ENDANGERED PEOPLES
of Latin America
ENDANGERED PEOPLES
of Latin America

Struggles to Survive and Thrive

Edited by Susan C. Stonich

The Greenwood Press
“Endangered Peoples of the World” Series
Barbara Rose Johnston, Series Editor
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Series Foreword

Barbara Rose Johnston

Two hundred thousand years ago our human ancestors gathered plants and hunted animals in the forests and savannas of Africa. By forty thousand years ago, *Homo sapiens sapiens* had developed ways to survive and thrive in every major ecosystem on this planet. Unlike other creatures, whose response to harsh or varied conditions prompted biological change, humans generally relied upon their ingenuity to survive. They fashioned clothing from skins and plant fiber rather than growing thick coats of protective hair. They created innovative ways to live and communicate and thus passed knowledge down to their children. This knowledge, by ten thousand years ago, included the means to cultivate and store food. The ability to provide for lean times allowed humans to settle in larger numbers in villages, towns, and cities where their ideas, values, ways of living, and language grew increasingly complicated and diverse.

This cultural diversity—the multitude of ways of living and communicating knowledge—gave humans an adaptive edge. Other creatures adjusted to change in their environment through biological adaptation (a process that requires thousands of life spans to generate and reproduce a mutation to the level of the population). Humans developed analytical tools to identify and assess change in their environment, to search out or devise new strategies, and to incorporate new strategies throughout their group. Sometimes these cultural adaptations worked; people transformed their way of life, and their population thrived. Other times, these changes produced further complications.

Intensive agricultural techniques, for example, often resulted in increased salts in the soil, decreased soil fertility, and declining crop yields. Food production declined, and people starved. Survivors often moved to new regions to begin again. Throughout human history, migration became the
common strategy when innovations failed. Again, in these times, culture was essential to survival.

For the human species, culture is our primary adaptive mechanism. Cultural diversity presents us with opportunities to draw from and build upon a complicated array of views, ideas, and strategies. The Endangered Peoples of the World series celebrates the rich diversity of cultural groups living on our planet and explores how cultural diversity, like biological diversity, is threatened.

Five hundred years ago, as humans entered the age of colonial expansion, there were an estimated twelve to fourteen thousand cultural groups with distinct languages, values, and ways of life. Today, cultural diversity has been reduced by half (an estimated 6,000 to 7,000 groups). This marked decline is due in part to the fact that, historically, isolated peoples had minimal immunity to introduced diseases and little time to develop immunological defenses. Colonizers brought more than ideas, religion, and new economic ways of living. They brought a host of viruses and bacteria—measles, chickenpox, smallpox, the common cold. These diseases swept through “new” worlds at epidemic levels and wiped out entire nations. Imperialist expansion and war further decimated original, or “indigenous,” populations.

Today’s cultural diversity is further threatened by the biodegenerative conditions of nature. Our biophysical world’s deterioration is evidenced by growing deserts; decreasing forests; declining fisheries; poisoned food, water, and air; and climatic extremes and weather events such as floods, hurricanes, and droughts. These degenerative conditions challenge our survival skills, often rendering customary knowledge and traditions ineffective.

Cultural diversity is also threatened by unparalleled transformations in human relations. Isolation is no longer the norm. Small groups continually interact and are subsumed by larger cultural, political, and economic groups of national and global dimensions. The rapid pace of change in population, technology, and political economy leaves little time to develop sustainable responses and adjust to changing conditions.

Across the world cultural groups are struggling to maintain a sense of unique identity while interpreting and assimilating an overwhelming flow of new ideas, ways of living, economies, values, and languages. As suggested in some chapters in this series, cultural groups confront, embrace, adapt, and transform these external forces in ways that allow them to survive and thrive. However, in far too many cases, cultural groups lack the time and means to adjust and change. Rather, they struggle to retain the right to simply exist as other, more powerful peoples seize their land and resources and “cleanse” the countryside of their presence.

Efforts to gain control of land, labor, and resources of politically and/or geographically peripheral peoples are justified and legitimized by ethnocentric notions: the beliefs that the values, traditions, and behavior of your
own cultural group are superior and that other groups are biologically, culturally, and socially inferior. These notions are produced and reproduced in conversation, curriculum, public speeches, articles, television coverage, and other communication forums. Ethnocentrism is reflected in a language of debasement that serves to dehumanize (the marginal peoples are considered sub-human: primitive, backward, ignorant people that “live like animals”). The pervasiveness of this discourse in the everyday language can eventually destroy the self-esteem and sense of worth of marginal groups and reduce their motivation to control their destiny.

Thus, vulnerability to threats from the biophysical and social realms is a factor of social relations. Human action and a history of social inequity leave some people more vulnerable than others. This vulnerability results in ethnocide (loss of a way of life), ecocide (destruction of the environment), and genocide (death of an entire group of people).

The Endangered Peoples of the World series samples cultural diversity in different regions of the world, examines the varied threats to cultural survival, and explores some of the ways people are adjusting and responding to threats of ethnocide, ecocide, and genocide. Each volume in the series covers the peoples, problems, and responses characteristic of a major region of the world: the Arctic, Europe, North America and the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East, Central and South Asia, Southeast and East Asia, and Oceania. Each volume includes an introductory essay authored by the volume editor and fifteen or so chapters, each featuring a different cultural group whose customs, problems, and responses represent a sampling of conditions typical of the region. Chapter content is organized into five sections: Cultural Overview (people, setting, traditional subsistence strategies, social and political organization, religion and world view), Threats to Survival (demographic trends, current events and conditions, environmental crisis, sociocultural crisis), Response: Struggles to Survive Culturally (indicating the variety of efforts to respond to threats), Food for Thought (a brief summary of the issues raised by the case and some provocative questions that can be used to structure class discussion or organize a research paper), and a Resource Guide (major accessible published sources, films and videos, Internet and WWW sites, and organizations). Many chapters are authored or coauthored by members of the featured group, and all chapters include liberal use of a “local voice” to present the group’s own views on its history, current problems, strategies, and thoughts of the future.

Collectively, the series contains some 120 case-specific examples of cultural groups struggling to survive and thrive in a culturally diverse world. Many of the chapters in this global sampling depict the experiences of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities who, until recently, sustained their customary way of life in the isolated regions of the world. Threats to survival are often linked to external efforts to develop the natural resources
of the previously isolated region. The development context is often one of co-optation of traditionally held lands and resources with little or no recognition of resident peoples’ rights and little or no compensation for their subsequent environmental health problems. New ideas, values, technologies, economies, and languages accompany the development process and, over time, may even replace traditional ways of being.

Cultural survival, however, is not solely a concern of indigenous peoples. Indeed, in many parts of the world the term “indigenous” has little relevance, as all peoples are native to the region. Thus, in this series, we define cultural groups in the broadest of terms. We examine threats to survival and the variety of responses of ethnic minorities, as well as national cultures, whose traditions are challenged and undermined by global transformations.

The dominant theme that emerges from this sampling is that humans struggle with serious and life-threatening problems tied to larger global forces, and yet, despite huge differences in power levels between local communities and global institutions and structures, people are crafting and developing new ways of being. This series demonstrates that culture is not a static set of meanings, values, and behaviors; it is a flexible, resilient tool that has historically provided humans with the means to adapt, adjust, survive, and, at times, thrive. Thus, we see “endangered” peoples confronting and responding to threats in ways that reshape and transform their values, relationships, and behavior.

Emerging from this transformative process are new forms of cultural identity, new strategies for living, and new means and opportunities to communicate. These changes represent new threats to cultural identity and autonomy but also new challenges to the forces that dominate and endanger lives.
Introduction

Susan C. Stonich

It is extremely problematic to generalize about the peoples and lands of Latin America. Diverse histories together with equally varied biophysical environments have created an astounding array of landscapes and cultures. No one schema can capture the considerable heterogeneity in peoples, economies, or governments. Latin America is also characterized by great differences in wealth and human well-being according to commonly used measures of income, poverty, education, and health (see Table 1). While national level statistics may be helpful in some instances, international boundaries often mask cultural differentiation or disparities in wealth and well-being. For example, the way of life (and the standard of living) of most of the people in southern Mexico is more like that in Guatemala than in northern Mexico. Aggregate data on national or per capita income suggest that certain countries in the region, such as Chile and Argentina, are significantly more wealthy than others, such as Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador. They also show that, in general, poorer countries tend to have significantly lower life expectancy and literacy rates than do richer countries. However, differences in wealth, education, and well-being among socioeconomic classes within individual countries are considerable throughout the region. That is, there are extremely rich people (with access to good jobs, education, and health care) even in the poorest countries, and considerable pockets of poverty exist in the richer countries.

To make things more complicated, there is no standard or universally accepted geopolitical definition of Latin America. This volume uses one of the more widely accepted definitions in which Latin America is understood to include the heterogeneous group of countries of Mexico, Central America, and South America. This region extends from the Río Grande River that forms the border of the United States and Mexico to the large island of Tierra del Fuego, at the southern tip of Chile. In between are vast dif-
# Important Human Indicators for Latin America, 1997

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*Includes the Caribbean.


Differences in biophysical environments as well as among the many peoples who inhabit the region. On a map, Mexico resembles a large cone pointing to the southeast, with the Sierra Madre mountain ranges converging just south of the present day capital of Mexico City. The present location occupied by Mexico City also was the site of the great political centers of prehistoric and colonial Mexico—Teotihuacán, Tenochtitlán, and the Spanish colonial capital. Many large mountainous regions are found south of Mexico City and continue into Guatemala. Many of these were the sites of the great pre-Columbian city-states of Mesoamerica, including the several Mayan city-states, which linked highland and lowland civilizations throughout the region. Farther south is the Central American isthmus, a land bridge that links North and South America. Although extremely narrow at some points, it is extremely heterogeneous in terms of topography,
climate, soils, flora, and fauna, as well as peoples. Many Central American environments, natural resources, and diverse peoples are threatened today. South of the Central American country of Panama, the Andes Mountains contain a series of highland basins where large numbers of Andean peoples live. In contrast, the Amazon basin to the east forms a more sparsely inhabited tropical region that is home to many threatened indigenous peoples and environments.¹

Latin American history can be divided into several time periods each characterized by significantly different political and economic institutions as well as by various threats to native peoples.² The first is the prehistoric period, characterized by indigenous polities and economies that ranged from small autonomous groups of foragers, to village-dwelling agriculturalists, to more complexly organized and larger city-states such as the Maya, to empires such as the Aztec and the Inca. Second is the period of exploration, conquest, and colonization that began with the discovery of the Americas by Europeans and ended with the beginning of the wars of independence from Spain in the early 1800s. Less than three decades after the discovery of the Americas, Hernán Cortés completed the conquest of Mexico with the destruction of the Mexica (Aztec) capital of Tenochtitlán in 1521. Shortly thereafter, in 1533, Francisco Pizarro captured the Inca capital of Cuzco located in modern Peru. This period was a “search for wealth” to use the phrase coined by anthropologist Eric Wolf in his monumental book Europe and the People Without History.³ During this time, not only were native populations devastated, many countries became economically dependent on the export of a few natural resource-based commodities—gold, silver, lumber, cattle, and agricultural crops such as indigo and sugar—a dependence that persists today. In addition, the profits generated by Latin America’s mineral and agricultural wealth accrued to only a few people—another pattern that continues to the present. A further contemporary situation with a foundation during this initial period of European involvement was the establishment of the dual pattern of extremely large and small landholdings—the latifundia (the large estates owned by the elite [haciendas and plantations]) and the minifundia (the extremely small holdings owned by non-elite mestizos and others).

The third period of Latin American history is often referred to as the period of caudillo politics (political bosses), which lasted approximately from the end of the wars of independence (1810–1820) into the 1930s. During the end of this time period, considerable industrialization took place in some of the more economically progressive countries, which became the wealthiest countries of the region (Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela). Rural peoples, especially indigenous peoples, in these countries were affected by the trend toward privatization of Indian ejidos (communally held and managed land) and the decimation of many
indigenous communities in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and elsewhere.

During the following period, roughly between the 1930s and the early 1980s, Latin American governments attempted to expand their industrial bases, often along with considerable economic protectionism. Beginning in the early 1980s, Latin America began undergoing a period of neoliberal economic reform by which the countries of Latin America have sought further integration into the global economy. The economies of the countries of the region have been opened; formerly government-controlled services and enterprises have been privatized; international, extraregional, and regional trade agreements—such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, the United States, and Canada; and the southern common market, MERCOSUR, between Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay—have been negotiated to advance globalization.

The earliest period of European invasion, conquest, and colonization caused excessive suffering and death among the native populations of Latin America. It disrupted and often destroyed indigenous peoples’ food production, economic, political, and social systems. Many indigenous peoples disappeared entirely and forever during this period, as much from the destruction of their social, political, and economic systems as from the effects of newly introduced European diseases. In spite of the devastating impact of the initial period of conquest, followed by 500 years of domination through a series of colonial and state governments, many of Latin America’s indigenous peoples and cultures survived. The current period of economic globalization, however, is often referred to as the “Second Conquest” because of its potential threat to destroy forever indigenous cultures throughout the region.

Today, indigenous peoples make up a minority of the total population of Latin America, numerically as well as politically (see Table 2). In a few countries, however, such as Guatemala, Bolivia, Peru, and southern Mexico, native peoples make up a significant percentage of the national population. Today, Latin America is an extremely ethnically diverse region that is home to indigenous/native, mestizo/ladino, white/European, Afro-Latin American, and other groups including those with East Indian, East Asian, and Middle Eastern heritage. As Table 2 shows, the ethnic makeup varies significantly among countries.

In most countries of the region, indigenous peoples commonly occupy the more remote and isolated areas that tend also to be the areas with the greatest biological diversity, including the tropical rainforests of the Amazon and Central America. Throughout the region, the number of culturally distinct indigenous peoples tends to be high in the most biologically rich and ecologically significant ecosystems. At the same time, however, native peoples also constitute an increasing number of urban dwellers as their indigenous homelands are threatened by outside interests and they are com-
Table 2
Ethnic Composition of Latin America

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<td>White or or Creole</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ladino (%)</td>
<td>European (%)</td>
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<td>Native or</td>
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<td>Indian (%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Other (%)</td>
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*Contains both mestizo and white/European.


... propelled to migrate to the cities. While indigenous peoples usually are part of the poorest segment of Latin American society, by no means are Latin America’s “poor” and “indigenous peoples” synonymous. In many places, such as Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and parts of Mexico, the “poor” are largely composed of national ethnic majorities (mestizos or lad-
Introduction

In other countries, including Brazil and Ecuador, Afro-Latin Americans make up a disproportionate share of the poor.

Today, indigenous peoples of the region face considerable threats to their material and cultural survival. Many native peoples currently are resisting the so-called Second Conquest and are struggling to survive culturally as well as materially in contemporary Latin America. One of the primary means of struggle has been the political actions of a growing number of indigenous and grassroots organizations that are attempting to negotiate with nation-states and corporations for various legal rights (especially land rights) and protection. Many of these efforts also function to protect and, in some cases, rejuvenate indigenous traditions and cultures as well as increase the incomes, health, education, and well-being of the region’s native peoples. Moreover, many of the current threats to, and the struggles of, indigenous peoples are shared by the multitudes of the region’s poor mestizos, ladinos, and Afro-Americans, and other marginalized groups such as women and children. For example, according to many measures of human well-being—including income, poverty, health, literacy, and education—Honduras’ poor latino majority is more similar to the indigenous Mayans in neighboring Guatemala than to “rich” Hondurans.

Contemporary threats to Latin America’s indigenous and other marginalized peoples during the present period of globalization are the focus of this volume. While the examples in this book concentrate on contemporary Latin America, most of the chapters show how the region’s history contributes significantly to current conditions and demonstrate the need to consider the region’s past in order to improve its future.

LATIN AMERICA’S SHARED PROBLEMS

Given its tremendous heterogeneity, the most obvious common denominators in Latin America may be its shared problems. Changes in the global economy since the 1970s have played a considerable role in structuring current social, economic, and political conditions in Latin America as well as contributed significantly to related problems. The pace of globalization (along with its companion, modernization) has been uneven, but no major segment of Latin America has been untouched by it. The threats, if not the impacts, of these changes are being felt socially, economically, politically, technologically, and culturally. Traditional patterns of human settlement are being altered; there is an increasing migration from rural to urban areas; new technologies of exploiting the environment are being introduced; and new industries and other institutions are appearing on the landscape. Rapid and often distressing changes have provoked political violence and revolution in many places including Mexico, Peru, Central America, Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil.
Economic Growth Along with Increasing Unemployment and Continuing Poverty

The 1980s often are referred to as the "lost decade" in Latin America because virtually all countries in the region experienced severe economic recessions. Between 1982 and 1989 the real gross domestic product (GDP) grew an average of 1.4% annually, but per capita GDP declined by approximately 1% per year. During the 1980s, the region experienced increasing rates of unemployment, declines in real wages and earning power, and increases in levels of poverty. By the end of the decade, 30% of the urban families in Latin America were living in poverty—50% in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

The crippling economic crisis of the lost decade led most of the region's national governments to accept the structural adjustment measures imposed by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and external creditors. Structural adjustment profoundly affected most people because national governments were compelled to cut spending by eliminating public sector jobs (e.g., teachers, health care professionals, garbage collectors, and administrators) and by reducing social, educational, health, and other services. Government measures also included accepting the dominant economic development model that promoted economic growth per se with little regard for the human and environmental consequences. Many large-scale development programs exacerbated social, economic, and political problems, as well as environmental degradation which most of the region's societies experienced to some extent earlier. Adjustment policies reinforced these problems, emphasized inequalities, and set the stage for political polarization.

Despite more than a decade of economic reforms aimed at furthering globalization throughout the region, a new report released by the International Labor Organization (ILO), an agency of the United Nations, raises serious concerns about the social and economic justice of globalization. The report concludes that, even though Latin America experienced a moderate economic recovery during most of the 1990s, the benefits of economic growth have not been equitably distributed. The report maintains that impoverished families continue to suffer disproportionately from the paucity of job opportunities and a growing deterioration in the quality of employment that is available.

Unemployment in the region increased in the last several years when the private sector did not fill the void created by the large cuts in public sector employment. According to the report, presented by the director general of the ILO, the unemployment rate in Latin America in 1999 rose to 9.5%, surpassing the peak jobless rates during the economic and debt crisis of the 1980s—despite a decade of economic reform and modernization. Through-
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Out the 1990s, more than 85% of all new jobs created in the region (and 59% of all nonagricultural jobs) were in the lower quality, so-called informal sector. The informal sector comprises temporary and part-time jobs such as street vendors, food sellers, babysitters, maids, laundresses, car washers, and shoe shiners. Wages, benefits, and levels of social protection are nonexistent or much lower in the informal sector than in the formal economic sector, and workers in the informal sector are almost never protected by any laws nor are they usually able to join recognized unions to protect their interests. As a result of recent trends, workers' buying power in Latin America fell dramatically over the past decade, dropping to 27% below what a salary bought in 1980 for minimum wage earners.

Women and younger workers have been especially hard hit by these recent economic trends. Youth unemployment rates commonly are double the national averages and triple for workers between the ages of fifteen and nineteen. Women's unemployment rates are between 10% and 60% higher than men's rates. The report also expresses a "growing concern" about child labor, which affects from 15% to 20% of the children in the region between the ages of ten and fourteen, and its potential to perpetuate high rates of poverty if left unchecked. The ILO report raises serious questions about the potential of economic globalization to benefit all sectors of society equitably and significantly reduce levels of poverty throughout the region.

Rural and Urban Poverty

Although urban areas exhibit high rates of poverty, it is the rural families who are most negatively affected and whose living conditions have deteriorated the most significantly in recent years. Estimates based on case studies conducted in rural areas by two United Nations agencies, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), suggest that an average of 70% of Latin America's rural families live in poverty. Growing rural poverty remains one of the paramount factors stimulating rural to urban migration as the rural poor flock to towns and cities looking for work—usually available (if at all) only in the informal sector. Latin America ceased being predominantly rural during the 1960s. By 1990 only 28% of the region's population continued to live in rural areas. Current estimates are that in 2000, the rural population makes up only about 25% of the total population of the region.

Environment and Health

The critical social and economic changes that have occurred in the region point to the intimate connection among economy, environmental condi-
tions, and human health. As a result of declining health budgets and inadequate sanitation measures in many countries, diarrheal and parasitic diseases are a leading cause of high mortality and morbidity among certain groups, especially the poor, women, and children. Simultaneously, the rapid growth of urban centers has elevated health risks from increased exposure to toxic chemicals that contaminate the air, water, soil, and food.

The urban population of Latin America is increasing by about 3% annually. In 1985, 250 cities in the region had 100,000 or more inhabitants. By 2000, an estimated 450 cities will fall into that category, including about 100 cities with populations of one million or more and 15 with more than 4 million residents. Deteriorating living conditions are a characteristic typical of most large cities in the region, especially in newer squatter settlements and in older downtown areas. Families that migrate to the cities from rural areas often are unable to find adequate housing or employment. Poor living conditions, including scarcity of potable water, sewerage, and solid waste disposal, intensify as population densities increase and public services (including health) continue to decline.

The production and use of chemicals by the growing number of export-oriented industrial processing plants (maquiladores), located in so-called Free Trade Zones throughout the region, also significantly increase environmental health problems, as do the increased number of accidents, noise, and congestion. Because the region as a whole is committed to globalization and economic growth, the upward trend in environmental problems affecting human health will persist and will probably accelerate.

