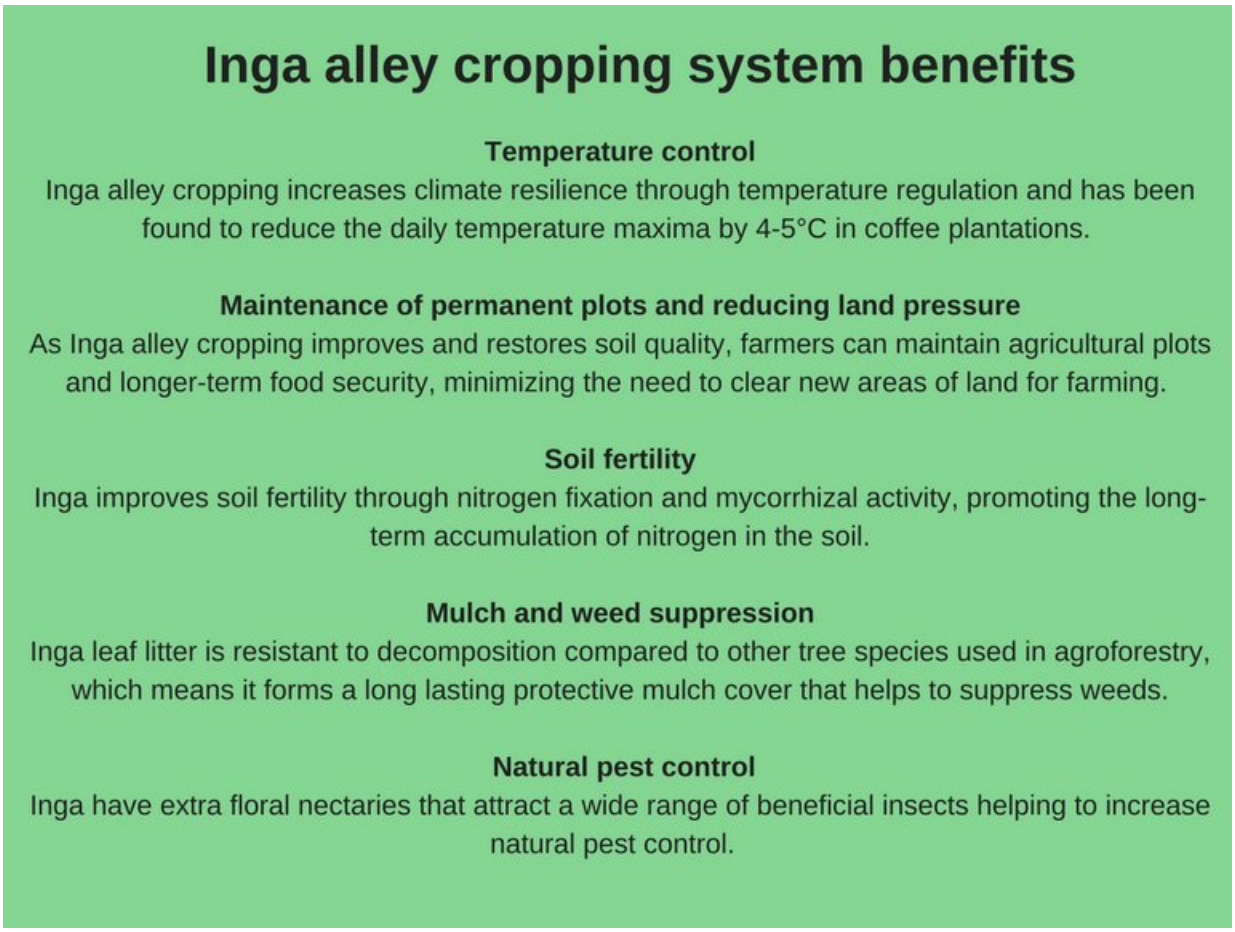
January 23 2018, by Vance Russell

Local farmer Mateo Ack shows the leaf litter in the Inga system. Credit: Maximiliano Caal

The first time I flew into Punta Gorda, a town on the edge of the Maya Golden Landscape in southern Belize, I was struck with how intact the forest remained compared to adjacent Guatemala and Honduras. Where Belizean forests were a rolling green landscape of tall tropical forest canopy Guatemala was nearly the opposite: blocks of intact forest surrounded by extensive clearing, smoke and fire.

In tropical regions worldwide, slash and burn practices are failing to provide sustainable food production and income for millions of smallholder farmers in rapidly growing communities. Faced with the growing pressure on the Maya Golden Landscape's tropical rainforests, Ya'axché Conservation Trust (in partnership with Fauna & Flora International) has been working with local communities to encourage a sustainable farming system known as Inga alley cropping so that Belize does not witness the same rampant land clearing as that experienced by its Mesoamerican neighbours.

In essence, the Inga alley cropping system works by planting crops (such as maize, pineapple, banana, cocoa and yam) between rows of Inga trees – native species that are able to recycle two vital nutrients, nitrogen and phosphorous, back into the soil. Not only do these trees allow farmers to use the same plot of land again and again by keeping the soil fertile (thus eliminating the need to burn down rainforest), but they also prevent soil erosion and protect soils from the hot sun. Pruned before each growing season, Inga trees also produce firewood for homes.



Inga alley cropping system benefits. Credit: Fauna & Flora International

Christina Garcia of Ya'axché believes that "Inga alley cropping is the revolutionary alternative to slash-and-burn. It is the hope for the restoration of many degraded lands in Belize." Many farmers in the region agree, local farmer Orlando Cucul stated, "Inga alley cropping will make my soil fertile, give me good crops and create a lot of firewood."

However, Ya'axché are taking implementation of the programme one step further by measuring how Inga vs. traditional cropping changes the

environment, species diversity and economy. In this way they hope to show local communities and a wider audience the benefits Inga alley cropping can bring to local livelihoods and also to wildlife.

A many pronged approach to reduce the negative effects of agriculture to wildlife whilst measuring the results and ultimately creating new community livelihood opportunities is greatly needed, not just in Belize but throughout the region.

Provided by Fauna & Flora International