Growing rural poverty and established links between environmental decline and diminished human health in rural areas suggests that people living in rural areas are also at risk. Rural people are significantly less likely than urban residents to have access to a safe and sufficient water supply, sewerage and waste disposal systems, adequate housing, and health services. In addition, because the rural poor increasingly are dependent on off-farm income, much of which is earned as agricultural laborers, they continually face the risks of exposure to toxic pesticides. Recent studies of the region demonstrate that the excessive use of pesticides is placing farmworkers in jeopardy and is contaminating soils, surface, and groundwater. Moreover, as some disease vectors (such as mosquitoes) have become resistant to pesticides, the incidence of diseases such as malaria is rising.

**Hunger and Food Security**

In part because of ongoing economic crises, exacerbated by major natural disasters, political unrest, and wars in some countries, the overall rise in food prices in recent years has outstripped increases in wages in many countries, resulting in a drop of real purchasing power to buy food. Because levels of food consumption are linked to real income levels, food con-
Introduction

Sumpion has deteriorated in some countries, especially among the poor. In addition, national level data on food production suggest that per capita food production declined in approximately half of the countries in the region during recent decades while the per capita daily availability of calories diminished in about a quarter of the countries.\textsuperscript{11}

Overall information on national food production and the per capita availability of calories or protein reveal only part of the reality. Recent analyses of hunger and food security demonstrate how hunger and malnutrition can coexist with growth in agricultural production, especially if crops are destined for export to foreign markets. International and national class interests and power relationships have meshed with donor and debt strategies to create food and nutritional deficits in many communities. The authors of a recent compilation of studies of hunger and food security in Mexico and Central America point to several factors that have generated regional food insecurity: extreme socioeconomic and political inequality, war and the large-scale displacement of peoples, responses to ongoing economic crises, overemphasis on export agriculture, overreliance on food imports, poorly developed mechanisms for distributing food to those most in need, and the degradation of the natural resource base resulting from dominant development strategies.\textsuperscript{12}

Environmental Degradation

Continuing economic crises, population growth especially in urban areas, and the desperate need of rural people to sustain their families have all stimulated government efforts to increase foreign exchange earnings and economic growth, often through intensified exploitation of the region’s natural resources. These efforts in turn have led to a staggering rate of environmental destruction. Widespread deforestation, erosion, desertification, and destruction of watersheds are among the consequences. Expansion of export crops in areas that are the most appropriate and have the greatest potential for agriculture has forced hundreds of thousands of smallholders off the land and has contributed to growing landlessness in rural areas. Those who remain find themselves relegated to marginal, steep-sloped lands that are easily degraded. Severe soil erosion and other forms of environmental degradation have decreased crop yields at a time when peasant farmers face severe economic hardships. The marginalization of peasant producers has generated hunger, reduced national food production, and systematically destroyed the environment and natural resource base. The health of the natural environment has become a critical dimension of present and future food security in many countries of the region.\textsuperscript{13}
Environment and Indigenous Peoples

Throughout Latin America, governments pressed by continuing economic crises are struggling to increase income by expanding the exploitation of natural resources within their national territories. Simultaneously, increasingly impoverished peasant farmers likewise are attempting to survive by migrating to previously more isolated frontier areas—the few remaining areas inhabited by indigenous peoples. These economic strategies, along with the growth in road building, lumbering, agribusiness, hydroelectric projects, mining and oil operations, unregulated and planned colonization, and the expropriation of genetic materials (and the associated cultural knowledge), pose an augmented threat to indigenous peoples. They also are a major source of conflict between indigenous peoples and national governments. Aggravating the situation of indigenous peoples throughout the region are the numerous political and military conflicts—which a geographer has termed the “Third World War”—which have increasingly been associated with economic development initiatives. In Central America, for example, the Miskito of Honduras and Nicaragua, caught between the Contras and the Sandinistas (and exploited by both) during the 1980s, now face threats to the control of their homelands by national development efforts to extract natural resources from their territories, and by the resettlement of impoverished ladino families from other parts of Nicaragua and Honduras (see chapters 6 and 7). In this context, a potentially positive trend for the Miskito, and other native peoples in the region, is the emergence of indigenous organizations that are attempting to maintain control of the environmental and natural resources under their domain and, in turn, their own cultures and destinies. Their efforts have been significantly enhanced by growing support from international environmental and human rights organizations.

THREATS AND RESPONSES

The case studies included in this volume are specific examples of the various cultural and material threats currently faced by indigenous and other groups at risk in Latin America. These include threats to cultural survival, to local economies and local environments, to health and nutrition, and to control of land and other natural resources. These threats come through a variety of mechanisms, including economic globalization and modernization, dominant economic development strategies—agriculture, shrimp farming, lobster diving, tourism, mining, even real estate development—and the colonization of frontier areas. Individual cases focus on particular groups, indigenous peoples, mestizos, ladinos, Afro-Latin Americans, who are struggling to sustain their cultures, lives, and livelihoods. A few of the cases examine how different
groups at risk sometimes must negotiate (or choose not to negotiate) conflicts with each other.

Far from presenting a bleak picture of the future of the peoples at risk, however, the cases demonstrate the creative, innovative, and powerful responses to these threats currently being engaged in by diverse peoples throughout the hemisphere. These include responses at the individual and family level: agricultural intensification and production for markets, greater reliance on wage work, seasonal wage labor migration, rural to urban migration in search of work, and migration to frontier areas (see chapter 2). They also include group strategies, especially organization for political action. From Mexico to Chile, indigenous peoples as well as other disadvantaged groups, including peasants, fisherfolk, and women, have established local organizations that have become one of the most important elements of their survival strategies. Native peoples have enhanced their efforts to control the dominant powers that have exploited them for the last 500 years. The strengthening of ethnic and cultural identities has been an important foundation for these efforts, not only for indigenous groups but also for mestizos and Afro-Americans (see chapters 3, 5, 8, 9, and 12). In most countries, the various indigenous, peasant, and urban groups have formed national networks and organizations to promote the welfare of their communities and attain other goals and objectives. Increasingly, local and indigenous groups have joined with their compatriots in other countries in international and even global networks; for example, the Industrial Shrimp Action Network discussed in chapter 4. These international and global networks often include support from groups outside of Latin America.

Beyond the widespread movement to organize locally, nationally, regionally, and globally, the responses of particular indigenous and local cultures to renewed oppression and threats from nation-states and corporate interests have varied considerably. These strategies for cultural survival have ranged from the peaceful and generally effective political negotiations of the Kuna and Ngobe with the government of Panama (see chapters 8 and 9) to armed rebellion as in the case of the Maya Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico. Some cases are characterized by a degree of violent confrontation as in the examples of the Tz'utujil Maya (chapter 10), the artisanal fisherfolk of the Gulf of Fonseca (chapter 4), the English-Speaking Bay Islanders (chapter 5), and the Quechua of Peru (chapter 13). Strategies for cultural survival also include innovative and, to date, relatively successful efforts such as the creation and comanagement of forest reserve areas such as those by the Awa of Ecuador (chapter 11) and the Maya of Quintana Roo (chapter 1) which may have application to other groups in other areas. Finally, strategies also include the use of new spatial technologies (Geographic Information Systems and Global Positioning Systems) as in the participatory mapping project of the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve described in chapter 7. However, as in the other instances, the use of innovative,
new technologies is not an end in itself, but rather a means of political action aimed at providing the Miskito, Garifuna, and others the power to affect their own destinies.

NOTES


2. This classification is based on that of Smith and Young presented in chapter 12 of their introductory textbook in cultural anthropology (see Smith and Young, Cultural Anthropology, 414–56). Readers are encouraged to consult that book for an excellent summary treatment of this subject.


12. Ibid.


15. See also Peter Poole, Indigenous Mapping and Biodiversity Conservation: An Analysis of Current Activities and Opportunities for Applying Geomatic Technologies (Landover, Md.: Corporate Press, 1995).
MEXICANS
Chapter 1

The Mayans of Central Quintana Roo

David Barton Bray

CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The People

From 1850 to 1901, a group of Yucatec Maya known as the Cruzeño or "people of the Cross" refused to be displaced by or incorporated into expanding sugar plantations, defied the Mexican nation, and established a rebel state in the forests in the interior of Quintana Roo, at the time a remote region in the eastern Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico. These rebel Maya were descendants of one of the greatest civilizations of the Western Hemisphere. Before the Spanish conquest, the ancient Maya erected great stone buildings and pyramids, practiced intensive forms of agriculture, used a form of hieroglyphic writing, and conducted astronomical reckonings in the vast rain forests of what is today southern Mexico and northern Central America. The descendants of these Maya occupy a nearly continuous territory in southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize.

The contemporary Mayan people can be defined as a language family, a cultural group, and the occupants of a geographic space. In Mexico, they include the Yucatec Maya who gave birth to the rebel group discussed in this chapter, a small group of Lacandón Maya of the lowland rain forest of Chiapas, and the far more populous Tzotzil and Tzeltal Maya of the Chiapas highlands, many of whom have migrated into the lowlands, as well as scattered groups elsewhere. In Guatemala, they include the Quichéan peoples of the eastern and central highlands and the Mamean peoples of the western highlands. Other groups live in Belize. The millions of contemporary Maya have generally similar sorts of subsistence patterns, textiles, and other cultural patterns but proudly differentiate themselves from each other by distinctive textile designs and other practices.
The rebel Yucatec Maya came to terms slowly and grudgingly with the reality of their participation in the Mexican nation; as late as the 1930s they were attempting to negotiate foreign diplomatic alliances through visiting U.S. archaeologists. “The Mayan Zone” of Quintana Roo still maintains a distinct cultural identity as the mostly heavily indigenous region of the modern Mexican state of Quintana Roo. The Maya today live in a precarious equilibrium between a declining traditional agricultural lifestyle and the economic opportunities offered by the booming tourist centers of Quintana Roo. Standing in between those two options is a third way, that of intensifying their management of the dry tropical forest habitat which has sheltered and supported them for 150 years. In the last fifteen years they have made significant strides in the sustainable management of their forest resources, particularly in the management of mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*). In order for the forest to become a genuine economic alternative, however, there are new demands to manage it more intensively without permanently degrading the resource for their children.

The Setting

Today Quintana Roo, formed out of a federal territory in 1973, is best known as the home of Cancún, a resort destination favored by U.S. college students. Long before the beaches of Cancún became world famous, other features of Quintana Roo’s geology determined the course of its development. Quintana Roo, like the rest of the Yucatán, is mostly a flat limestone shelf, much like southern Florida in the United States. The limestone is heavily pitted with myriad sinkholes, some of them quite large, called cenotes. Quintana Roo’s only river, the Río Hondo, forms the southern boundary with Belize; the rest of the water in the state moves through underground channels, accessible only through the cenotes. In most places, only a thin layer of soil has formed over the limestone which, combined with a five-month dry season, has limited the density and height of the forest. Because the forests receive about 1,200 millimeters (47 inches) of rain a year, ecologists call them “dry” or, at best, “semihumid” tropical forests. The canopy may only reach as high as 30 to 35 meters (98 to 115 feet) as opposed to 45 to 50 meters (148 to 164 feet) for wetter forests on better soils. Nonetheless, these forests have a rich biodiversity with as many as 100 tree species, 1,257 different kinds of plants, and 151 vertebrate species. One survey of late secondary forest (an advanced state of succession from an original clearing) in central Quintana Roo yielded a total of ninety-eight tree species from thirty-three families. Predominant trees include the sapodilla tree (*Manilkara zapota*); whose sap (called chicle), which was traditionally used to make chewing gum; the ramon (*Brosimum alicastrum*), used for forage; and mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*), valued for centuries as one of the finest woods available for use in furniture and inlays.¹
Traditional Subsistence Strategies

The Mayan milpa or cornfield is more than just a place to plant corn; traditionally such crops as beans, squash, chiles, and yucca are interplanted. Corn was developed as a food crop for humans in Mexico and, as one would expect for such an ancient practice, it has developed a complex system of practices and beliefs around its cultivation. Traditionally, and to a significant degree still today, clearing land, planting, tending, and harvesting mark the principal stages of the agricultural cycle and occupy much of the Mayas' time, energy, and concern. The type of agriculture practiced is known as slash and burn because it is based on clearing and burning forestlands, planting for a few years until soil fertility is exhausted, and then clearing a new patch of forest. The technique depends on having substantial areas of forest so that whole villages can continue finding new forest soils in which to plant. When anthropologist Alfonso Villa Rojas visited the region in the 1930s, he found each farmer cultivating nearly 6 hectares (15 acres) to support his family for a year. The Maya also traditionally planted vegetables and herbs in large wooden boxes next to the house and raised chickens, turkeys, and pigs. The forest was a source of game, particularly deer and white-collared peccary, wild fruits, medicinal herbs, and building materials.

Social and Political Organization

The power of the Cruzob, or Talking Cross cult, also marked Maya social organization. Until well into the twentieth century, and to some extent today, the Maya organized themselves around the model of the Yucatec militias, out of which they sprang as a military force in 1848. Since the 1930s, they have also organized their communities according to the regulations of Mexico's agrarian reform laws. These laws call for the communities to select their leadership democratically, usually for three-year periods.

Although some Maya have always lived throughout the eastern Yucatán, it is central Quintana Roo that is known as the Mayan Zone because of its density of population and the historical presence of the Cruzob as a major demographic infusion in a mostly unpopulated area. However, the rest of the state has passed from having a Maya majority to a shrinking minority, overwhelmed by the explosive growth of tourism and immigration into the state. By 1995 only 26% of the population of Quintana Roo spoke an indigenous language. Even today, however, the two municipios (counties) that make up central Quintana Roo, Felipe Carillo Puerto and José María Morelos, are an average of 75% Mayan; the two municipios to the north, Lázaro Cárdenas and Solidaridad, also have substantial Mayan populations. The largest absolute number of Maya are found in the mun-
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icíplo where Cancún is located, although they constitute only 17% of the
population there. The Maya have larger families than average, with live
births of 4.32 compared to an average of 3.6 for the rest of the state.
Twenty-six percent of the population is illiterate, and only 38% of the
population has completed primary school. Mexico’s status as an advanced
developing nation has meant that most villages today have running water
and electricity. The Mayan Zone includes only one town with more than
10,000 inhabitants; the rest of the population lives in small hamlets widely
dispersed over the landscape. In 1990 there were 244 population nuclea-
tions, with almost all of them having fewer than 500 inhabitants.³

Religion and World View

Although Mayan culture and religion are undergoing changes, traditional
beliefs still have a very strong presence. In the Mayan conception, the world
of the supernatural dominates everything; they feel continually overseen by
one of the many saints and spirits that emerged from the syncretism be-
tween ancient Mayan beliefs and the Catholicism brought by the conquer-
ing Spaniards. Because the Mayan deities are demanding, people perform
frequent ceremonies, rituals, and prayers to keep them satisfied. The Maya
of this region have been strongly marked by the emergence of a unique cult
in the nineteenth century, the cult of the Talking Cross. Although dimin-
ished in importance today, the cult and other elements of nineteenth-
century Yucatec history have left their mark on local Mayan social and
political organization. The emergence of the Talking Cross cult resulted in
features that significantly differentiated the Maya of Central Quintana Roo
from other Maya and their belief systems. For example, the image of the
cross displaced the images of the saints important elsewhere, and the high
priest of the Talking Cross displaced the village priest’s functions.

THREATS TO SURVIVAL

You have come to pick a quarrel with me; the letter says that the Queen will
send troops against me. If the English want to fight, let them come, in
thousands if they like. If this is the case, say so, and I will dispose of you at
once.

—The Talking Cross, addressing captured British soldiers,

1861⁴

The Mayan people as a whole have survived the collapse of their ancient
civilizations at the end of the first millennium and the conquest of the
Spanish halfway through the second millennium. One hundred and fifty
years before the end of the second millennium, in 1850, one group of Maya
passed through a third major threat to their survival, one that marks them
The Mayans of Central Quintana Roo

to this day. These Maya were the protagonists of an armed uprising known to historians as the Caste War of Yucatán because, during the colonial period, Maya were denied all rights as members of a scorned "caste" or lower stratum of society. Many Maya were forced into near slavery on sugarcane plantations in northwestern Yucatán, and Maya in the eastern peninsula, who had seen their fate, declined the work. As one anthropologist described it,

The Indians who, for whatever reason, refused to attach themselves to the sugar plantation (or were lucky enough to avoid getting rounded up) found themselves being pushed further into the bush with each passing year. As the plantations took over the best lands of the rich frontier region the Mayan's position was becoming more and more desperate.5

They also protested unfair taxes, including payments for religious sacraments, debt peonage, lack of access to agricultural land, and the frequent physical abuse they received. The Maya had firearms and military experience because they had been pressed into service in civil wars between Yucatecans who quarreled over whether to continue to be part of Mexico, declare independence, or affiliate with the United States. The Maya rose up in 1848 and almost took the capital city of Merida before retreating.

By 1850 they had lost militarily and were witnessing deadly fratricidal conflict among their leaders. Nearly 10,000 retreated into the unpopulated wilderness of eastern Yucatán. The Maya were shattered militarily, disorganized, and demoralized. In an effort to revitalize their opposition, the defeated but defiant Maya established a religious sect that has endured to this day; the Talking Cross. The followers believed that the cross spoke to them, interpreted events, and dictated courses of action. The cross was used to lead the Cruzob into battle, and authorities in Merida and Belize found themselves exchanging letters with the Talking Cross. There is historical evidence that the Mayan leaders used ventriloquists to induce belief in the cross in their followers, but in 1863 an internal uprising against the leaders associated with the cross exposed the hoax. Nonetheless, the cross remained a powerful force in Mayan religious and political life, and even if it ceased to talk, a belief in written notes from the cross survived well into the twentieth century. The rebel Maya functioned as a state in many senses. They successfully rejected the political authority of Mexico; at different times they negotiated for arms, fought with, and sought recognition from the British in Belize; and as late as the 1930s, they solicited political assistance for a possible political alliance with the United States through archeologist Sylvanus Morley.

Another striking aspect of Cruzob culture was the fact that they reorganized themselves along the lines of the Yucatec militia in which many had served between 1839 and 1847, replete with generals, majors, lieuten-
ants, and other military ranks, and a company structure. In 1867 there were reports of an army of 11,000 men, equipped with rifles and munitions captured from the Yucatecans. As late as the 1930s, Villa Rojas found the system of organization by companies had become a part of the way of organizing kinship and other social relations with, for example, marriages taking place outside the company.

The Caste War came to a formal end on May 4, 1901, when General Ignacio Bravo occupied the Cruzeb capital of Chan Santa Cruz (today called Felipe Carillo Puerto) bringing railroad tracks and telegraph lines with him. However, the Maya continued to wage guerrilla warfare from their forest villages, intensifying attacks on convoys and commercial traffic by 1912. Due to the demands of the Mexican Revolution, Chan Santa Cruz was abandoned by the Mexicans in 1912. The Maya showed what they thought of the benefits brought by civilization and reisolated themselves from the outside world by destroying the railroad tracks and cutting the telegraph and telephone lines. In 1915 the Cruzeb met with the president of Mexico and established somewhat more peaceful relations with the Mexican government.

Even though they survived the onslaught of the Mexicans, the Maya could not protect themselves against the diseases of the outside world. Smallpox and influenza swept through the population in the years before 1920, eliminating whole villages, and perhaps reducing the population by half. Only in the 1930s could the Mexican government begin to establish schools in many of the communities and to issue Mayan land titles under Mexico’s agrarian reform laws.

The traditional Mayan economy revolved around the cornfield and subsistence uses of the forest. Beginning in the 1920s, however, the forests were subjected to progressively more commercial uses, uses in which the Maya have participated. By 1920 a boom in chewing gum popularity taught the Maya a new use for the sapodilla tree whose sap was the basis for gum. In the 1970s and earlier, small companies began paying pitiful amounts to log mahogany and Spanish cedar (Cedrus odorata) on their lands, and Mexico’s national railroad began buying railroad ties hacked out of beautiful tropical hardwoods. Later, the soaring demand for thatching materials used in the resorts of the Cancún-Tulum corridor intensified the exploitation of palm fronds (Palmae Mexicana). The federal and state governments also became steadily more involved in various efforts to organize, to institute political controls, and to deliver services to the Mayan Zone. In the 1970s, many of the communities of the area were organized into “unions” or peasant organizations, which were focused into the production and marketing of railroad ties. This effort quickly fell into the hands of corrupt Mayan leaders who were in collusion with government officials, and the railroad-tie producers did not receive the full value of their product.
The Mayans of Central Quintana Roo

The organization has brought change. Before the peasants didn't know what forest production was; the buyers were the ones who knew and told us what to do. Now the (community) is the owner because the peasant is organized and knows his work. (Abundio Canché, former president of the Mayan Zone Organization)

It was into this situation that a notable new organizing effort began among the Maya—one which has delivered a greater degree of control over their forests than previously existed, but which is now bringing new and daunting challenges as well. In the mid-1980s, foresters and organizers from the state government of Quintana Roo, the federal government of Mexico, and foreign consultants from the German government banded together with a new vision of community forest management for Quintana Roo. The assumption of this program, known as the Forest Pilot Plan (FPP), was that the only way to stop the deforestation that was then sweeping over Quintana Roo was for the communities to manage the forests directly themselves. The forest must provide an economic alternative for them that could compete with agriculture and cattle raising. The promoters of the FPP worked mostly with mestizo (mixed Spanish and Indian) colonists in southern Quintana Roo, but they also sent a small team to work with Maya in the central part of the state. Although that team received very little support from the FPP, it remained to carve out a new production alternative for some of the communities. With the help of the organizing team, twenty-three communities formed the Organization of Forest Production Communities of the Mayan Zone (Mayan Zone Organization). Following the FPP methodology, the communities voluntarily declared substantial areas of their forest lands to be "permanent forest areas," areas never to be converted into any other land use, such as agriculture or cattle. Instead, the communities would manage these permanent forest areas for timber and non-timber forest products, seeking to find enough value in them to warrant maintaining the standing forest. They also established small sawmills and furniture workshops in several communities and captured the profits from several stages of the production chain.

The members of the Mayan Zone Organization, representing about 15% of the total population of the area, served as a model for alternative development in the region. The role of university-trained forestry professionals was key in the founding of the organization and continues to be crucial today, although a new generation of Mayan leadership and forest technicians is starting to emerge. The principal management focus in the early years was on the sustainable harvesting of mahogany and cedar. Unfortunately, most of the other products of the forest, the lesser-known tropical species used for railroad ties, chicle, and palms and by wildlife, were not put under any systematic management plan. Nonetheless, some of the communities accomplished something rare in the world—community management of forests for commercial timber production. Timber production, even
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on a small scale, is a complicated industrial process that involves substantial investments in production and processing equipment, as well as close coordination. It requires the establishment of a community enterprise dedicated to sustainable logging. This accomplishment has won the Mayan Zone a degree of international recognition, which is richly deserved. However, it has also become clear that mahogany management alone is not sufficient to save the Mayans from a series of threats to their continued ability to live in and off the forest.

In the forest there are animals: pheasant, turkey, deer. . . we also collect medicinal herbs: cinnamon, cuyo, copal, tankasché and fruits like zapote, guaya and palms like guano. That's why the young people have to preserve the forest, because it's what they are, and the only thing they have. (Jacinto Cob, of the community of Laguna Kaná, Mayan Zone, Quintana Roo)

The threats stem from a series of crises in production, and from the growth of nontraditional employment opportunities in the Cancún area. The first crisis is the precipitous decline in the extent and productivity of the basis of Mayan culture, the milpa. In the 1940s, Maya typically planted almost 6 hectares (15 acres) of corn; in the 1970s and in the 1980s it was down to less than 5 hectares (12 acres), and today most plant less than 3 hectares (7.5 acres). The productivity per hectare has also plummeted. The price of chicle has been stagnant for years, and there is only one government-controlled buyer. More recently, the market for railroad ties has been highly unstable; in one recent year, there were no buyers at all. Increasingly severe droughts are also resulting in more damaging fires, whose smoke drifts across the southern United States. Over the decades of logging, both by contractors in the early period and more recently by the communities, the forests have become impoverished. Mistakes in the reforestation practices for the first ten years have also damaged the ability of the forest to recover its commercial productivity. Wildlife is being hunted out around many communities. The limitations of the FPP model are becoming obvious fifteen years after its founding. Only a handful of the FPP communities have enough mahogany to be commercially viable. All the rest have only stands of the harder-to-market lesser-known species, and they must look for other ways to reap value for the forest. For them, the FPP has not yet offered a solution.

Finally, there is both the threat and the opportunity of service-sector employment. Many of the Mayan men, particularly the young ones, now spend part of the year working as bricklayers on the high-rise hotels of the Cancún-Tulum corridor. Furthermore, the expansion of this strip, the “Riviera Maya” in the publicity campaigns of Mexico’s tourism planners, is bringing luxury tourism within one hour from them. On the southern coast of Quintana Roo, the plans are on the drawing boards to develop a lower-
The Mayans of Central Quintana Roo

density "Costa Maya" which will also present both economic opportunities and cultural threats to the survival of the Cruzob. Directly to the east, the urgency of conservation was responsible for the creation of the 528,000-hectare (1,304,000-acre) Si'an Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, an enormous protected wetland which covers some of the traditional hunting grounds of the nearby communities.

Perhaps the most intractable crises brought by the modern world to the Maya are alcoholism and television viewing. By one estimate, a considerable amount of the income that comes from forest and service-sector activities is spent on alcohol. The accompanying problems of health, abuse of family members, and lost income are serious social problems in most Mayan communities. Organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous have begun to appear in some of the larger villages. The spread of Protestantism in many communities, whose adherents usually give up drinking, has helped to mitigate this problem to some degree, but it is a source of cultural change among the normally nominally Catholic Maya. The presence of television sets in many homes has been blamed for a decline in home gardens. Family members find spending time in front of the television more pleasurable than tilling soil under the blazing sun. The exposure to the full range of distractions offered by the modern world by those who leave the village to work is another source of unpredictable cultural change.

RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

Now, THE LAND HERE HAS BEEN DIVIDED by the Mexican masters. . . . They don't like us; they don't give us any respect. They don't AID US like they should. . . . A long time ago, long ago, we were all VERY IGNORANT. ALL IGNORANT. Our eyes were closed . . . Now, in the time we are living, WE ARE ALL "peasants of the Mayan zone". All our eyes are open. All of them.

—Narration collected by anthropologist Allan F. Burns, 1971*

In the second half of the nineteenth century, anthropologist Paul Sullivan quoted documentary sources describing the forests of central Quintana Roo as "a place of desolation and death . . . inhabited only by birds, wild beasts and Maya Indians more fearsome than the wild beasts themselves" and "an excellent place to keep away from." Today, these same forests are increasingly impoverished of their biological diversity, surrounded by the institutions of the modern world, and the increasingly beleaguered Maya have an uncertain future as a shrinking minority with few skills needed by the modern world. Many will leave and become urbanized, but increasing efforts are being made to find new and innovative ways to manage their tropical forests sustainably, giving them a chance to exercise more control
Mayans in the village of Santa María conduct a land-use planning workshop, August 1998. Courtesy of David Bray.

of the pace of change and remain in their communities. In agriculture, the fear of fire, the declining productivity of the milpa, and the limited availability of new forest areas for planting have created new pressures to end or modify the millennia-old practice of slash-and-burn agriculture. The alternatives run the gamut from organic agriculture, which can develop richer soils allowing the farmers to continue cultivating in the same spot, to various forms of agroforestry, a practice that combines agricultural crops, fruit crops, and tree crops.

With the support of the Mayan Zone Organization, small groups within the communities are now experimenting with making compost and planting “green manures,” nitrogen-fixing plants that can be turned under to enrich the soil. The goal is to extend the rotation from the current two to three years to from five to six years, and possibly build up some areas of richer soils that could tolerate permanent agriculture. When a plot is finally abandoned, it will be planted in fruit trees, timber trees, and shade-tolerant crops. In shorter-term plots, the tree crops will be planted at the same time as the corn to create an enriched secondary succession immediately after several corn crops are harvested. In timber, those communities that have mahogany have begun the process of seeking “certification” for sustainably managing their forests. Under this process, outside evaluators visit the community and analyze the forest and logging practices. If they are found to
be sustainable by agreed-upon criteria, the communities can receive a "green seal" that allows them to access high-value niche markets of consumers willing to pay a premium for wood products from sustainable forests.

The communities have also improved their reforestation practices and are experimenting with new methodologies. For the first ten years of the FPP, the communities primarily replanted mahogany seedlings in the small gaps left by the selective logging. However, several years ago, a Mexican tropical ecologist, who works closely with the Mayan Zone Organization, began to study survival rates of the seedlings. She found that survival rates were quite low in the logging gaps, but much higher in logging roads and log storage areas. This discovery caused the organization to begin replanting in the larger areas favored by the sun-loving mahogany seedlings. The communities have also established mini-plantations of mahogany and cedar that can be planted and taken care of by the children in the communities, as a savings account for their own future.

For the majority of communities, however, the most important timber product remains railroad ties. Logging for railroad ties is an extremely low value and wasteful use of what frequently are very beautiful tropical hardwoods. A railroad-tie producer may be able to extract only one or two ties from an entire tree and receives only $9 for each railroad tie. An alternative being explored is the production of carved wooden artisan objects, including animals of the forest, bowls, children's blocks, and other useful and decorative objects. Workshops have already been established in several communities, and some products are already being sold to the tourist shops in Cancún. As many as 200 artisan objects could be carved out of the timber used for railroad ties, giving enormously more value to the wood and to the forest. As another use for the tropical hardwoods, a sawmill outside of Felipe Carrillo Puerto is currently being reconditioned by the organization to begin producing dried and sawn lumber. Women in several villages have established a thriving business in embroidering shirts and blouses with designs based on the plants and animals of the forest, the lowest impact use of the forest of all. A program in reproductive health is also in the process of being established for these women artisans. In an effort to mitigate the increasing scarcity of deer, white-collared peccary, and game birds around many of the communities, initiatives have been made in the captive breeding of wild animals. In several communities, small stone corrals now harbor breeding stocks of white-collared peccary, preferred by the Maya over domestic pork. Other exotic efforts include the cultivation of orchids and ornamental plants under natural forest canopy.

Finally, the Mayan Zone Organization has begun initial studies for a carbon sequestration project, possibly the most novel and ambitious alternative development initiative to date. This initiative would position the Mayan Zone Organization, and eventually the entire Mayan Zone, to cash
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in on the global ecosystem services offered by their forests. As research on the causes and consequences of global warming and global climate change proceed apace, much attention has been focused on the role of growing forests to absorb the enormous amounts of carbon ejected into the atmosphere every year by automobiles and factories. New international mechanisms are now being developed to allow polluting manufacturers to compensate for their carbon emissions by investing in reforestation and forest management in Third World countries, working with entities such as the Mayan Zone Organization. The organization could thus receive additional payments for the reforestation and agroforestry initiatives it has already undertaken and expand in the future.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

All of these efforts and more will be necessary if the Maya are going to be able to continue to live in the forests that have harbored them for 150 years, and their ancestors for many centuries before that. In this process, the Maya must move from depending solely upon the traditional knowledge that sustained them for so long, to an increasingly sophisticated set of management tools that draw both on traditional values and practices and the most advanced scientific concepts of ecosystem management. The Maya of central Quintana Roo are only one group within the millions of Mayan peoples, speaking many different languages, who today live in southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. Their historical role as the protagonists of the Caste War of Yucatán, their adoption of the now-faded cult of the Talking Cross, and their fierce resistance to incorporation into Mexico, which lasted for the first third of the twentieth century, make them a unique case among contemporary Maya. A tradition of resistance and survival will not take them far into the twenty-first century without serious modifications. The Mayans must take on a challenge that continues to baffle highly educated conservationists and foresters—how to manage sustainably a tropical forest for both income and biodiversity conservation. The Maya will have to learn many new things in order to regain the forest as a buffer and filter, allowing them to choose those aspects of the modern world they want and reject those they do not want.

Questions

1. How is the rebellion of the Maya of central Quintana Roo different from or similar to other uprisings of economically or politically oppressed peoples in history?

2. Why do you think the Maya would have violently rejected such modern inventions as the railroad and telegraph?
3. Why would it be difficult for the forest to compete as a source of income with luxury hotels in Cancún?

4. What does it mean for tropical timber to be 'certified'? Would you pay more money for a desk made from certified timber?

5. What does it mean to have a carbon sequestration project? How could this project help the Maya?

NOTES


7. Leticia Merino, “El Aprovechamiento del Bosque por los Maya de Quintana Roo” (unpublished manuscript), p. 188, translated by David Barton Bray.


RESOURCE GUIDE

Published Literature


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Videos and Films

The videos and films below are available through the Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas-Austin.

ILAS Outreach
Sid Richardson Hall 1.310
The University of Texas at Austin
Austin, TX 78712
Telephone: 512-232-2404
Fax: 512-471-3090
e-mail: katebennett@mail.utexas.edu

Lost Kingdoms of the Maya, The National Geographic Society, 1993 (60 minutes).
Maya, the Blood of Kings, Time Life’s Lost Civilizations Series, narrated by Sam Waterston, 1995 (48 minutes).
The Maya, Temples, Tombs and Time, Questar Video, Inc., Chicago, 1995 (53 minutes).

MayaQuest, the Mystery Trail, MECC, Minneapolis, Minn., 1995. (Based on the 1995 expedition, this CD-ROM (Windows or Macintosh) for ages 10 to 16 offers two educational interactive games and a multimedia resource tool with photographs, sound effects and text.)

Rain Forest, The National Geographic Society, 1993 (60 minutes). (Actually filmed in Costa Rica, this video is also recommended for those studying the Maya of the rain forest.)

The Ruta Maya Experience—Belize, Yucatan, Guatemala, Lonely Planet, IVN Communications, Inc., San Ramon, Calif., 1995 (47 minutes). (This Lonely Planet expedition may have special appeal for action-oriented, less academically inclined students.)

WWW Sites

For a good introduction to the ancient Maya, Mexico’s University of Guadalajara maintains a good web site at http://nudgifp.cencar.udg.mx/ingles/Precolombina/Maya/intromaya.html.

To know more about tourism development on the “Riviera Maya” where the
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contemporary Maya mostly work only in building the hotels, you can consult http://cancun.mayan-riviera.com/.

For current news from the state of Quintana Roo you can consult http://www.novenet.com.mx/.

To learn how to go on a tour of the Sian Ka’n Biosphere Reserve, which adjoins the Mayan Zone, visit http://www.cancun.com/siankaan/.

For a good overview of issues of tropical forest management, see the following web page introduced by the Canadian International Development Agency, http://www.rcfa-cfan.org/English/issues.8.html.

Organizations

Amigos de Sian Ka’an is a Cancún-based conservation organization that works on conservation efforts in the Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve, and has worked with some of the communities in the Mayan Zone. Their web page is at http://www.coa.edu/HEJourney/yucatan/SianKaan/directory.html.

Conservation International works on conservation issues throughout southern Mexico and Guatemala, as well as in other places in the world, and can be reached at http://www.conservation.org/.
Chapter 2

The Rural People of Mexico's Northwest Coast

Maria L. Cruz-Torres

There is unrest and discontent in the countryside. In many places this unrest has now become exasperation; in other places the discontent is often translated into acts of desperate violence. This is natural; industrialization and development have been paid for, in great part, by our rural population.

Octavio Paz, Mexican poet, essayist, diplomat, and Nobel Prize winner

CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The People

Various indigenous groups such as the Toteranos and the Nahoa inhabited the Mexican coast during pre-Columbian times. These groups were conquered in the late sixteenth century by Nuño de Guzmán, a particularly brutal conquistador (conqueror). In the early seventeenth century, Jesuit missionaries made their way through the coastal zone with evangelization campaigns targeted toward the native population. Currently, the majority of the rural people refer to themselves as mestizos, people of mixed indigenous and European ancestries; however, many other people in the region can claim some of their ancestry to be African, Greek, French, Chinese, Japanese, German, or North American.

Currently, 23 million people live in Mexico's rural areas, which accounts for about a quarter of the total population of the country. In Spanish, the term campesino (peasant) generally is used to refer to the mostly poor people who live in these rural areas. Throughout most of this century, life for Mexican campesinos has been characterized by a constant struggle for access to the basic resources needed to meet their daily requirements. Dur-
The quality of life in rural areas has declined resulting in an increase in poverty and malnutrition.

The transformation and degradation of natural resources represent the biggest threat to the survival of the campesinos who inhabit Mexico’s northwest coast. For a long time, campesinos in this region have struggled to maintain their access to land for farming and fishing grounds. Government policies, which favor the large-scale, commercial exploitation of these natural resources over the smaller-scale activities of campesino families, have resulted in many localized social and political conflicts.

The Setting

Mexico’s northwest coast is mostly semiarid with a dry subhumid to a warm subhumid climate. There is a long, very marked dry season followed by a short rainy season. Since water is not always available, in many places irrigation systems have been built to guarantee a constant supply for the agricultural activities practiced in the region. One of the most important features of the west coast is the abundance of coastal lagoons, estuaries, seasonal floodplains, and mangrove forest ecosystems. These coastal ecosystems serve as nurseries and habitats to various species of fish, crustaceans, mollusks, and birds. Archaeologists have pointed out the importance of marine resources to pre-Columbian populations living along the coast. Indeed, the abundance of shell “middens” (piles of oyster shells) in many areas confirms this hypothesis. However, as a result of the development of the commercial, export-oriented agriculture, fishing, and aquaculture industries, as well as tourism, many of these coastal ecosystems have been transformed and negatively affected.

Traditional Subsistence Strategies

Mexico’s northwest coast has a long history of depending on the commercial exploitation of its natural resources as a way to promote economic development. For the past three centuries, the mining of silver and other metals has been the pillar of the region’s economy. Currently, large-scale commercial production of agricultural products, such as rice, cotton, tomatoes, mangos, sugarcane, and chili peppers, are produced in the region to be sold to the United States and other countries. Similarly, the large-scale development of the commercial fishing industry originated in the region with the tuna and shrimp fisheries comprising the two most important sectors of the fishing industry. Tourism is also an increasingly important industry in the region. The largest development for mass tourism has taken place in Mazatlán—a major seaport on the central northwestern coast of Sinaloa. Recently, the region’s natural beauty has begun to be exploited commercially as part of a new trend in ecotourism development.
Rural People of Mexico's Northwest Coast

A family on their way out to visit relatives and friends in a nearby community. Courtesy of Maria Cruz-Torres.

Rural families in Mexico's northwest coast are able to survive through their participation in a wide array of economic activities, some aimed at producing crops or products for home consumption (subsistence activities) and others for sale in the local or national markets (commercial activities). Many also borrow money from relatives and friends, obtain remittances from migrant children, and exchange favors between households. For the great majority of the rural coastal population, fishing, farming, and wage labor constitute the three most important economic strategies. People fish for a variety of species including fish, shrimp, and crabs—mostly in the lagoons and estuaries that border their rural communities.

Fishing

People in rural coastal communities have a great deal of knowledge about the fishing resources they use and about the natural environment that surrounds them. Like most human populations who depend on the natural en-
vironment for daily survival, these campesinos can identify the taxonomies of various species according to their biological characteristics and behavioral patterns. Their knowledge systems are every bit as complex and sophisticated as those of professional agricultural and marine scientists. Campesinos use these “funds of knowledge” to plan what (and how) they farm and fish.

Fishing is generally a male activity, and most men engage in both the subsistence and commercial fishing sectors throughout the year. Coastal people take advantage of the various fish species and crabs abundant in the area’s coastal ecosystems at different periods in the fishing cycle. The most commercially valued fishing resource is shrimp, for which the fishing season is three or four months, depending on the various environmental factors that influence the reproduction, growth, and migration of the species.

Groups of three to four men build fishing camps along the shores of the lagoons in which they reside during the entire fishing season. Since shrimp fishing takes place at night (using flashlights to attract and blind the shrimp), most men prefer to stay overnight at the shrimp camps, and they go home only when there is an emergency situation. The fishers either stand along the shore or use small motorboats known as pangas to catch the shrimp using a circular net known as an atarraya that is handled in an overhead sweeping motion not unlike that of a rodeo cowboy roping cattle. Both the small boats and nets are used for subsistence and more commercial fishing activities.

Organization of Production

Mexican law requires that those involved in the commercial exploitation of shrimp be organized into fishing cooperatives, which were first organized in the northwest coast in the 1930s. Since then, numerous fishing cooperatives have been organized in the region and throughout Mexico’s coastal areas. Being a member of a fishing cooperative guarantees that a person has the legal right to capture wild shrimp. If someone is caught fishing illegally, his fishing gear is confiscated, he must pay a fine, and, in many cases, he is harassed or beaten by other fishermen. In return for being a member of a fishing cooperative, the member must sell his entire production to the cooperative at the price that it establishes.

Women also participate in the fishing activity in various ways. Many women process the fish or shrimp and sell it from their houses, on the streets, or in the town’s market. Other women work in the packing plants in which the shrimp is processed for export. In recent years, as the economic conditions in the region have worsened, many more women have begun to fish both for subsistence and commercial purposes.

Farming

The type of farming practiced by rural households in the region is seasonal, rain-fed agriculture. People take advantage of the rainy season to
Rural People of Mexico’s Northwest Coast

prepare the land for cultivation and to plant the seeds. This type of farming, known in Mexico as milpa agriculture, originated thousands of years ago among the prehistoric indigenous population. The crops still cultivated are corn, beans, and chili peppers, which are part of the staple diet of rural households. “Intercropping” is a common farming technique used by most farmers in rural communities. In this system, different crops are planted closely together in the same field. Farming is an activity that involves all members of the household. Men usually work in the fields to prepare the land while women and children work during planting and harvesting. Usually groups of “extended” families work together depending on the nature of the task. For the most part, familial groups of ten or twelve adults and children work together as a cooperative group.

The reliance on wage labor by a large portion of the rural population of Mexico’s northwest coast has increased during the last decade. Many landless households in rural communities depend on wage labor for their daily survival. In many other instances, family members who have land also seek employment as wage workers for a series of reasons. Soil erosion, desertification, and salinization are among those factors that no longer make the land unsuitable for cultivation. In many other instances, rural households lack the financial resources to buy seeds, fertilizer, or a water pump for irrigation.

Wage labor provides rural households with seasonal, short-term employment in agriculture. Campesinos sell their labor to landowners who grow cash crops for the national and international markets. The type of crop to be cultivated during a particular year depends on individual choices made by the landowners. These decisions, in turn, are influenced by the demands of national and international markets, as well as by existing climatological conditions. Coconuts, mangos, chili peppers, and lemons are the most commonly cultivated crops in coastal zones for the export market.

Normally, campesinos are hired at different stages of the agricultural cycle. Men usually are hired to help prepare the land before cultivation. Men, women, and children working together in labor gangs are employed during the planting and harvesting stages. Wages in 1998 for such work was approximately U.S. $6 for eight hours of work.

Aquaculture and Other Sources of Income

Recently, the development of the shrimp aquaculture industry or “industrial shrimp farming” in the region has provided wage labor for individual household members. Employment in shrimp aquaculture is generally short term and seasonal, and men are usually hired as guards or construction workers in the shrimp farms as well as to aid in the production of shrimp larvae in some of the hatcheries built in the region. Some women are hired as cooks in the shrimp farms and hatcheries; others are hired to process the shrimp for export in the packing plants. The salary paid to wage workers in shrimp aquaculture is the same paid to agricultural wage workers.
Many women in coastal rural communities engage in various income-generating activities in order to support their households. The majority of women seek employment as agricultural wage workers, but others sell food, groceries, clothes, and crafts made at home. Other women organize rotating credit associations, known as *cundinas*, in order to save money to meet the needs of their households as well as to invest in profit-making activities.

**Social and Political Organization**

The most basic local social unit comprises small households often related to each other by blood or marriage. “Clustered extended” households living within the same plot of land are very common. Residence after marriage is very flexible, but the couple is expected to establish their own separate households, usually close by. Only under special circumstances, such as the lack of money to build a house, are couples allowed to reside in either the husband’s or the wife’s parents’ household. Women are expected to marry at a young age, but many women postpone marriage to pursue a professional career. On a daily basis, men and women interact throughout the communities often engaging in conversation and information sharing in small knots of relatives and friends. Given this arrangement, it is not surprising that the elderly are always treated with respect since they are considered a source of knowledge and experience and, more important, the connection between past and present to future relationships of *confianza*, or trust, and reciprocity.

At the level of community, people are organized into different types of committees with the goal of improving their quality of life. These include fiesta committees, community cleanup and improvement committees, church construction committees, and many others organized around cleaning the church and making sure that people attend Mass. Other committees organize fund-raising activities to support the community’s school. All of these committees are based on the same central features of *confianza* and reciprocity and are often composed both of blood and marriage relatives as well as friends, neighbors, and even those with whom people are in conflict.

Rural communities in Mexico’s northwest coast usually have a strong political leadership vested in *ejidos*. These are communities of common landholders in which, until very recently, people owned the land jointly but cultivated it individually. However, since 1992, individual households may own their plots of land privately. The political organization of the *ejidos* consists of a president, secretary, treasurer, comissary, and a president of vigilance elected by vote. Most of these posts usually are headed by adult men. Fishing cooperatives also are very important, and their political organization is similar to that of the *ejidos*. The various bonds of community life intertwine into a complex network of social relations.
Rural People of Mexico’s Northwest Coast

Religion and World View

Everyone gets used to the place in which she or he lives. We don’t lack anything because my husband is a fisherman. He helps to support the household. When he does not make enough money fishing, we all go to work to the mango or chili farms. Sometimes I find life here to be very sad, but other times I feel happy about it. This is a very quiet community. There are no bad people like in other places. We all have mutual trust in each other because we know each other. Here, both women and men work outside of their homes. Sometimes women have to play the double role of being mothers and fathers. After we come from the field, we must do household chores. Life is a struggle for the woman, but the man can no longer support the household by himself.

—Chabela, a campesina in Mexico’s northwest coast, 1998.
Author’s translation.

Rural communities in Mexico’s northwest coast are by no means isolated from the wider society. In fact, these communities are also part of national and international markets through their participation in the commercial agriculture, aquaculture, and fishing industries. People are aware of the social and economic inequalities that exist between and among them, and between them and those who control the means of production in their region. They are also aware of the class differences between them and the Mexican elite. They see these differences constantly being played out in the telenovelas or soap operas, and in their interaction with the professional and wealthy elite of the region. People also are aware of the similarities that exist between them and other campesinos in the country and in other parts of the world.

Nevertheless, these great disparities between classes and groups of people are compensated for by belief systems that seem to cut across these cleavages. Among the most important of these are religion and distinct ways of looking at the world. Today, the majority of the rural population in Mexico’s northwest coast are Roman Catholic, but other religions, including Jehovah Witnesses, Mormonism, and Pentecostalism, have expanded through many of the rural areas in the region. Nevertheless, since the sixteenth century, Catholic churches have dominated the rural landscape with Masses and other religious rituals celebrated throughout the year. Every community has an associated patron saint with festivals prepared every year in his or her honor. Thus, each town and rural community will have a particular festival and religious figure with which it is identified which cuts across class and other differences.

The most important religious celebration throughout the region, as well as throughout most of Mexico, is the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. The celebration takes place every year on December 12, but rural communities begin to prepare a few weeks before then
when the women arrange altars at their homes. Usually the altar is placed on the porch or in the entrance way. A portrait or other representation of the Virgin is located centrally, and bright colored-paper flowers are arranged around it and usually flanked by an assortment of multicolored candles and ribbons.

Women also work together in the preparation of a special event to be held at their church to honor the Virgin of Guadalupe. They decorate the church with flowers and a nacimiento (manger) of Jesus that commemorates the Virgin’s motherhood rather than Jesus’ birth as is the case at Christmas. At midnight, the mariachis (Mexican troubadours) play and sing the mañanitas (a traditional Mexican birthday song) to the Virgin while hundreds of people offer bunches of freshly cut flowers and place them before her feet as an act of respect and obeisance.

Many other people from rural communities also attend peregrinaciones (pilgrimages) organized in the urban towns where they travel to a particular, naturally beautiful rural spot to make further offerings. They regard these peregrinaciones as an opportunity to pay back favors they have requested from the Virgin previously during the year. Interestingly, some of these sites originally were indigenous places of worship hundreds of years before Christianity arrived in the area.

Such important rituals are part of a much broader ritual and social cycle in most rural communities. Ritual is a type of “cultural glue.” Embedded into this glue for daily interaction is the expectation of reciprocity and mutual trust or confianza. Reciprocity and mutual trust are systems of relationships and values that bind persons into a sense of community. People take turns in helping each other build houses, schools, and churches and working the land. Women also take turns caring for each other’s children while they go to work, shop, or go to the medical clinic.

Such expectations of reciprocity and mutual trust are given meaning by other life cycle rituals. The institution of compadrazgo, or godparenthood, may be developed through various Catholic sacramental celebrations such as baptism. Through the ritual of baptism, godparents are expected to take care of the child in the event that something happens to the parents. These form part of a much broader “ritual cycle” in life cycle rituals, including baptism, confirmation, first communion, marriage, and quinceañeras (fifteenth-year debuts). This ritual commemorating the passage of a young woman from childhood to adulthood, is very elaborate, and rural households begin to plan and save money for a quinceañera two or three years ahead of time. Marriage and funerals form the adult and terminal parts of a circle of ritual participation. When daily interaction is added to this ritual cycle, the people in these communities have opportunities to develop very close social bonds of reciprocity and mutual trust.
Rural People of Mexico’s Northwest Coast

THREATS TO SURVIVAL

Years ago this fishing cooperative produced a lot. During that time everything was going very well for us in here. Although the shrimp was sold very cheaply it was enough to support ourselves. There was no competition over the shrimp resources as there is now. Now we produce only enough to eat. The government has organized many fishing cooperatives because people can not make a living anymore by only working their land. These are not fertile anymore. Most people are entering into fishing. We cannot support ourselves anymore like we used to do.

—A fisherman, 1989. Author’s translation

Fishing resources have supported the rural coastal population throughout different generations, and during the nineteenth century people from other parts of Mexico settled in the northwest coast and began to exploit the fishing resources. At this time, when fishing was done on a subsistence basis, there was a great diversity of species. Ocean, estuarine, and lagoon fishing were open access activities, and the fishing resources in many cases were held in common among all of the region’s inhabitants. A more commercial fishing industry was developed around 1870 when the first Chinese immigrants arrived in the port of Mazatlán and began to export shrimp to California and China. A few years later, in 1917, the first processing plants were built in the northwest coast, and the tuna fishing industry developed.

Before the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910, the fishing resources were exploited by small companies which settled in the area and by subsistence fishermen. The companies had been granted exclusive fishing rights to some of the best fishing grounds, but other productive fishing grounds were available as common property to the rural coastal population. After the Mexican Revolution, the companies ceased operation.

Subsistence fishing was declared free, and all fishing resources again became common property. By 1923 the Mexican government had implemented a plan to develop the fishing activity in the region by allocating the fishing resources to different sectors of the population. According to this plan, the rural population had the most privilege to exploit the fishing resources, but the state kept the ownership rights. Fishing for sale at national and international markets was also allowed. Although no restrictions were imposed, people dedicated to the commercial exploitation of the fishing resources had to pay for exploiting and exporting the product.

In 1928 the Mexican government granted specific fishing areas within the lagoons and estuaries to the rural population. This, however, was contingent upon the formation of fishing cooperatives in those areas in which rights to fishing grounds were granted. These cooperatives were to be formed only by people for whom fishing was the main occupation and who
wanted to improve their economic situation. In this way fishing cooperatives and the fishing industry became the focus of Mexico's economic development program.

Shrimp became the main export-oriented fishing resource due to its importance and value in the international market. In 1940 shrimp resources were reserved for the exploitation of only those fishermen organized in fishing cooperatives; these organizations operated with relative success for several years. This success was the result of several factors, including the abundance and diversity of fishing resources, the low density of the coastal population, and the small number of fishing cooperatives organized in the region.

Fishing cooperatives and their fishing resources have since become a source of conflict in Mexico's northwest coast as the direct result of the increase in population to the coastal rural areas. In the 1950s the increase in population was attributed to the establishment of farming ejidos in the region. Because in many instances the land was not productive, the majority of people sought out other occupations, and fishing became an alternative for those people whose ejidos were established near lagoons and estuaries. The fishing cooperatives already organized in the region were reluctant to accept new fishing cooperatives because of a concern that new cooperatives would lead to the overexploitation of the shrimp resources. Nevertheless, in 1972, ejidos were legally allowed to organize their own fishing cooperatives, a decision that may have contributed to some of the more extreme pressures on the shrimp stocks in the present time. Currently the rural population in Mexico's northwest coast continues to grow as people from other parts of Mexico relocate to the area searching for work in the agriculture and fishing industries, which aggravates the conflicts over the access to the exploitation of fishing resources.

Another source of aggravation is the development of an offshore commercial fishing sector. The fishing technology used by this sector is more complex and less environmentally friendly than the technology used by the fishing sector in estuaries and lagoons. The offshore sector uses bigger fishing boats and trawl nets which have been in part responsible for the over-exploitation of the shrimp resources in the region and also responsible for the virtual disappearance of some marine species, including the turtle and small dolphin.

Mexican policies and regulations have not been effective in developing the fishing industry in a sustainable manner. Even defining the appropriate opening and closing of fishing seasons is often contradictory or non-enforceable. Although in theory access to shrimp resources is closed during the off-season, in practice shrimp often are exploited much of the year. Because of the worsening of Mexico's economic situation, rural people need to diversify their economic activities, and shrimp fishing is seen as an at-
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ttractive opportunity for rural people because of the high monetary value of shrimp in countries such as the United States and Japan.

That the fishing resources in Mexico’s northwest coast are being depleted as the result of these social, economic, and environmental factors is a reality. Studies conducted by various research institutes have shown that productivity has declined during the last ten years. Certainly people in rural coastal communities are aware of this depletion since they have been among the most affected by it.

During the 1980s, the Mexican government attempted to reduce the pressure on shrimp capture fishery by expanding shrimp farming; however, this strategy has had dire social and ecological effects. The stated goals used to justify the development of industrial shrimp farming included increasing shrimp production and profits generated through exports, creating jobs in rural communities to improve the quality of life of the population, and providing access to the exploitation of the shrimp resources to those people who lack it. Until 1990 the only people legally allowed to farm shrimp were campesinos organized in cooperatives. Since 1990, as the result of a series of political and economic changes promoted by the Mexican government, private entrepreneurs from Mexico and other countries have been given the means to participate in the industry legally.

Shrimp aquaculture has not fulfilled the government’s goals. Instead, it has exacerbated the previously existing conflicts over access to the exploitation of the shrimp resources and has created new conflicts as well. Conflicts among cooperative members, the biologists in charge of the shrimp farms, and private companies have altered the social fabric of many rural communities. Recently, a series of environmental problems associated with the expansion of the industry have emerged. These are especially prominent in Mexico’s northwest coast because the largest development of the industry has occurred in this region.

One of the main environmental problems has been the impact of the construction of shrimp farms upon the lagoon and estuarine ecosystems. In many cases, concessions have been granted to private entrepreneurs to build shrimp farms in coastal lagoons which are the fishing grounds that traditionally have been exploited by the fisher peoples in the region. As a result, serious conflicts between private investors and traditional fishing cooperatives have emerged.

The impact of shrimp farming on mangrove ecosystems have recently become a major concern in the region. An estimated 10,000 hectares (25,000 acres) of mangrove forests have been cleared to build shrimp farms. The water quality of coastal ecosystems including the lagoons and estuaries also has declined due to the construction of shrimp farms. The discharges of shrimp ponds, which in many cases contain large amounts of organic material, fertilizers, chemicals, and antibiotics, also are negatively affecting water quality.
Endangered Peoples of Latin America

The natural resources of Mexico’s northwest coast have been degraded over time. The shrimp fishing and shrimp farming industries are partially blamed for this degradation. However, the large-scale, export-oriented, commercial agriculture prevalent in the region is also responsible for the environmental degradation of coastal ecosystems. Pesticides and fertilizers and other chemicals in agriculture drain into many of these coastal ecosystems. Fishermen in the area report that agricultural drainage is killing the fish and shrimp in lagoons and estuaries. Pesticides are also having harmful effects on the human residents of the coast.

The current situation of the rural poor in Mexico’s northwest coast is very precarious. Most rural households struggle to survive in conditions of extreme poverty while the natural environment on which they depend continues to degrade. The serious economic crises faced by the Mexican nation over the last several decades have severely impacted the rural population. In recent years, the Mexican government has taken a variety of measures to privatize its major industries and services. This has further increased the inequalities among the Mexican people.

Current government policies continue to support the large-scale commercial exploitation of natural resources in order to promote the country’s economic development. The pressure of a growing impoverished rural population upon the country’s natural resources, together with the lack of sustainable management policies, is contributing to the degradation of those natural resources.

Tourism, often considered a socially and environmentally benign industry, is among the fastest growing industry in the region, with both national and foreign entrepreneurs investing in the sector. The largest development of the industry is concentrated in the coastal town of Mazatlán, in the state of Sinaloa. Numerous hotels, resorts, golf courses, discos, restaurants, and shops have been built in order to attract foreign tourism. Mazatlán is a popular destination for American and Canadian college students during spring break as well as for American retirees.

The industry is expanding and spreading to rural coastal communities. Tourists traveling to the region can now visit colonial churches, beaches, shrimp farms, mangroves, and the lagoon ecosystems found in small town and rural communities. Residential communities are being built for North Americans who are resettling in coastal areas in rural communities. As yet, tourism does not appear to have benefited the rural coastal population. The jobs created by the industry usually employ people who live in or close to Mazatlán, and many of these jobs require a university degree or some technical training and some competence in spoken English (the language of most of the tourists)—qualifications lacked by the poorer rural people. In addition, the tourism industry is competing with coastal residents for potable water and for access to traditional recreation areas.

Environmental and economic crises in Mexico are exacerbating the social
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crisis faced by people and rural communities. Recently, many rural communities in Mexico’s northwest coast have witnessed an increase in malnutrition, alcohol consumption, and domestic violence. The lack of basic services, such as potable water, electricity, health care services, and educational and economic opportunities, is having a tremendous impact, especially upon the younger generations.

RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

Household and Community Levels

As poverty continues to spread, households in rural areas have developed some survival strategies to guarantee their members a relatively secure supply of basic resources. One strategy has been for household members to engage in multiple occupations to generate more income. In most rural communities, adult males rotate through various economic activities throughout the year. The working cycle for most adult males includes fishing, farming, and wage labor. The cycle varies depending on a series of factors such as climatic conditions, availability of work, and the amount of income generated within the household. Those households with a large number of children usually have more people engaged in multiple occupations.

In recent years the participation of male adults in the trafficking of archaeological artifacts has been noticeable. People resort to the excavation and sale of indigenous archaeological artifacts out of desperation, need, and discontent. The existence of a black market in the region for these artifacts is an incentive for some households to engage in this illegal activity. These artifacts are often smuggled across the United States–Mexican border, especially through Tijuana.

Another household strategy has been to increase the number of wage earners. More women, adolescents, and children in rural households are participating in activities to earn cash. Many have been able to find seasonal jobs in the commercial agriculture sector, mostly during the planting and harvesting seasons. The need for more income in individual households has increased the workload of women and has transformed gender relations in rural communities. Traditionally, the men of the family were considered the breadwinners, and women were in charge of the social aspects and biological reproduction of their households. The need for multiple wage earners within the household, however, has changed this traditional pattern, posing new challenges for the household since women must divide their time between their families and their salaried work. One aspect that constrains women’s involvement in income-generating activities is the lack of child-care facilities in rural areas. Most women solve this problem by asking relatives, friends, and neighbors to watch their children while they
go to work. In other instances, women take their children with them to their workplace.

The organization and operation of rotating credit associations (RCA), known in Mexico as cundinas or tandas, have increased in rural areas recently. Generally, women administer these associations. They take turns rotating a sum of money among themselves. Thus, in a typical RCA, ten women in a ten-week period contribute 10 dollars each to a fund. In turn, a different woman will receive 100 dollars each week. These RCAs provide households with the opportunity to save cash in order to pay for items or services they need. Through these organizations, people have been able to save enough money to buy furniture and electric appliances for the house, to send their children to school, to go to the hospital, and to visit other parts of Mexico.

At the household level, another strategy has been to alter food consumption patterns. Consumption of certain products, such as meat and milk, has declined. Especially in times of financial difficulty, many households consume food that can be easily and freely obtained. There is a growing reliance on mangos, chilies, corn, beans, coconuts, cactus, fish, shellfish, and eggs, which are found or grown in the community. Tortillas are usually made at home instead of purchased at the store.

The current Mexican economic situation has affected the availability of health-care services for rural households. The costs associated with health care have increased, and households are faced with the uncertainty of what to do when someone gets ill. People often borrow money from relatives and friends to pay for a visit to the clinic or to purchase medicines. Sometimes people go to curanderos or healers in their own communities or to others nearby, since they charge less than physicians.

Migration as a household strategy to deal with growing poverty and economic uncertainty in rural areas has increased during the last decade. Members of individual households migrate to other northern border states such as Sonora or to border cities like Tijuana or Mexicali in search of employment. Usually one member of the household leaves first and later others follow. People often already have friends or families living in these places, so the transition from rural to urban settings is made easier by these networks. Once in the new setting, people seek employment in the factory assembling plants or maquiladoras and in the construction industry. However, many times, migration is part of an intermediate stage for eventual migration to the United States, where poor Mexicans from impoverished rural areas frequently work in low-wage jobs in the agricultural or service sector—as farmworkers, domestic servants, restaurant and hotel workers, and factory workers.
Environmental Awareness

There is growing awareness in the northwest coast, as well as in the rest of Mexico, about the serious effects posed by human activities on the natural environment. In this regard, the Mexican government has revised its National Development Plan to include an Environmental Plan. One of the main objectives of this plan is to encourage the sustainable use and development of the country’s natural resources. The plan also stresses the importance of natural resources for economic development and for the benefit of the rural poor of the country. As part of this plan, the Environmental Sub-Program for the Coastal Zones was created when the country became a member of the Global Program of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment against Land-Based Activities. The fishing and aquaculture industries have recently been the focus of new policies and regulations. New legislation requires the completion of an Environmental Impact Assessment Study before a shrimp farm can be constructed. The purpose of the environmental study is to determine the potential effects of a shrimp farm upon coastal ecosystems.

Coastal-urban communities also are taking an active role in dealing with the environmental issues that affect them. A group of academics and citizens in Mazatlán recently organized an environmental nongovernmental organization (NGO) that has been working with issues of pollution in coastal ecosystems. Currently, this NGO has several active projects including a nursery of native plants from the region and the rehabilitation and conservation of estuaries and lagoon ecosystems.

In coastal rural communities, fishing cooperatives have started to oppose the construction of shrimp farms near their fishing grounds. Cooperatives have openly denounced the harmful effects of shrimp aquaculture upon the mangrove ecosystems and the wild stocks of fish in their fishing areas. Some cooperatives and communities have joined efforts in protesting and stopping the construction of shrimp farms. For example, in southern Sinaloa, a group of twenty-one fishing cooperatives, including 2,000 fishermen, has gone to government agencies and asked them to stop the construction of a shrimp farm near their fishing area. The group also wrote a letter to the Mexican president, Ernesto Zedillo, asking him to stop the construction of the shrimp farm. This group of cooperatives previously was successful in halting the construction of a shrimp farm in another nearby community. In the northern region of the state of Nayarit, fishing cooperatives recently opposed the construction of another shrimp farm. In this case, the fishermen accused the private company in charge of the shrimp farm of destroying large tracts of mangrove forests in the region. A study was conducted and the company was held responsible for the destruction. The company is expected to start a reforestation program in the area at its own expense.
FOOD FOR THOUGHT

This chapter raises a number of issues about the relationship among economic development, environmental degradation, and rural poverty. Most Latin American countries are faced with the dilemma of pressure to exploit their natural resources commercially in order to generate profits while at the same time trying to conserve their precious resources. However, most government policies have favored the commercial, export-oriented exploitation of the most important natural resources. Usually the return on investments are used to pay external debts and loans provided by multinational lending corporations such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. In other instances, profits go directly to the banking elite, transnational corporations, or government agencies. Given the recent pressure to promote “free enterprise,” rarely do these profits reach the poor people in rural areas in the form of services such as health care or education. Latin American countries also face the challenge of trying to develop their natural resources in a sustainable way in order to ensure their availability for present and future generations. This has been a very difficult goal to achieve.

The Mexican nation has undergone a series of radical changes over the last two decades. The economic crisis during the 1980s had a severe impact upon the rural population that was measured in terms of increased poverty. More recently, in the 1990s, the country underwent a series of changes aimed at the expansion of the free market. This new model sought to attract economic investment to rural areas. As a result, article 27 of the Mexican constitution, which defines the land tenure system of ejidos and the fishing law, were modified. Under the “old” article 27, people could not sell or rent ejido lands. Under the “new” article 27, individuals are considered to be the sole owners of their plots of land and thus are entitled to sell it or rent it. The new fishing law allows for the investment of national and foreign private capital in the shrimp aquaculture industry. The new land tenure system has created difficulties in many ejidos, since there have been instances in which members sold their land under emergency situations, leaving entire families landless and without the means to buy new land. In some cases, coastal ejidos have rented or sold land to private investors who want to build shrimp farms. This has spurred the rapid expansion of the shrimp aquaculture industry on the northwest coast of Mexico and has contributed to the exacerbation of the social and environmental problems already existing in the region. Mexico is not unique in this sense; other Third World countries, including Ecuador, Honduras, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia, where shrimp farming has expanded, face similar conditions.

Despite all of the changes taking place in Mexico, rural communities have been very active in devising ways to deal with the persistent economic
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uncertainty and natural resource degradation that characterize this region. Coastal rural communities are very dynamic entities with a strong sense of cultural identity. The various rituals and cultural practices performed in these communities act to ensure the continuity of communal and cultural identity through various generations. However, as Mexico’s rural areas continue to change and become even more a part of a global economy, there is a risk that many of these cultural rituals and traditions may disappear.

Rural communities in Mexico’s northwest coast are embedded in a daily struggle to ensure that people meet their basic needs. In doing so, rural households have developed a set of adaptive strategies to guarantee the survival of their members. Some of the strategies include an increase in the number of wage earners and household members engaged in multiple occupations. The contribution of women to the household economy has been enhanced by increased participation in income-generating activities. For many women, finding a balance between salaried work and housework is an extremely difficult task. Unfortunately, this is a common constraint for most rural women throughout Latin America. There is a finite line past which multiple employment and the contributions of women simply are not enough to cope with declining conditions. A growing number of rural Mexicans are compelled to leave their rural communities in order to survive. Migration—within Mexico, to Mexico City, to border towns, or to the United States—is an increasingly vital option when there are no other alternatives left.

Questions

1. Is it possible for Latin American countries to conserve their natural resources in a sustainable manner and at the same time promote economic development and increase the standard of living of their people?

2. What are the global, social, and environmental impacts of industrial shrimp farming?

3. What are the true costs of the shrimp on your dinner plate in the United States, Europe, and Japan—the countries to which most farmed shrimp is exported?

4. Can the people of Mexico’s northwest coast maintain their cultural and social identity and become part of a globalized economy at the same time?

5. Given the recent events and laws in the United States aimed at curtailing immigration, do you think that the survival strategy of poor Mexicans to migrate to the United States may be short lived? If so, what options will be left to poor rural Mexicans?
NOTES


RESOURCE GUIDE

Published Literature


Videos

*Sweet 15.* This video presents the ritual of Quinceañera. It can be purchased from Teacher’s Video Company, P.O. Box WHG-4455, Scottsdale, AZ 85261. Tel. (800)262-8837.

*Troubled Harvest.* This video presents the life of Mexican and Central American farmworkers in California agriculture. It can be rented or purchased from Women Make Movies, Inc., 462 Broadway, Suite 500 D, New York, NY 10013. Tel. (212)925-0606.

*Women and Work in Latin America.* This video examines the various economic and subsistence activities of Latin American women from diverse economic and social backgrounds. It can be purchased from the Upper Midwest Women’s History Center, 6300 Walker Street, St. Louis Park, MN 55416.
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WWW Sites

The Mangrove Action Project

This site addresses various issues concerning the global degradation of mangrove forest ecosystems.

Mexico Online

This site offers geographic and environmental information about Mexico. It also offers a list of the government and nongovernment environmental organizations in the country.
Chapter 3

Villagers at the Edge of Mexico City

Scott S. Robinson

CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The People

When the Spaniards arrived in the Valley of Mexico in 1521, they had no idea how many communities surrounding the lakeshore city of Tenochtitlán had been subdued only recently by the Aztecs. Today, from Iztapalapa on the eastern rim, around the volcanic cone hiding Milpa Alta and its eleven villages from the valley floor, westward through the highlands of Xochimilco, and then northward through Tlalpan and beyond, a network of seventy small villages still runs continuously around three sides (the east, south, and west) of the world's largest city, Mexico City. At the time of the conquest, this was not a homogenous set of villages; rather, it was an example of negotiated neighborliness among diverse peoples. At least three languages were spoken by the villagers: Mexica or Nahuatl, the language of the conquering Aztecs, whose speakers could distinguish local origins by special terms and shifts in certain sounds (what linguists call dialects); Tlalpanec (which gave its name to the district of Tlalpan, in the southwest corner); and Otomí (or Nahü, as they prefer) in the northwest quadrant. The shallow lake extended toward the distant hills in the northeast quadrant. No doubt there were many gods and named spirits that distinguished the groups of villages that spoke the same language. Neighbors speaking different languages tended not to share ceremonial obligations and exchanges. Different gods, different fiestas, was perhaps the rule. This band of contiguous yet diverse villages was a complex mosaic of cultures and communities that were well established before the Aztecs appeared and continued after the Spaniards arrived in search of gold and souls.

These villagers could monitor each other from their defensive promon-
tories, as was the custom in the broken topography of the central highlands. Lakeside villagers were not fearful of the neighbors who lived above them because they shared a similar culture, language, beliefs, and ceremonies, as well as their sons and daughters in marriage. The territory of each culture on the lake was wedge shaped. The lowlanders at lakeside looked up, to the west, to the south, and to the east, to where their highlander cousins lived in the woods and protected the springs and sacred places, the flanks and backside of the territory. This vertically integrated ecosystem linked villages that shared the lake and the region’s bounty at different elevations. These diverse cultures became consolidated only after the decline of the empire of Teotihuacán (A.D. 1100) which was governed from the city of pyramids in the northeastern corner of the valley. Every culture had its geographical boundaries, and surely, as now, there must have been some fence moving at night as well as poaching in a neighbor’s territory. This was not an open space without rules of ownership; rather, it was communal property controlled by a hierarchy of civil and religious officials or by married couples. Every household was linked to others via kinship ties, much as can be found in the small towns on the North American prairie today. These were integrated cultures, only partially subservient to their conquerors. As often occurs, the most talented and brightest individuals probably joined the Aztec court where issues of state, faith, and history (time and space) were discussed and written down in a glyph language painted on bark parchment. No document attests to the personal friendships and alliances that may have mediated each dominated culture from harsh treatment. At the same time, these personal ties probably allowed some dialogue and negotiations between the conquered and the conquerors. There were, no doubt, a few major surprises (such as comets and asteroids) in the neighborhood, until the Aztecs physically conquered the lakeside cultures, extracted tribute, and began expanding their city on the mud islands in the middle of the lake. Then the Spaniards arrived and began a long period of colonization that continues to this day.

The Setting

With a population of around 20 million people (about 20% of the total population of Mexico), Mexico City (the Federal District) is one of the largest cities in the world. Today, the “rural” population of the Federal District is approximately 400,000 people, of whom only about 17,500 still farm their land. All together, these communities are caretakers of 79,400 hectares (196,000 acres) of land, which is subdivided as follows: 37,700 hectares (93,100 acres) of forest, 30,000 hectares (74,100 acres) of cultivated plots (29,000 hectares [71,600 acres] rain fed and 1,000 hectares [2,470 acres] of irrigated parcels), 7,700 hectares (19,000 acres) of grazing land, and 4,000 hectares (9,900 acres) of what is classified as “mixed uses.”
Villagers at the Edge of Mexico City

This is a large territory composed of a complex network of continuously renegotiated neighborliness among natives and newcomers.

Until the 1970s, the inhabitants of the villages on the edge of the Federal District went “downtown” to market, to work, and to sightsee around the modernizing urban sprawl. The city only came “up” to the rim villages in order to deliver beer, soda pop, and junk food to the small mom-and-pop grocery stores on the corner of the village plaza. Most of the teachers and probably all of the young doctors and nurses who staffed the expanding network of schools and public clinics came from below. There were open spaces of cultivated land, orchards, and terraced hillsides between the villages and the city. The city continued to grow, fed by an economic boom that attracted many migrants from impoverished areas elsewhere in rural Mexico as well as by the expanding core of city folk or chilangos, as they are known in Mexican slang. Along the paved tentacles of urban boulevards, people moved “up the hill,” purchased lots, and built their homes, rental apartments, repair shops, and small businesses. Today the geographical separation of the villages no longer exists.

Traditional Subsistence Strategies

At the time of the Spanish conquest, every household planted corn, beans, and squash on small, rain-fed parcels of land at the edge of each village. Many villages bordered the lake, with its winding shoreline full of reeds, migratory fowl, fish, and freshwater shrimp. Lush gardens (chinampas) were formed by dredging mud on top of human-made islands that were then framed by heavy stakes and woven reed mats. These chinampas still are used to grow vegetables, flowers, and medicinal plants. Staple crops were grown on the sloping floodplain or on plots, in Milpa Alta terraces, carved out of the hillsides. The nopal cactus (first cousin to a prickly pear) was cultivated as a vegetable, and its consumption remains important today. Food products and materials for tools and household utensils (such as reed sleeping mats) were traded “up the hill” to neighbors with access to dense forests of cedar, pine, oak, and other medicinal species. Fresh drinking water, firewood, corn, and the pitch or sap (copal) from certain species of pine came “down the hill” to the lakeside. Copal incense melted on hot coals housed in ceremonial dishes—some held in the hand, others in large bowls—smoked before shrines to gods and spirits. Its sweet, pungent aroma blowing around the neighborhood announced that the ceremony was under way.

Social and Political Organization

The calpulli is one of the intriguing mysteries linked to the changes taking place in this network of villages and, for that matter, throughout central
arrested and tortured by the Church; the names and intents of the deities simply changed during the religious conquest of Mexico.

Being practical people, however, and well adapted to their habitat, the villagers shared a general need to guarantee water and prevent crop failure, the continuity of life. During the rainy season (May to October), a major threat to the corn and beans growing in their fields were violent hailstorms. Young and old sometimes were struck down by lightning, as some still are today. Given these risks, those who could communicate with the rain god and control fickle weather spirits were the men and women who survived being hit by lightning. In this altered state of mind and body, these chosen people assumed their calling as communicators with the gods. Master shamen are those who can control these forces, assuring the arrival of the rains in time for a plentiful growing season, averting lightning and hailstorms. If one developed these awesome powers, then it was relatively easy to cure someone frightened by the dark or by a snake, or angry about a bad marriage, ungrateful children and the many other sources of ill-will and suffering among humans. These religious figures are called grancieros in Spanish, the hail people, and only a few elders practice this medicine today. In the old days, however, every village had an officiating shaman or granciero.

THREATS TO SURVIVAL

Today, this network of villages and small towns is being invaded by outsiders, or vecindados (those who come to be neighbors). The long process of negotiating neighborliness now is not about the “foreigners” (Aztecs and Spaniards) who live elsewhere and collect tribute from you. Today, the outsiders have purchased land (by hook or by crook), moved in, and wish to participate in local politics. These outsiders are a mix of poor families forcibly relocated by urban renewal downtown, others still frightened by the 1985 earthquakes and determined to reduce their anxiety, and still others who cannot afford to buy or rent in the central city neighborhoods. Wealthy land speculators, too, with good connections have cobbled together large, forested areas, often by purchasing illegally communal property that technically cannot be sold. These speculators find the local authorities who are responsible for communal properties (both cultivated and forest land) and who are willing to cut a deal. They then “legalize” title to these properties in a fast-track operation sanctioned by official government accomplices. As swiftly as possible, they build condominiums for the new, professional middle class who are only too happy to raise their children in a secure, walled, and forested compound only they can afford and with a lovely view of the city below to boot. Today this process, called real estate development, is a very lucrative business that the existing system of political impunity allows to operate.
How does this system work? On a national scale, Mexico is divided into a mosaic of 2,418 municipalities, or municipios. These vary in size from a few in the northern desert states that are larger than Rhode Island, to minuscule municipios no more than a small town and the surrounding lands in the southern mountains of the state of Oaxaca. In 1929 the federal government expropriated the municipios within the Federal District and transformed them into delegaciones, or delegations, akin to the boroughs of New York City. Until 1997 there was not a single elected official in the government of the Federal District, formerly the Department of the Federal District. Before this date, the president, as the post was called, appointed the regent. The regent, in turn, appointed the delegates (delegados) who are the highest authorities in each delegation. Without a professional civil service, all public officials in the Federal District served at the whim of either their delegation chief or someone on the regent’s staff. This was a colonial system without any form of democratic representation (with the exception of federal deputies elected from districts within the capital city but without authority therein). When there is no system of checks and balances allowing for accountability of public officials’ behavior, impunity is the rule. Yossarian, Joseph Heller’s protagonist in the novel Catch 22 would have coped well in Mexico City; he worked out the logic of the “catch”: “They can do anything to you you can’t stop them from doing.”

This is a fair description of official conduct in Mexico City until the 1997 elections. The former delegation authorities, with administrative control over all public services (schools, clinics, markets, transport, and police) in the villages around the rim, could work their whims in conjunction with commercial interests who often were members of their own families.

How did the pattern of real estate speculation emerge? The colonial system in Mexico was consolidated over a lengthy period of time; in fact, it is still under way. In effect, it was and is a process of legalizing land taken from native communities who did not share the concepts of private property, a tradition of legal titles, or the legitimacy of their transfers from original “owners” to newcomer purchasers. Notaries were a special category of colonial official, sanctioned by the Spanish crown, to oversee this “legal process”; they were entrusted to “notarize,” that is, by their royal (and nowadays, state) authority, approve transfers of land ownership. This meant the notaries were put in charge of the privatization of former native properties. Today notaries remain responsible for this process (with the addition of modern business law). While the expansion of the limits of private property is a cartographic history yet to be compiled in Mexico, the agrarian “victories” of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917) add another element to contemporary land tenure rules: the creation of the ejido and the recognition of communal property. Native villages throughout Mexico had witnessed their land being grabbed and legalized by Spaniards and their descendants for over 400 years. The Constitution of 1917 per-
mitted the villagers to recover a great deal of land in the hands of the "white" (catrín) landlords; these are today’s ejidos formed by dividing up the large, colonial estates (legally, the state retained title and granted use rights in perpetuity to a list of villagers).

The communal lands around each village were also surveyed, and the revolutionary government entrusted them to each village petitioning for recognition of their bienes comunales (communal goods). It may seem complicated, but every villager knows there are three kinds of property: private (urban lots and some cultivated land), communal, and ejidal. Because decisions about the disposal of communal and ejidal property remains among those villagers or their descendants who received the federal ejido land grant earlier in the century, it has been possible to convince some of these authorities to cede or "loan" parcels to kin or outsiders. Once land has been "loaned" (with cash payments for those responsible for the decision) and then farmed and structures built upon it, it tends to be very difficult for the local authorities to recover these parcels. As elsewhere, possession is nine-tenths of the law in Mexico. If the new "owner," a real estate developer, say, rushes to a notary for title transfer, and the procedure is actively endorsed by Federal District delegation authorities, the former ejidal or communal property becomes, in effect, privatized. Many variations on this theme of official chicanery can be found in the oral histories of the villages at the edge of the city. This irregular mosaic of de facto privatizations constitutes the largest block of disputed land tenure in all of Mexico.

Why is this happening now and not earlier? The answer has to do with the growth pattern of Mexico City and the surrounding metropolitan area (technically, this is the Federal District and adjacent municipalities of the state of Mexico). Previously, a shared culture and lack of outside pressure made it easier to maintain traditions.

The villages themselves have gotten larger over the past generation. With the expansion of the public health system into the rural areas of the country, including the semi-urban edges of the capital city, the rate of infant mortality has dropped dramatically, and longevity, or the average length of a person’s life, has increased (from around fifty to more than seventy years). These facts translate into more mouths to feed. Kin groups need to negotiate access to rooms and housing for their members. In the villages, this has led to increased pressure to build houses on the garden plots next to existing homes and to gather more firewood in the upper woodlands to be used at home or sold to neighbors down the hill. As more schools were built, teachers from elsewhere came to work in the villages, and young people became better equipped for the jobs they sought down in the city.

The impact of a growing population of natives and outsiders has led to an average annual loss of 1,235 acres of forest. In addition, the remaining forest is being thinned by those who are too poor to install liquid propane
Villagers at the Edge of Mexico City

gas tanks for their stoves and instead pick their kindling on a regular basis. Thousands of kindling pickers can thin a forest very quickly, and this has been occurring at an increasing rate over the past twenty years. Less forestland leads to a reduction in the flows of natural springs and less water to use for irrigating garden crops in the dry season. This results in reduced food production at the household level and consequently to a greater need to earn cash to purchase food. Those who continue to farm are using more agricultural chemicals which, in turn, are contaminating the water supply for those who live at lower elevations. This environmentally dangerous scenario can be summarized. As a result of real estate development, increased human population, and accelerated deforestation, previously cultivated lands have become either subdivisions for the rich or a chaotic mosaic of self-built housing for the poor.

RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

The native inhabitants of this wide ring of neighboring villages have resisted the many pressures on their land and culture by simply doing what they know best: respecting their traditions. Nowadays, they are becoming more politically active. When the gods and spirits are on one’s side, and one has enough to eat and is healthy, “foreigners” cannot cause too much damage. When foreigners begin taking the land and moving in, there is a real threat to one’s integrity and well-being. If the foreigners speak the same language and share many symbols, as is the case here, intermarriage inevitably will occur. When marriages are made up of young couples who belong to different groups, natives and new neighbors, the traditions likely will be modified. Each spouse brings a distinct yet overlapping set of cultural rules about the nurturing of children. The next generation learns a “mixed” set of beliefs and norms about the proper way to behave and relate to neighbors and sacred places. If, in 2021, the villagers celebrate (which they probably will not do) 500 years of the Spanish presence in Mexico, a new generation will have grown up together, married, and had children who will be nearing adulthood. By this time, only the elderly will recall the costumbres, or customs, the fiestas with all the reciprocal obligations, processions, chants, floral designs, music, and paraphernalia. Traditions can change quickly, in a generation’s time, as happened when the Nahuatl language was lost with the deaths of unschooled grandparents only twenty years ago.

Remember, however, that class and culture segregate newcomers to the villages. Social inequality is embedded within the spatial structure of the city as modern geographers remind us. These villages represent a process of cultural change and segregation taking place throughout Mexico. Herein, the rich, a minority with access to credit through the banking system, are the ones who can afford to purchase a lot and build a separate
home. Without access to credit, most of the children of poorer residents are obliged to remain with their parents after marriage, often building more rooms in the back, on the roof, or behind the patio of their parents’ homes.

It is important to recall that most of the village land was, and remains, communal and ejidal (technically, federal land ceded in perpetuity after the Mexican Revolution to a specific list of users who control its management). By the 1970s, a new middle class of professionals, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and top-level government employees began buying land in the wooded and tranquil villages above the urban din of Mexico City. Real estate developers acted quickly to meet this demand by pressuring local communal and ejido authorities to part with some of their parcels for a price. Technically, this was illegal, but given the volume of these deals as well as the political clout of those purchasing the land, only the federal agrarian authorities could have intervened, and unsurprisingly, they chose not to. In 1999 there was a special project within the Federal District to “legalize” the thousands of acres of parcels, small and large, that have been “transferred” to private hands over the past thirty years or more.

Can the villagers sustain their cultural integrity in the near future? This is a question germane to most of rural and semi-urban Mexico, where communities, large and small, maintain a system of barrios, rituals, and cosmology distinct from what is projected by the public media—especially television. Some call this the “Profound Mexico” as opposed to what is seen on television. Television has created and reproduces a culture of consumption and values (e.g., Disney World, Cancún holidays, new homes in the hills on the Upper West Side, sports utility vehicles, and many other things) very distinct, and perhaps incompatible, with the traditions described here. This is occurring throughout the world, and Mexico is no exception. How can one defend one’s self while being physically invaded and bombarded with alien messages? It may be even more difficult if there are few democratic forms of representing local, village, and barrio interests in the larger political entity, in this case the government of the Federal District. It is not easy to be sure, and it is unclear which cultural forms will remain significant and collectively supported, practiced, and handed down to the next generations.

The villagers’ struggle to defend their customs has become overtly political. This story is linked to a larger effort to wrest control of the Federal District’s government from the hands of what used to be Mexico’s monopolistic political party, the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional). Opponents of the PRI succeeded in their quest only recently, in 1997. Since December 1997, a freely elected head of the Federal District replaced the colonial regent, appointed by the president. In 1995 there was a rehearsal of sorts for the 1997 campaign within the Federal District: “citizen counselors” were chosen in very small, local election districts. The vote among the rural villages on the rim of the Valley of Mexico was much larger and
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had less abstention than the vote in urbanized neighborhoods elsewhere in the city. This was probably due to the faith of the native villagers that the new councilor figure could represent their interests for the first time in city politics. This was not to be the case. The PRI-appointed regent ordered his delegation chiefs to ignore those councilors who were linked to the opposition (meaning all those who protested the top-down management of public affairs at the village level) and favor only those tied to the government party. The frustration of the villagers' expectations about recovering control of some local services fed the massive support for the opposition party that swept to power in the July 1997 elections.

Since taking office on December 1, 1997, the first elected government in the history of Mexico City is paying respectful attention to the social and environmental demands of the villages on the rim. Nevertheless, in 1998, the nineteen communities formed the Alliance of Native Villages, Ejidos and Communities of Anahuac (Alianza de Pueblos Indigenas, Ejidos, y Comunidades del Anahuac). (Anahuac is the Aztec word for the Valley of Mexico.) The precursor to this coalition was the CUALOCOTLA, a loose confederation of villagers who successfully opposed a scheduled 100-meter (328-foot)-wide swath of highway right-of-way to be expropriated by the former Mexico City regent. This was clearly a clever real estate speculation scheme (or scam), whereby the toll road to be built with public funds would serve a ring of high-rise condominiums along the upper rim on the west side of the valley, affording a dramatic view for the upscale professionals who lived there. The new government of the Federal District promptly shelved the toll road proposal, but the villagers are justifiably wary. With the democratic opening in Mexican and Mexico City politics, villagers know that only solid community-based organizations can withstand the kind of legal and extralegal pressures they have been resisting from the colonial period until now. The integrity of their barrio-based system of mayordomias, including married couples' committed to sponsoring village saints' fiestas, has been an important tool until now.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

This chapter raises a number of important questions regarding cultural continuity and change in the context of significant economic changes (i.e., real estate development) and human population growth.

Questions

1. How does one transform a local network of trust among neighbors who share religious traditions into a village organization capable of negotiating with ex-
ternal public agencies on behalf of the group? In other words, how does the religious organization become an effective civic group?

2. How can one respect the grandparents’ traditions and still participate as citizens in a modern society? Young people in these small towns face this dilemma in the new millennium.

3. Does a culture “die” when its language is no longer spoken?

4. What happens to a traditional community when its forest resource base disappears?

5. Can “conquered” peoples retain their original religious beliefs?

NOTES

Information and data presented in this chapter are based on field research conducted by the author.


RESOURCE GUIDE

Published Literature


WWW Sites

A Spanish language WWW site dedicated to the sustainable development of the villages located on the rim above Mexico City can be found at http://servidor.rds.org.mx/sirds/surdf/tix.html. This site contains information on the history of the villages, maps, and current information on the area’s environment and natural resources.
CENTRAL AMERICANS
Chapter 4

Artisanal Fisherfolk of the Gulf of Fonseca

Jorge Varela Marquez, Kate Cissna, and Susan C. Stonich

The principle that “the polluter pays” is transfigured by investors into “the polluter collects”... and the people pay. The social and ecological must be given equal weight with the economic consideration. To the degree that the [shrimp farming] industry continues to extend itself at our expense, we will complement their actions with our logical education of consumers, and our actions against financial institutions who patronize this activity.

—CODDEFFAGOLF (Committee for the Defense and Development of the Flora and Fauna of the Gulf of Fonseca), 1996

CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The People

The Gulf of Fonseca and adjacent areas of southern Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador were among the first places that were exploited by the Spaniards in their search for wealth in the New World. When the Spaniards first arrived in the 1520s, this was a culturally diverse region that was home to a conflux of northern (Mexican), southern (lowland South American), and indigenous Central American peoples who spoke different languages and had discrete ways of life. The Spanish conquerors of the sixteenth century described a region that was home to “more people than hairs on all the deer.” These peoples lived in fairly large settlements and farmed the rich volcanic soils along the Pacific Coast. Most groups practiced slash-and-burn agriculture to cultivate corns, beans, and squash. They supplemented their diets with domesticated chilies, peanuts, fruits, and turkeys.
Equally important to their survival was the monte, or uncultivated land, where they gathered nuts, roots, and grubs for food, and where they hunted and trapped deer, iguana, birds, and jaguars for meat and skins. The monte also was a source of brush, timber, and reeds that were used to construct houses and boats. In the mangroves and mudflats along the Gulf of Fonseca, the people collected shellfish and other aquatic species and fished from dugout canoes. Cacao and cotton were also grown, and the indigenous groups probably participated in local, coastal, and long-distance trading networks which involved these crops.

These conditions changed abruptly after the Spanish arrived; by the 1540s, the region's indigenous peoples had nearly been exterminated. Only in the early part of the twentieth century did the human population of this region reach pre-conquest levels. The rapid decline of the native peoples was not so much a result of the military operations but the more far-reaching consequences of malnutrition, from the disruption of indigenous food production and distribution systems, and deadly epidemics. Extremely high rates of mortality also occurred in association with forced labor in the newly opened mines and haciendas, or large landed estates. In addition, large numbers of native people were captured and sent in slave ships to Panama and Peru. By the third quarter of the sixteenth century, the coastal lowlands adjacent to the Gulf of Fonseca had been virtually depopulated. The various indigenous peoples had been reduced to remnant populations, most of whom were forcibly resettled in reservations in the southern Honduran highlands.

At the same time, Spanish land grants apportioned the fertile, lowland areas of the Gulf of Fonseca among Spanish conquistadors and Catholic religious orders. These large landowners quickly established ranching (cattle and mules) as the major economic activity in the region. The labor on these large haciendas was supplied by the few remaining indigenous peoples and later by poor peasants. The Spaniards also expropriated the indigenous salt-making operations for their own use. The growing number of silver and gold mines started by the Spaniards required a constant supply of meat, leather bags, tallow candles, and other goods. The cattle, mules, salt, and other agricultural commodities produced in the lowlands were transported to the mines in the highlands or exported by ships to other parts of the expanding Spanish empire. One result of the decimation of the indigenous peoples in a context of expanding mining and ranching was a labor shortage. To meet labor demands, hacienda and mine owners in southern Honduras, as well as in much of the rest of Spanish Central America, began importing labor to meet growing needs. The result of the combination of the rapid demise of the indigenous peoples and the need to bring in others to meet the labor needs of the mines and haciendas is evident today in the makeup of Central America's contemporary population. Central American ladinos, as they are called, are a genetic and ethnic mix of indigenous,
Artisanal Fisherfolk of the Gulf of Fonseca

Spanish, African, Middle Eastern, and other ancestry. This diversity is apparent in the physical appearance of the ladino population of southern Honduras, as well as in most of the rest of Central America. Currently, approximately 600,000 people live in southern Honduras, about 10% of the total population of Honduras. At the time of the last population census (1988), 75% of the residents of the region lived in rural areas, and the remaining 25% lived in the major regional urban centers of Choluteca, San Lorenzo, and Nacaome. The vast majority of the region’s rural and urban inhabitants are ladinos.

The Setting

The artisanal fisherfolk of the Gulf of Fonseca live in a region that is classified as southern Honduras. This region usually is delineated on the basis of a combination of geopolitical and environmental boundaries: on the north by a portion of the Central American Antilles chain of mountains, on the south by the Gulf of Fonseca, on the west by the Rio Goascoran which forms the national border with El Salvador, and on the east by the Rio Negro which constitutes part of the political departments (similar to states in the United States) of Choluteca and Valle. The two departments of Choluteca and Valle are divided into twenty-five smaller geopolitical units called municipalities (similar to counties in the United States). Each of these municipalities is divided into smaller towns and hamlets. All three of the region’s largest urban centers are located in the lowlands near the coast.

Southern Honduras is a triangular-shaped region covering approximately 6,000 km² (2,300 miles²) in the southern part of the country along the Gulf of Fonseca. It is located primarily in tropical dry and subtropical moist forest zones in the Pacific watershed of Central America. The area that borders the Gulf of Fonseca is covered by a band of mangrove and marsh grass. Beyond the mangrove forests lies one of the few broad plains on the Pacific Coast of Central America. This savanna gives way to steep foothills which quickly become the jagged mountain ranges to the northeast that make up about 60% of the region. Few of these volcanic mountains reach altitudes of more than 1,600 meters (5,250 feet), but they are extremely rugged and fashion innumerable segregated valleys. The region is marked by a distinct dry and rainy season with unpredictable precipitation patterns and soils that are prone to erosion. Consequently, agriculture is very risky, and the area is highly vulnerable to environmental degradation.

Honduras shares political jurisdiction of the Gulf of Fonseca with Nicaragua and El Salvador where the shrimp farming industry is expanding rapidly. There has been little research on the physical and biological characteristics of the gulf, and the lack of reliable information has been a critical factor in resolving recent conflicts. Because it is a large shallow depression,
it is vulnerable to both pollution and siltation. The coastline is dominated by approximately 50,000 hectares (123,500 acres) of mangrove wetlands that are fed by five major river systems. The biologically diverse mangrove ecosystems have many important ecological functions: they provide habitats, especially nursery areas for aquatic and terrestrial species; they protect coastlines from inundation and contain sediment to form new land; and they are an important stopover for an uncounted number of migratory birds. During the rainy season, the extensive mudflats form temporary shallow lakes which sustain large populations of fish and shellfish that are harvested by local inhabitants primarily for domestic consumption. The suitability of this region for industrial shrimp farming has led to a largely uncontrolled conversion of mudflats and mangroves, as well as some agricultural lands, into shrimp ponds in recent years.

Traditional Subsistence Strategies

Coastal communities vary considerably, with members of some communities more dependent on income from fishing than from agriculture. In other communities, fishing and agricultural activities are more in balance while in still others agriculture is more important. The economic livelihood strategies of households share a great deal with the survival strategies of peasants living in predominantly agricultural communities of southern Honduras: they are extremely diversified, flexible, dependent on cash remittances, and they can shift among economic resources in response to changing market conditions and resource availability. Most households integrate subsistence and wage activities by combining fishing, small-scale agriculture, gathering wild foods from coastal wetlands, and doing wage work (e.g., as hired laborers for their more affluent neighbors, as larva gatherers or laborers for the shrimp farms, or as workers in the shrimp processing plants). Although some shared labor occurs within communities, it generally takes place within extended families. Households also earn income by cutting mangrove for fuelwood and charcoal, producing salt, extracting bark for tannin, and collecting turtle eggs, mollusks, and crabs.

Social and Political Organization

Because the coastal areas of southern Honduras’ mangroves, mudflats, estuaries, and seasonal lagoons were unsuitable for the large-scale cultivation of cotton, sugarcane, pasture, or other commercial crops, they were not valued highly by outsiders or violently contested until the shrimp industry began to boom. Until then, the Honduran state (the legal owner of the coastal wetlands) allowed local people access to much of the zone. Compared to agricultural areas, the coast remained less densely settled until poor families, dislocated first by the expansion of cotton in lowland areas
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and later by beef cattle (in lowland, foothill, and highland areas), began migrating to the coast in the late 1950s. Families settling in existing communities or starting new ones survived by exploiting the wetlands. They cleared adjacent areas to cultivate crops but depended as well on fish, shrimp, shellfish, animals, and wood gathered from the surrounding common resource areas. By 1990 about 110,000 people lived in the rural areas of the municipalities bordering the Gulf of Fonseca, including an estimated 2,000 artisanal fishers and an additional 5,000 individuals who apportioned their time between fishing and small-scale agriculture.²

The vast majority of artisanal fisherfolk are ladinos and share many social characteristics with ladinos and mestizos living elsewhere throughout Central America. They are intimately connected to Honduras and the wider world economically, socially, and politically. Diversification characterizes even the smallest communities. Families engage in a wide range of monetary and non-monetary income-generating activities as discussed above. There is a fair range in wealth as measured in terms of ownership of land, animals, boats, and other fishing equipment as well as in income and human well-being (nutrition and health). Extended families often share their labor in order to complete necessary work in agriculture, fishing, construction, child care, and other household tasks. Virtually all families have family members (men, women, and older children) who have migrated outside of their home communities in search of work. The remittances sent by these migrants are very important to the survival of the families remaining within the communities. Coastal residents belong to a number of clubs or voluntary associations including women’s groups and religious organizations. The most important of these groups is the Committee for the Defense and Development of the Flora and Fauna of the Gulf of Fonseca (CODDEFFAGOLF).

Religion and World View

Diversity in religion and religious views also characterizes the people of southern Honduras including those who live in coastal areas. Since the 1960s, southern Honduras has been the site of several efforts made by the liberal wing of the Roman Catholic Church within the rubric of “liberation theology.” These efforts have included supporting peasant and workers organizations and maintaining a radio school that broadcasts information to the people of the south. Liberation theology asserts that the Church should maintain an activist political role, intervening to promote economic equity and social justice and to curb human rights abuses. Not surprisingly, southern Honduras has been the site of numerous peasant movements and protests. While many inhabitants continue to belong to the Roman Catholic Church, a growing number of coastal residents have joined a number of evangelical Protestant churches in recent years. The position taken by these
more conservative movements is that religion should concentrate on spiritual aspects and not be politicized.

THREATS TO SURVIVAL

Recent Events and Conditions

The environment of southern Honduras and the Gulf of Fonseca have provided ample natural resources for large numbers of indigenous peoples. Yet today, the United Nations has designated southern Honduras a "critically endangered region," an area where basic life-support systems, including water and soils, are in jeopardy. Deforestation, erosion, deterioration of watersheds, the indiscriminate use of agricultural pesticides, and overgrazing have transformed the southern Honduran landscape. The region's ladino inhabitants, among the poorest in Latin America, also are at risk. Recent nutritional assessments conclude that 65% of the children under five years of age and 37% of first graders suffer from moderate to severe undernutrition. Recently, too, the region has been the site of significant, sometimes fierce, conflicts stemming from the explosive growth of the shrimp-farming industry in the coastal wetlands along the Gulf of Fonseca. On one side of the struggle are the powerful shrimp-farming interests who stress the economic benefits of the expanding industry. On the other
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side of the controversy are artisanal fishers, fisher-farmers, other rural people, and environmentalists responding to the diminished access to natural resources vital to rural livelihoods and the environmental destruction arising from the largely unregulated growth of the industry.

Central to the environmental and social transformation of southern Honduras has been the loss of common pool resources. Especially significant has been the post-World War II period during which the Honduran government, with the assistance of international donor and lending institutions, promoted a series of agricultural commodities for the global market—principally cotton, sugarcane, and beef cattle. By the 1960s, growing human impoverishment and environmental destruction provoked extensive migration from the south to urban centers, to coastal zones within the region, and to the tropical humid forests in the northeastern portion of the country. Recently, economic development efforts have focused on the production of nontraditional agricultural exports (especially melons and cultured shrimp). By 1987 shrimp (most cultivated on farms along the Gulf of Fonseca) had become Honduras’ third highest source of foreign exchange after bananas and coffee. Although the industry has provided an important source of export earnings, created a limited (and highly contested) number of predominately temporary jobs, and stimulated the start-up of related businesses, the industry also has significantly restricted access to the south’s remaining common pool resources: coastal wetlands, fisheries, and water.

Expansion of the Honduran Shrimp Industry

Aquaculture, the cultivation or farming of aquatic species, includes both plants, such as various seaweeds, and animals, including such species as salmon, carp, mussels, tilapia, and many others. Recently, aquaculture has been hailed as the Blue Revolution—a crucial means to meet the food needs of the growing human population of the world. Globally, among the most commercially important species farmed are several kinds of shrimp, carnivorous species that are cultivated using industrial methods in tropical coastal zones of Asia, Latin America, and Africa. While almost all cultured shrimp are raised in poor, Third World, or developing countries, virtually all these shrimp are exported to rich industrial countries including the United States, Western Europe, and Japan. Currently about one-third of global shrimp production comes from farms (the rest are captured by boats), but it is likely that within the next few years, most of the shrimp consumed in the world will be farmed. The fact that most shrimp is farmed in poor countries and then exported to rich countries has raised serious concerns about the extent to which shrimp aquaculture (or shrimp farming) can improve the diets and nutritional status of the world’s poor. An additional nutritional concern comes from the fact that most commercial shrimp feed pellets contain a large percentage of fishmeal. Most fishmeal is composed of cheap
(low-value), less commercially desirable species such as anchovies—precisely the less-expensive species of fish that are consumed by the poor. Using cheap fish to produce fishmeal that is fed to expensive (high-value) species such as shrimp, in effect, puts the poor in competition with shrimp for these low-value species.

**Shrimp Farms Are Aquatic Feedlots**

Industrial shrimp farms can be seen as aquatic feedlots—water-based equivalents of the industrial feedlots in which cattle, pigs, and chickens are raised. As in those kinds of operations, juvenile shrimp, collected from the wild or purchased from hatcheries, are placed in grow-out ponds where they are fattened with commercial feeds. When the shrimp reach the desired size and maturity they are harvested, processed, packaged, and exported. Shrimp farming has environmental problems parallel to those of other kinds of industrial livestock-feeding operations.

The basic pattern of shrimp pond development for the semi-intensive systems of production that predominate in Honduras requires the excavation of a shallow depression varying from 1.0 to 1.5 meters (3 to 4.5 feet) in depth. The excavated material is used to form a low earth dike around the pond. The pond is linked to the ocean or a brackish estuary by a shallow canal that leads to sluice gates in the dike that permit water to flow into and out of the pond at high tide. Diesel-powered pumps are frequently incorporated into the design when adjustments in the salinity levels in the pond are required. Construction is usually done with bulldozers, and some of the channel digging is done with dragline cranes.

Shrimp farms vary from extensive, through semi-intensive, to super-intensive systems of production. In extensive systems, an enclosure is built close to the sea often by damming a seasonal lagoon. Tidal flows into and out of the enclosure provide stocking of shrimp, feed, and water exchange. The semi-intensive systems that predominate in Honduras and the intensive systems that prevail in much of Asia function more or less as forms of brackish water feedlots for shrimp. In the Honduran semi-intensive systems, shrimp postlarvae, produced in hatcheries or captured, are stocked in ponds where the water has been fertilized to create an algal bloom. The water in the ponds is aerated to maintain dissolved oxygen and replaced regularly to prevent the buildup of metabolic wastes. The shrimp are fed formulated diets made from imported commercial feed to produce rapid growth. In the tropics of Asia and Latin America, where most shrimp are farmed, two crops per year are possible in such ponds. The fattened shrimp are then cleaned, deheaded (for export to the United States), and packed for export either on the farms or in one of the regional packing plants.
Environmental and Social Problems Associated with Shrimp Farming

Currently, Honduras ranks after Ecuador and Mexico in the production and export of cultured shrimp from Latin America. All shrimp farming in Honduras is located in the southern region along the Gulf of Fonseca, one of the most environmentally degraded and most impoverished regions of the country. Although the first shrimp farm in southern Honduras was constructed in the early 1970s, it was only in the 1980s that the industry began to expand significantly. By 1998 approximately 14,000 hectares (34,600 acres) of primarily semi-intensive shrimp farms existed in southern Honduras; approximately 70% of them were located on government-leased concessions of national land rather than on private property. Although about ninety farms operate in the country, various factors have led to the exclusion of small farmers from the shrimp-farming industry and the domination of the industry by a few firms. Most of these large firms are part of vertically integrated international companies that include feed mills, hatcheries, processing plants, and worldwide marketing. The two largest firms in southern Honduras account for about half the total area in production in the country as well as the majority of exports. The largest enterprise, Grupo Granjas Marinas (Sea Farms Group), is an international company that ranks among the largest shrimp-farming operations in the world with production from 6,500 hectares (16,000 acres) that accounts for 60% of the cultivated shrimp exports from Honduras. The second largest integrated shrimp farm in Honduras is Grupo Deli with 700 hectares (1,700 acres) of ponds that average 20 hectares (50 acres) each. According to the southern Honduras Chamber of Commerce, the shrimp industry provides employment to 11,900 people through commercial farms, six packing plants, and ice-making operations. These employment figures, however, are hotly disputed by local people and other critics of the industry.

Faced with chronic economic crises in the 1980s, the Honduran government began encouraging investment in the industry with the support of international development organizations, including the World Bank and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Through its concession process, the government began granting rights over state-owned coastal land to investors, thereby supplanting the previous claims of traditional, communal users. Renewable concessions are leased to individuals or corporations for twenty-five years at the ridiculously low cost of about U.S. $4–5 per year. Concessions cannot be legally transferred or sold, but entrepreneurs have circumvented the law by remaining minority investors in new farms, and they have established a black market for leases which has stimulated land speculation. Despite the low cost of leases, their lack of political power to influence the award of concessions (along with
the high costs of farm construction and maintenance, lack of technical assistance, insufficient credit opportunities, and high interest rates) has impeded the entry of small producers, agrarian reform cooperatives, and poor coastal communities into the industry. Although concessions confer only use rights, investors treat their holdings much like private property. Repeating past “enclosure movements” in which small farmers were evicted from good agricultural land, often violently and with the help of local authorities, concession holders exclude others by means of armed guards, barbed-wire fencing, and no-trespassing signs. Over 25,000 hectares (61,750 acres) have been leased through concessions, although more than half the area remains undeveloped. Estimates of mangrove loss due directly to the construction of shrimp farms range from about 2,000 to 4,000 hectares (5,000 to 10,000 acres), while the remainder of shrimp farms have been constructed on mudflats and lagoons. Since World War II, half the gulf’s mangrove areas have been destroyed, and if conservation policies are not put in place, estimates are that all the mangroves will be gone within twenty years.

While areas in mangrove and mudflats have the most clearly designated property rights under the concession process, activities affecting estuaries take place under a largely unregulated open access system. Seed to stock shrimp ponds comes either from captured wild shrimp postlarvae or (increasingly) from hatchery-produced seed. From 1,500 to 3,000 larva gatherers trawl the coastal estuaries in boats or on foot collecting shrimp postlarvae in nets. They work individually or in teams under a variety of contractual arrangements. Some are paid on a piece rate while others receive a wage from labor contractors. Larva collecting does provide a source of employment, but it also entails environmental costs. Even though these costs are poorly understood, artisanal fishers assert that their catches have fallen since the larva gathering began. This may be due to the loss of by-catch: an estimated five other organisms die for each shrimp larva that is captured. Significant environmental costs in estuarine areas also include declining water quality from farm effluent that contains high organic loads. Several farms usually recycle water from the same estuary among themselves—the waste water pumped from one farm is the source of water repumped into adjacent ponds. Degraded water quality affects not only the sustainability of the shrimp farms and the livelihoods of artisanal estuarine fishers but also myriad other aquatic organisms.

All of these circumstances have contributed to reductions in the sources of food and income for gulf fisherfolk and, for many, the loss of an ancestral home and way of life. By privatizing former common pool resource areas, the industry’s expansion has converted biodiverse, multiple-use habitats to mono-crop, single-user habitats. Artisanal people are forced to go elsewhere to seek other kinds of wage work or resource-extractive activities, or they are pushed into smaller fishing areas, increasing the competition
Artisanal Fisherfolk of the Gulf of Fonseca

among themselves. In some cases, the problem is that of access to fishing sites. The access problem is partly due to the fact that shrimp farmers have rarely left buffer zones around their operations, leaving shrimp ponds whose perimeters are immediately adjacent to estuaries, vulnerable to robbery. This situation has provided a basis for some shrimp farmers to consider all fisherfolk who pass near to their property as potential thieves. According to the executive committee of the CODDEFFAGOLF,

The artisanal fishermen cannot tranquilly move through the estuaries and mangroves where they once found their sustenance, because the shrimp farmers have not only appropriated the grounds of their concessions, but also the surroundings. With the complicity of all our governmental system, we have given the patrimony of our people over to a select few national citizens and foreigners, and we have taken away the very medium for subsistence for thousands of people.4

The insistence of artisanal fishers on their rights to use the estuaries, as well as the insistence of shrimp farmers to patrol those estuaries with security forces, has resulted in tragedy for some fishing families. On the evening of October 4, 1997, two fishermen, Israel Ortiz Avila, thirty years old, and Marín Zeledonio Alvarado, twenty-eight years old, were fishing in the Todo Mundo estuary, adjacent to CRISUR shrimp, which is established within the Las Iguanas wildlife refuge. According to a witness, the two men were trapped, tied up, and tortured by shrimp guards. In the early morning hours of the next day, the two men’s bodies were deposited by the owner of the shrimp farm at the entrance to Guipo, the town where the men lived. They had been shot at gunpoint. Immediately after the incident, before any investigation had taken place, the National Aquaculture Association of Honduras (ANDAH) defended the killings, implying that the fishermen were thieves. Ortiz’s widow pleaded, “If they were thieves, why were they killed? Why were their bodies dumped here in our town, rather than left at the scene for an investigation? What is the code of ethics of ANDAH?” In total, between 1988 and 1997, at least nine fishermen who were active in a regional fishermen’s alliance have been murdered. Their cases have been reported to national and international human rights organizations. To date, there have been no prosecutions of any of those responsible for the fishermen’s deaths, but the law has not been lenient in disciplining several individuals accused of stealing shrimp from farms. They received penalties of more than five years in jail.

RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

The Evolution of Organized Resistance

Southern Honduras has been the site of several peasant movements that have resisted the loss of common pool resources associated with the earlier
spread of the cotton, sugar, and beef cattle industries. In response to the current promotion of shrimp farming, poor people from coastal communities founded their own resistance movement, the grassroots Committee for the Defense and Development of the Flora and Fauna of the Gulf of Fonseca (CODDEFFAGOLF) in 1988. In contrast to past peasant movements, the members have successfully received the backing of an extensive global network including the public, the press, and international organizations of environmental and social activists. It remains to be seen whether this support will significantly enhance the ability of local people to have a voice in the development plans for the Gulf of Fonseca or amplify their access to crucial coastal resources in light of the influential groups actively opposing their goals.

The name of the ecological grassroots alliance formed by coastal fisherfolk and peasants is a mouthful, but it says something important. The participants do not believe it is possible to defend the environment without also developing the resources that allow people to survive. From a base of dozens of village-level informal associations, comprising over 5,000 fisherfolk and peasants, CODDEFFAGOLF has become one of the strongest environmental organizations in Central America today. It has instituted a variety of programs in training and technical assistance, institutional development, environmental education, and improved production projects for artisanal communities. However, the shrimp industry is of paramount concern because it is considered the greatest single factor affecting the marine waters and coastal zone, as well as the human and environmental rights of the gulf’s artisanal fishers. In addressing the shrimp industry, the gulf’s artisanal movement draws on a long history of peasant organizing in Honduras, in which landless peasants have occupied large landholdings and, as a people, have demanded some redistribution of land ownership to procure the basic human rights of livelihood and physical survival. Like the environmental movements of the poor in various regions of the world, CODDEFFAGOLF’s goals are equal parts justice and ecology.

The organization began by providing workshops by, and for, fisherfolk about the ecological principles of their marine environment. The workshops were conducted jointly by university-trained marine biologists and artisanal fisherfolk who had long-term experience fishing in the gulf and intimate knowledge of local flora and fauna. Aimed at helping artisanal people improve sustainable practices in a heavily pressured gulf environment, the workshops also became an important place for people to discuss how to understand and respond to social justice and environmental concerns about the expansion of industrial shrimp farming. From this beginning, the role of CODDEFFAGOLF has evolved into a complex mixture of direct, non-violent action, negotiation, dialogue, and participation in governmental efforts to resolve resource problems and conflicts in the Gulf of Fonseca.

In 1991 CODDEFFAGOLF took its complaints and proposals to the
Artisanal Fisherfolk of the Gulf of Fonseca

National Congress in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, and hundreds of artisanal people marched in front of the Presidential Palace. Other direct actions began to take place locally, including blocking access to shrimp farms, destroying fences and surveillance stations, blocking major highways, and burning the nets used to collect juvenile shrimp. Major efforts being made by CODDEFFAGOLF are to educate its members about national laws and regulations and to provide information that may affect artisanal people through meetings and its newsletter. Up and down the coast, CODDEFFAGOLF has created an active network of local residents who report illegal mangrove clearing and harassment and assassinations of fisherfolk to local and national authorities. They also bring these incidents to light to a growing international and transnational network of supporters.

The Global Context

Despite their conflicts with shrimp farmers, CODDEFFAGOLF does not lay all the blame at their feet or just blame the Honduran government. Rather, CODDEFFAGOLF has targeted international financial institutions and development agencies, foreign investors, and consumers in its efforts to alter the wider processes that bear upon local people in the Gulf of Fonseca. Such processes include structural adjustment policies promoted by the International Monetary Fund. In addition, shrimp farmers are often faced with difficult decisions because, in order to satisfy investors and compete successfully in international markets, long-term environmental considerations are sacrificed. CODDEFFAGOLF’s response has been to increase the awareness of international financial institutions and consumers about the serious social and ecological costs of producing and eating shrimp, costs that are being paid by local people, some with their lives.

In addition, CODDEFFAGOLF has tried to influence multilateral agreements and institutions such as the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD), the UN Commission for Sustainable Development (UNCSD), and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) to exert pressure on the government and industry of Honduras. For example, the UNFAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries states in article 6, clause 18,

Recognizing the important contributions of artisanal and small-scale fisheries to employment, income and food security, States should appropriately protect the rights of fishers and fishworkers, particularly those engaged in subsistence, small-scale and artisanal fisheries, to a secure and just livelihood, as well as preferential access, where appropriate, to traditional fishing grounds and resources in the waters under their national jurisdiction.5
In order to better accomplish these goals, CODDEFFAGOLF has acquired international partners, including environmental and development organizations in the United States, Canada, and Europe. Moreover, Honduran activists also have reached across political, cultural, language, and geographical barriers to link with other grassroots organizations in other tropical countries in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere in Latin America where shrimp farming also is expanding. In fact, CODDEFFAGOLF has played an important role in facilitating the development of a global network, the Industrial Shrimp Action Network (ISA-Net), which formally emerged in 1997 to link people and organizations in over sixty nations. Organizations in many countries have seen a critical need for international solidarity for two reasons: to strengthen one another’s local or national struggles and to cooperate in addressing the global aspects of industrial aquaculture. In 1997 CODDEFFAGOLF called for a worldwide moratorium on the expansion of industrial shrimp farming:

With much respect, we suggest a moment of reflection and more time to investigate and develop mitigation measurements that could convert this industry into an activity more appreciated by the local communities.

The Bioregional Context

CODDEFFAGOLF has participated actively in international efforts to create coordination and cooperation among the national governments and resource users of all three countries that border the Gulf of Fonseca. One important focus has been the Tri-Partite Commission, an advisory body of government officials from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras, along with representatives of development institutions, shrimp farmers, and organizations such as CODDEFFAGOLF. Some positive changes have resulted from the bioregional approach, mainly in ecological matters. One example is the research on water quality which is financed by USAID. CODDEFFAGOLF participated in the PROARCA-COSTAS project in Central America, an ecosystem management effort that includes the Gulf of Fonseca, which is being funded and developed by USAID, the World Wildlife Fund, the Nature Conservancy, and the University of Rhode Island.

The National Context

The Honduran artisanal movement in the gulf represents neither a local withdrawal from the Honduran nation nor an effort merely to bypass or replace the national arena with that of the international or global arena. In many ways, the struggles of artisanal people may be seen as an effort to increase their voices and rights as national citizens. CODDEFFAGOLF
has claimed a place at the national “table” as a protagonist in the sustainable national development of the country and frequently explains its activities in terms of national interests. In the struggle for equal footing, CODDEFFAGOLF has sought a dialogue with shrimp farmers individually and through the national shrimp aquaculture association, ANDAH. Subsequent to a 1996 ISA-Net meeting held in Choluteca, Honduras, and a mass protest staged in Tegucigalpa in 1997, the government of Honduras has twice decreed an annual moratorium on the expansion of shrimp farming, which was supported by many shrimp farmers, though not all.

In 1998 a precedent was set when CODDEFFAGOLF and ANDAH cooperated in producing feasibility studies for a series of protected areas in the Gulf of Fonseca. In October 1998, the Honduran government approved a plan to implement the protected areas, placing more than 75,000 hectares of wetlands in the Gulf of Fonseca under different categories of management, according to the nomenclature developed by an international scientific nongovernmental organization (NGO), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The Declaration for the Protected Areas aimed to increase the control of all gulf-based industries including shrimp farms, fisheries, and others. As one member of CODDEFFAGOLF stated recently, “An important issue for all of us is having sincerity in the dialogue, and concerted efforts by CODDEFFAGOLF and ANDAH. . . . This isn’t the end of the problem but it might be the beginning of the end.”

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

The shrimp aquaculture industry has brought with it economic growth for a relatively small sector of the Honduran national society. It has also made a very important contribution to the financial needs of the debt-ridden Honduran government. It has benefited foreign investors. Consumers have benefited from the increasingly cheaper prices of shrimp that have been created by international growth and competition in the shrimp aquaculture industry. However, CODDEFFAGOLF argues that the shrimp aquaculture industry has not created real development in the coastal communities because of the excessive stimuli to production and commercialization at the expense of local livelihoods and the environment. While shrimp aquaculture is the most important industry that affects the marine waters and coastal zone, other traditional activities have negative impacts: salt production, the collection of firewood, artisanal fishing, urban pollution, and the production of other agricultural commodities such as cotton, melons, and cattle. As shrimp farmers have rightfully pointed out, everyone affects the environment to some degree.

One response to try to reduce the environmental and social harms taking place through initiatives to certify products that are produced with agreed
Endangered Peoples of Latin America

standards for ecological and sometimes also social practices. This way, consumers have the opportunity to use their buying power to discourage destructively produced products and to encourage those that have a more positive impact on people and environment. Ranging across a broad array of goods and institutions around the world, such efforts include the organic food movement in the United States and tropical timber certification by such organizations as the Forest Stewardship Council. One difficulty encountered in applying the certification concept to shrimp products is that the place of origin and method of the production of shrimp are rarely identified in grocery stores or restaurants, although this is changing in some stores. Still, a variety of institutions are now rushing in to acquire the right to “green” shrimp aquaculture, including the Marine Stewardship Council (a partnership of the World Wildlife Fund and Unilever, the world’s largest seafood company). The Global Aquaculture Alliance, an international association of shrimp producers, also is considering a program to identify “responsibly” produced shrimp for consumers. Other corporations have simply placed their shrimp products in “green” packaging, packaging that claims that their products are produced in an environmentally friendly way. However, to date, none of these efforts have included an independent (non-corporate) review that takes into account local people, such as the Gulf of Fonseca fisherfolk, who are directly impacted by shrimp aquaculture operations.

This chapter points to the complexity of causes and local responses to the life and death problems that are faced by local fisherfolk in southern Honduras. Some might argue that artisanal fisherpeople have become an anachronism in the modern world—they persist in a way of life that is antiquated, inefficient, strenuous, and rapidly vanishing. On the other hand, the prehistory of the Gulf of Fonseca suggests that the natural resources of the region are sufficient to sustain a large number of human inhabitants using relatively simple agricultural and fishing technologies that do not permanently degrade the environment or natural resource base. Shrimp farming is just the most recent example of the kind of export-oriented production that has degraded the environment of southern Honduras while also impoverishing local people.

Questions

1. Do you think there is a place in the modern world and the global economic system for artisanal fisherfolk such as those of the Gulf of Fonseca?
2. Do you think it is possible for shrimp farmers and other artisanal fisherfolk to solve jointly the environmental and social problems discussed in this chapter?
3. What are the social and environmental consequences of your last shrimp dinner? What can you do to ensure that your decision to eat shrimp does not destroy
Artisanal Fisherfolk of the Gulf of Fonseca

the environment or the lives and livelihoods of local people in Honduras and elsewhere?

4. Consider the role that CODDEFFAGOLF has played in attempting to solve the environmental and social problems associated with industrial shrimp farming. Can you think of any similar examples of this kind of involvement by environmental organizations in your community, or state, or country?

5. Do you think that shrimp farmers should be allowed to “self-policing” their industry and even to certify that the shrimp they produce is environmentally friendly and socially sound?

NOTES


RESOURCE GUIDE

Published Literature


Endangered Peoples of Latin America


**WWW Sites**

Many of the groups involved in the debate over industrial shrimp farming maintain WWW sites. The following list includes the most important (but certainly not all of these sites). Most of the following sites include links to hundreds of other sites on shrimp farming and related topics.

Aquaculture Magazine Online
http://www.aquaculturemag.com/

CODDEFFAGOLF
http://coddeffagolf.org

Earth Summit Watch: The Shrimp Sentinel
http://www.earthsummitwatch.org/shrimp/index.html

Global Aquaculture Alliance
http://www.gaalliance.org

The Industrial Shrimp Action Network (ISA-Net)
http://www.shrimpaction.org
email: isanet@shrimpaction.org

International Center of Aquaculture and Aquatic Environments, Auburn University, Auburn, See Pond Dynamics Honduras
http://www.ag.auburn.edu/dept/faal/pdbond.html

Mangrove Action Project—see projects list, Earth Island Institute
http://www.earthisland.org/

Mangrove Web Sites—a selection of useful web sites dealing with mangrove ecosystems and other tropical wetlands
http://www.ncl.ac.uk/tcmweb/tcm/mglinks.htm

The National Fisheries Institute (USA)
http://www.nfi.org/

http://darwin.bio.uci.edu/~sustain/shrimpecos/declare2.html

Third World Network
http://www.twnside.org.sg/
Chapter 5

The English-Speaking Bay Islanders

Susan C. Stonich

Our children are our most important resource.
—Statement by the Native Bay Islanders Professionals and Labourers Association, 1995

CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The People

Although politically part of Hispanic, Spanish-speaking Honduras, the Bay Islands, with their predominantly Afro-Caribbean population, are one of the English-speaking enclaves in the western Caribbean region. Over the last several centuries, the Bay Islanders have attempted to maintain cultural, social, and economic ties with other English-speaking enclaves, especially British Honduras (now Belize), the Cayman Islands, and the United States. They also have successfully retained their use of the English language and have adhered to their Protestant religions. Through these means, the Bay Islanders isolated themselves fairly successfully from Honduran influences even after Great Britain returned sovereignty of the islands to Honduras through the Wykes-Cruz treaty in 1859. Following four centuries of Anglo-Hispanic conflict in the western Caribbean region, the current efforts of the Honduran government to promote international tourism on the islands is the most recent attempt to integrate the islands into the Honduran nation’s economy, society, and culture.

Several distinct groups have occupied the Bay Islands at one time or another: pre-Columbian indigenous peoples—most likely the Paya, a group that also lived on the Honduran mainland; Spanish soldiers, pirates, and agriculturalists; English buccaneers, sailors, and farmers; Garifuna (Black
Caribs) from the island of Saint Vincent in the eastern Caribbean who were marooned on Roatán by the British in 1797; Anglo-Caribbeans and Afro-Caribbeans from the Caymans and Belize who migrated to the islands starting in the 1830s; North American adventurers, fugitives, tourists, and retirees who began arriving around the turn of the twentieth century; Spanish-speaking ladinos (individuals with mixed ethnic and racial ancestry) from the mainland of Honduras whose migration from the mainland has accelerated over the last two decades; and various European adventurers, castaways, travelers, tourists, and investors.

Although the Bay Islands currently are characterized by an ethnically diverse population, until recently the majority of the residents of the islands were descendants of freed black slaves, an Afro-Caribbean people who immigrated to the Bay Islands from the Cayman Islands after slavery was outlawed in British colonies in 1837. Lighter-skinned Creole (persons of mixed African and European ancestry) plantation owners from the Caymans were the first to settle on the islands in anticipation of the repeal of slavery. Their former slaves followed, especially during the period between 1844 and 1858 when many existing towns on the islands were established. This dark-skinned Afro-Caribbean, English (and Creole) speaking population settled in strings of hamlets and small villages that hugged the western shoreline of Roatán, Morat, and Helene; their far less numerous, lighter-skinned former masters predominated in the larger towns of Coxen Hole and French Harbour. From that time to the present, considerable disparity in wealth, along with considerable racial prejudice, has persisted between the “white” Bay Islanders (who became the elite) and the majority of black Bay Islanders, who now refer to themselves as the English-speaking Bay Islanders.

The Setting

The Bay Islands are located about 50 kilometers (31 miles) off the northeastern coast of Honduras and are easily accessible from the mainland by plane or boat. Made up of eight islands and sixty-five cays, they have a total land area of approximately 258 square kilometers (about 92 square miles). The largest island is Roatán, which covers 127 square kilometers (49 square miles) and is the site of most of the tourism business, although tourism has grown significantly on the other islands in the last few years. A mountainous ridge, which runs the length of Roatán, abruptly ends at the coastline with steep slopes. Although Roatán boasts only a few palm-tree-skirted beaches, these beaches are spectacularly beautiful and provide ideal sites for swimming, snorkeling, and sunbathing. The islands’ main international tourism attraction, however, is a coral reef that scuba divers place in the same class as the Great Barrier Reef of Australia. The reef provides critical habitats for numerous marine species and protects the shorelines from
flooding. Although rainfall averages at least 200 centimeters (79 inches) per year on all the islands, most precipitation occurs during the rainy season, the fall and early winter of the Northern Hemisphere, especially October and November. The primary tourist season is during the dry season, from January through June, during which less than 10 centimeters (4 inches) of precipitation falls.

In addition to the captivating tropical beaches and spectacular coral reefs, reminders of the islands’ exciting history are evident in ruins of prehistoric archaeological sites, pirate strongholds, English fortresses, underwater shipwrecks, and an ethnically diverse population. Together these attractions make the Bay Islands ideal for the most important types of international tourism currently promoted throughout Central America—sun, sea, and beach tourism; adventure and ecotourism; and cultural heritage tourism.
Traditional Subsistence Activities

It makes little sense to designate any set of economic activities of the Bay Islanders as traditional (unchanging since some bygone days) or as purely subsistence (produced only for consumption within the home or family). The Bay Islanders emerged during recent history and have always engaged in economic activities that provided cash income and goods for home consumption as well as for sale in the marketplace. At the time of the initial, modern settlement around the mid-1800s, when the Bay Islands were a colony of Great Britain, the economy of the islands has flourished. In addition to subsistence activities—farming, fishing, and turtling—the Bay Islanders have produced a growing quantity of commodities for sale and export including coconuts, coconut oil, bananas, fish, and yams. Most of these goods were shipped to the United States and Belize. After Great Britain relinquished control of the islands to Honduras in 1859, the export-oriented economy of the islands declined and was replaced by a greater overall economic dependence on the sea. The Bay Islanders became renowned for their prominence as merchant sailors and fishers. During the last thirty years, the Bay Islanders’ economic survival has depended on their employment in the shrimp and lobster industries, on cruise ships, and most recently on the tourism industry.

Social and Political Organization

Until recently, social and political organization among the English-speaking Bay Islanders was confined for the most part to the level of the family. In general, the islands do not have a history of concerted efforts to organize and to establish local institutions, with the exception of the Protestant churches which continue to play an important part in community concerns. In part, this pattern is explained by the economic independence of families and the long absences of male family members because of their employment in various seafaring enterprises. Relying on incomes earned at sea demanded that men be away from home for long periods of time from a fairly early age. This, in turn, required that women assume most of the responsibilities connected with family and household, including child care, cleaning, cooking, washing, and making decisions regarding the day-to-day maintenance of the household. Lack of widespread, well-integrated organization beyond the level of the community may help explain the lack of organized response to recent efforts by the Honduran government to Hispanicize the islands and to promote tourism in ways that many Bay Islanders judge to be detrimental to their cultural and material survival.
Religion and World View

In addition to their devotion to the English language (rather than Spanish), the Bay Islanders’ vigorous adherence to their Protestant faiths distinguishes them from their Spanish-speaking, predominantly Catholic counterparts on the Honduran mainland. Currently, Bay Islanders belong to a number of Protestant sects including Methodist, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, and Church of God. Their religions are very important to the Bay Islanders who view the influx of tourists as formidable threats to their basic values and beliefs. For example, most Bay Islanders abhor the sight of scantily clad tourists and have erected signs banning topless and nude bathing throughout the islands. They also fear that the increased accessibility and growing violence associated with the drug trade on the islands is negatively affecting their young people.

THREATS TO SURVIVAL

In late October 1998, Hurricane Mitch grew into a devastating hurricane with wind speeds in excess of 200 miles per hour and took deadly aim at Honduras. Described as the most destructive Atlantic hurricane in the last 200 years, it stalled with its eye over the Honduran Bay Islands for thirty-nine hours before it made landfall along the northern coast of Honduras. On the Bay Island of Guanaja, over which Hurricane Mitch directly hovered for almost two days, the destruction was overwhelming. Although the loss of human life was miraculously low, all the island’s buildings were badly damaged or destroyed, and virtually all the island’s vegetation was stripped away by the high winds and rain. Although Hurricane Mitch posed a serious threat to the Bay Islands, it is only one of the many dangers that have recently threatened the survival of the Bay Islands’ people and natural environment. Most of these recent threats are linked to the explosive and largely unregulated growth of international tourism on the islands. Since the early 1980s, the number of international tourists who visit the islands has grown from a few thousand to 100,000 every year, making the Bay Islands the most important tourist destination within Honduras.

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Latin America with more than 75% of its population living on less than U.S.$2 a day. It also is among the Latin American countries with the greatest gap between rich and poor, the most unequal distribution of income and consumption, and the lowest levels of education and health. In order to try to improve the standard of living of its population, the government of Honduras has been promoting various economic development schemes over the last several decades. Since the early 1980s, one of the most important of these economic strategies has been the expansion of the international tourism industry. The particular focus of this strategy has been the pristine coral reefs, scenic
beaches, and historical ruins of the Bay Islands. In the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch, the Honduran government has singled out the tourism industry as the major means of economic recovery and reconstruction and is accelerating its efforts to expand the industry.

We don’t know where you came from . . . We don’t know who you are . . . You have no history. (Honduran minister of culture, during a meeting with Bay Islanders in 1996)

This statement, made by the Honduran minister of culture, reflects the prevailing views held by Spanish-speaking Hondurans regarding Bay Islanders—that they are neither “Honduran” nor “indigenous.” Although the government of Honduras is mandated by its constitution to protect the cultures of Honduras’ indigenous peoples, the minister’s statement implies that the government does not recognize that responsibility in the case of the Bay Islanders. If the minister is alluding to the non-Hispanic and non-Central American origin of the Bay Islanders, he is accurate, although it is quite incorrect to say that Bay Islanders have “no history.” Like many peoples of the Caribbean, they are a mix of relocated peoples—in this case, with roots in the Cayman Islands, Belize, Jamaica, and elsewhere.

The Bay Islands are among the diminishing number of English-speaking enclaves in the western Caribbean that lie on the periphery of Spanish-speaking Latin America. (The English-speaking western Caribbean generally is defined to include Belize (formerly British Honduras), the Mosquito coast of Nicaragua and Honduras, the Isle of Pines, the Cayman Islands, Jamaica, the Corn Islands, and the Islands of Providence and San Andres.) They are part of the Spanish Main, that region of the Caribbean that was the nucleus of the Spanish empire, the site of the first tragic confrontations between Europeans and native Americans, and the locus of centuries of violent conflicts among various European powers. The Bay Islanders’ identity has emerged in this marginality, shaped, in part, in terms of their relations to more powerful Spanish and subsequent Honduran mainland forces. Throughout the nineteenth century, well after they were formally incorporated into the Honduran national territory, the Bay Islands effectively persisted as a relatively autonomous economic and cultural entity. Despite the efforts of the government to extend its control throughout this century, the native people of the islands continue to regard themselves as having an ethnic and cultural identity that is quite distinct from the Spanish-speaking majority. Their separate identity, however, is now threatened because of the enhanced efforts of the government of Honduras to integrate the islands into Honduras.

Until recently, the Bay Islands’ relatively low population density, comparative isolation, and poor communications protected them from many of the adverse social and environmental effects of tourism that have charac-
characterized much of the eastern Caribbean region. Beginning in the 1960s, a small number of tourists made up mostly of recreational sailors and divers “discovered” the islands’ splendid reef, clear waters, secluded harbors, and tranquil beaches. At the same time, according to most social, economic, and health measures, the Bay Islanders enjoyed a quality of life that significantly surpassed that of Honduran ladinos living on the mainland. Unfortunately, these conditions changed radically in the 1980s in the context of the largely uncontrolled growth of the tourism industry, which included the migration of thousands of desperately poor ladinos from the mainland seeking employment in the expanding tourism sector. By the late 1990s, approximately 100,000 tourists visited the islands annually—about twice the resident population; and by the end of the decade, ladinos constituted more than 50% of the islands’ 50,000 residents—an increase from 16% a decade earlier.

By the mid-1990s, the combined effects of the escalating numbers of international tourists and ladino immigrants from the mainland elevated the human population to a level at which the islands’ freshwater supply, food supply, and other natural resources were threatened, and the ability of many communities to maintain health services and other vital services was overwhelmed. The environmental health effects of this degradation are considerable and include high rates of respiratory and diarrheal infections, malaria, dengue fever, and other waterborne diseases, particularly among the poorer segments of the islands’ population. These conditions raise the serious question of whether population growth per se is the root cause of the environmental degradation occurring on the islands. An essentially demographic explanation is an oversimplification of reality, however, since the majority of population growth is due to the escalating numbers of tourists and ladino immigrants, which is directly associated with the expansion of the tourism industry. The root cause of environmental degradation on the Bay Islands is the rapid, largely unregulated expansion of the tourism industry. Part of this growth has included significant infrastructure development in certain domains, especially airport improvement and road construction, and a simultaneous lack of infrastructure development in other critical domains, especially drinking water, sewage, and solid waste disposal systems. Although it is clear that escalating numbers of tourists put more pressure on the islands’ environment and natural resources, the major effort of development efforts has been to increase the number of tourists—regardless of the environmental and human costs.

The expansion of tourism has had considerable social, cultural, and economic costs as well as environmental ones. The price of tourism has included a growing gap between rich people and poor people; and less affluent residents feel that their standard of living has fallen along with the growth of tourism. Although tourism has provided an increasing number of jobs, the majority of Afro-Caribbean Bay Islanders and ladinos have
access only to the lowest status, lowest paying, temporary jobs. A growing number of environmental regulations designed to protect coral reefs for use by tourists have also reduced access for local people to the natural resources on which they depend for their livelihoods. This is particularly serious for poorer members of island society who rely on the fish and shellfish collected from reef areas. Compounding the problems associated with a diminished access to reef species for food and sale, demand from a growing number of tourists has escalated prices for commercial food as well as for manufactured goods and housing. These price increases again are most serious for the poor and middle class. Tourism also has prompted great land speculation and spiraling land costs, what many call a “land grab.” This too has had the most negative effect on poor and middle class islanders, many of whom have lost title to land that has been in their families for generations. Land speculation also has resulted in increased outside ownership of land and other local resources by foreigners and by Honduran nationals from the mainland. In the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch, the government of Honduras enacted several measures, including changing the Honduran constitution to make it easier for foreigners to buy property on the Bay Islands and in other tourism zones, in the hope of encouraging foreign investment. While this strategy may indeed stimulate foreign investment in the tourism industry, it will also likely increase local-level conflicts over land on the islands.

The establishment of marine reserves as part of the environmental conservation effort (such as the Sandy Bay-West End Marine Reserve on Roatán) has diminished the economic options of the English-speaking Bay Islanders, most of whom make up the poorer and middle class segments of Bay Island society, as well as the poorer ladino families, by enforcing rules that prohibit or limit the taking of reef and inshore species. There is little question about why residents are suspicious of the recent designation of the Bay Islands as a national marine park. In addition, poorer island residents (both Afro-Caribbean Islanders and ladinos) are angry at being told to curtail their fishing and hunting activities by the wealthier inhabitants who own commercial fishing fleets, hotels, resorts, and other businesses. It is these island “elites” and foreigners who are responsible for overfishing shrimp and lobster and are absorbed in a hotel building spree (despite a shortage of fresh water and the absence of sewage and other waste disposal systems). It is these wealthy residents and investors who are engaged in unsound road building, mangrove destruction, extensive dredging of the reef, and other environmentally destructive activities in connection with the construction of new tourism businesses. Although poorer local users admit that the reef and other aspects of the environment have suffered, they believe that their own restraint will be of no benefit unless everyone can be made to cut back on fishing and other environmentally destructive activities. The discrepancy in wealth between resort owners, whose guests make
the most use of the reef, and local users only reinforces the attitude of poorer users that they should not bear the burden of environmental conservation alone. It is not surprising that the one marine reserve, long supported by the owner of a prominent diving resort, is having difficulty limiting subsistence use by local people and has prompted escalating conflict and sometimes deadly violence among resort owners, tourists, islanders, and ladinos.

At present, Afro-Caribbean Bay Islanders face dangerous threats to their cultural and ethnic survival as well as to their economic and physical well-being. These threats all are linked directly or indirectly to the recent, unregulated expansion of the tourism industry. Threats to cultural and ethnic survival stem from enhanced efforts being made by the government of Honduras to integrate the islands and the islanders into Honduran culture and society through the imposition of laws requiring Spanish-only instruction in schools, the replacement of islander civil servants with ladinos from the mainland, and the intimidating presence of the Honduran military. The islanders also face considerable threats to their economic well-being from loss of land as a result of widespread land speculation which often results in the islanders’ loss of title to land holdings, loss of access to fishing and hunting grounds crucial to their livelihoods, and increased dependence on low-paying jobs in the tourism sector. These economic costs are tied to cultural loss as well because they diminish the high degree of economic independence that has traditionally characterized Bay Islander society. Dangers to the Bay Islanders’ physical well-being also are considerable as environmental health risks associated with enhanced environmental degradation have increased as well.

RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

Is it fair to say that we are becoming strangers in our own land, while a wave of non-islanders are drowning our culture and threatening our identity? We must rise above the wave and claim the rights as a people with dignity and pride in our society.

—Native Bay Islanders Professionals and Labourers Association, 1995

The history of the Bay Islands reveals a lack of widespread or well-integrated efforts made by Bay Islanders to protect their cultural and ethnic identity. These factors help explain the lack of organized response to efforts being made to Hispanicize the islands and to promote tourism in ways that many islanders judge to be detrimental to their ethnic and material survival. The islanders’ staunch defense of their British ancestry, increasingly militant efforts to maintain the English language, and recent attempts to raise cultural consciousness are significant expressions of their perceptions of their
own distinct ethnic identity. So too is the islanders’ preference for U.S. baseball rather than soccer, including naming one of the islands’ baseball teams the Pirates. In the present context, long-used derogatory, ethnic slang terms have taken on new significance. Native Bay Islanders continue to refer to themselves as “British” or “English” and to mainlanders as “Spaniards,” “indios” (Indians), or “natives.” Mainlanders in turn refer to all Bay Islanders as “pirates,” to white islanders as “caracoles” (conch or snails), and to black Islanders as “negritos” (Negroes).

The founding of the Native Bay Islanders Professionals and Labourers Association (NABIPLA) in 1991 is evidence of current accelerated efforts to protect islander ethnicity and culture from several perceived threats. Two young men from the Afro-Caribbean communities of Flowers Bay and Gravel Bay (located on the southwestern shore of Roatán) started NABIPLA in response to “the people from the mainland who were coming in and controlling everything” (president of NABIPLA, 1997). The attitude of the organization toward mainland efforts to assimilate the islands was expressed quite simply by a member of NABIPLA in 1997: “The government used to leave us alone. . . . It was the Islands for the Islanders. . . . If we didn’t have the pressure from the government these islands would be much improved” (author’s field notes). By 1997 membership in NABIPLA had grown to several thousand and consisted primarily of poor and middle-class black islanders. According to NABIPLA’s president, the grassroots organization now has a committee in virtually every community on all the islands. Fifteen women and men make up the board of directors—one for each major program area of the organization. Many of the leaders are pastors from the different Bay Islands’ Protestant churches (e.g., Baptist, Church of God, and Adventist).

NABIPLA has a broad agenda that includes promoting social justice, maintaining black Bay Islanders’ cultural and ethnic identity, protecting islanders’ rights over land and other natural resources, enhancing human health, and conserving the islands’ environment and natural resources. Its major efforts, however, have been promoting bilingual education throughout the islands, which it feels is key to achieving its other objectives. The organization wishes to collaborate with an educational institution, such as the University of the West Indies, to establish a Center for Bilingual Education for the Bay Islands that would provide secondary school education for Bay Islander youth. NABIPLA also is putting pressure on the government of Honduras to implement its recently enacted legislation allowing and facilitating bilingual education among Honduras’ diverse indigenous peoples.

It was largely through the efforts of NABIPLA that the English-speaking Bay Islanders were officially recognized as an indigenous ethnic group in 1996. Since its membership in the major organization of indigenous peoples of Honduras, the Confederation of Autochthonous Peoples of Honduras
(CONPAH), NABIPLA has taken an increasingly activist position as indicated by the numerous human rights complaints it has brought to national and international bodies since 1998. In their words, “We have somewhat lost control of the islands. We are looking forward to taking it back” (member of NABIPLA, author’s field notes, 1997).

NABIPLA is quite interested in improving the day-to-day lives of Bay Islanders. In 1997 NABIPLA started a food cooperative in one Afro-Caribbean community as a way to help poor islanders deal with the escalating cost of food on the islands. NABIPLA began dealing directly with wholesalers on the mainland, thus bypassing the supermarkets and food-distribution channels controlled by the island elite. Members get a 20% discount on all merchandise in the store: meat, chicken, vegetables, canned goods, paper products, and other manufactured items such as soap. Thought of as a pilot project, NABIPLA hopes to establish a network of such cooperatives in other communities.

NABIPLA also is thinking of ways for Bay Islanders to benefit more directly from the growth of tourism. They have started a Board of Tourism to control buses and taxis. The idea is to train islanders as tour guides for the passengers of the Norwegian Cruise Line who now stop on Roatán every week. Currently most cruise passengers visit West Bay Beach where they snorkel and picnic at a new resort owned by the brother of the owner of the largest resort located within the Sandy Bay-West End Marine Reserve. The Board of Tourism also plans to set requirements for dive masters—most important from the perspective of NABIPLA is that they be Honduran citizens rather than foreigners, who currently make up most of the islands‘ dive masters.

One of the major objectives of NABIPLA is to preserve islander ethnicity and culture. To this end, one of their proposed projects is to build a cultural village in the community of Gravel Bay. They are attempting to raise U.S.$40,000 to purchase a site for the project. The village will demonstrate to tourists how Bay Islanders used to live—their traditional foods (plantains, corn, dried plantain, and salted fish), ways of making a living, stories, songs, boats, and buildings.

The attitude of NABIPLA toward environmental conservation initiatives on the islands was conveyed quite forcefully in their first newsletter published in May 1995:

We know that in every society laws and prohibitions are important but are we implementing them correctly? How can we stop a poor man from selling the sand on his beach; and allow a rich man to dredge, fill up our sea and terminate our mangrove? Is it fair to prohibit a poverty stricken family from cutting down a tree in their back yard? When the wealthy are destroying our flora by the thousands daily? Is it right to construct roads that benefit the elite only and neglect the underprivileged while they are stuck to [their] knees in mud? They want us to clean
and dispose of our litter. Where are the garbage collecting trucks? . . . NABIPLA believes that for our islands to go forward successfully, biasness, corruption, political propaganda, unequal education, and partiality on the whole must be eliminated. We must conserve our children, our environment, our good customs, traditions and belief that all men are created equally. (Native Bay Islanders Professionals and Labourers Association, 1995).

Despite the efforts of NABIPLA, major risks to Bay Islander ethnicity and culture remain. These stem from government attempts to further integrate the islands into the Honduran polity; a national agenda that emphasizes the significant expansion of tourism as a primary economic development strategy; the massive migration of Spanish-speaking mainlanders who now constitute a slight majority on the islands; the loss of critically important land and marine resources; and the influx of large numbers of foreign investors, residents, and tourists.

Bay Islanders are attempting to sustain their culture, lives, and livelihoods in many ways. They are trying to maintain their knowledge of the English language, Protestant religions, and other cultural practices. They are attempting to conserve the natural resources on which they depend for their livelihoods. They are encouraging young people to marry within their own group of Bay Islanders rather than marry outsiders. They have founded NABIPLA, which is coordinating action among Bay Islanders and promoting a unified political and economic agenda. They are enhancing power among the islanders by building strategic alliances with national and international groups. These diverse efforts, however, are not attempts to inhibit change, including the growth of the tourism industry, but rather efforts to give the islanders greater power and a greater say in determining their own futures.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The decision by the government of Honduras to make tourism one of the pillars of economic recovery in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch is understandable given the growing importance of tourism to the economies of many countries throughout the world. This is especially true of poorer countries located in the developing or Third World where foreign tourists provide national governments with substantial income and provide a crucial source of employment and income for local people. However, a number of the negative consequences of tourism have attracted criticism and have led to heated debates about the extent to which international tourism actually can sustain rural livelihoods, communities, cultures, and environments. In addition, tourism often has provoked significant local-level conflicts in the areas in which it has expanded. Hostility often stems from the loss of critical natural resources on which local people depend for their
living as well as the loss of local cultures. The Bay Islands of Honduras are one of the clearest examples of the uneven distribution of the costs and benefits of tourism and of community-level discord associated with the spread of tourism. On the Bay Islands, conflicts surrounding the cultural, social, economic, and environmental impacts of tourism have been substantial as the English-speaking Bay Islanders continue to strive for their cultural, ethnic, and economic survival. More positively, tourism has stimulated a much higher degree of cultural unity and political action among Afro-Caribbean islanders than ever before. This unity has resulted in the English-speaking Bay Islanders being recognized as one of Honduras' indigenous peoples, and they are thus able to claim the rights that go along with that recognition.

Questions

1. Is the government of Honduras justified in promoting tourism on the Bay Islands in the name of economic growth, national unity, and national reconstruction?

2. How best might the government reconcile national economic goals with the needs and aspirations of the English-speaking Bay Islanders and other poorer residents of the Bay Islands?

3. In regard to the role of local residents, how might English-speaking Bay Islanders and recent ladino immigrants from the Honduran mainland overcome several hundred years of ethnic animosity and at times violent conflict in order to collaborate in their efforts to increase the benefits of tourism for themselves?

4. "Indigenous" or "native" people often are thought of as having lived in a specific place for hundreds or even thousands of years where they have practiced "traditional" culture. Yet, the English-speaking Bay Islanders first came to the islands in the 1830s, and their emergence and recognition as an indigenous group are quite recent. What does this imply about our concept of "indigenous" or "native" peoples?

5. Finally, how does the example of the Bay Islands affect the choice of your next vacation or diving trip? How does your choice of a vacation destination affect the local people who live there? How can you make sure that your travel dollars help rather than hurt local residents?

NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, all information, data, and quotations included in this chapter were taken from Susan C. Stonich, *The Other Side of Paradise: Tourism, Conservation, and Development in the Bay Islands* (New York: Cognizant Communication, 1999).

English-Speaking Bay Islanders


RESOURCE GUIDE

Published Literature

Davidson, William. *Historical Geography of the Bay Islands*. Birmingham, Ala.: Southern University Press, 1974. This gives an informative historical background on the Bay Islands.


Houlson, Jane Harvey. *Blue Blaze: Danger and Delight in Strange Islands of Honduras*. London: Duckworth, 1934. This is an entertaining tale of Houlson’s travels with Mitchell Hedges in the Bay Islands.

Mitchell Hedges, F. *Battles with Giant Fish*. London: Duckworth, 1923. This colorful book recounts the travels of Mitchell Hedges, adventurer, amateur anthropologist, and fisherman in the Bay Islands and elsewhere in Central America and the Caribbean.


WWW Sites

*Honduras This Week Online*, a weekly newspaper about Honduras in English often has articles about the Bay Islands and about tourism in general. http://www.marrder.com/htw/

*Planeta.com-Eco-travels in Latin America*, the best WWW site on tourism and the environment in Latin America with links to many other related sites, can be found at http://www.planeta.com.
Chapter 6

The Miskito of Honduras and Nicaragua

David J. Dodds

CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The People
The Miskito are one of the largest groups of indigenous peoples in lower Central America. Altogether there are about 200,000 Miskito: about 40,000 to 50,000 in Honduras, and as many as 150,000 in Nicaragua.¹ They have lived for over 300 years along the coasts and rivers of eastern Nicaragua and Honduras, a region historically called the Mosquito Coast, the Miskito Coast, or the Mosquitia. The Miskito are an interesting people because their ancestry is strongly rooted in an indigenous New World culture and people—yet Africans and Europeans have influenced Miskito physical appearance, language, subsistence system, and cosmology (religion). Miskito culture is a “contact” culture created by the mixture of indigenous Americans with African and European peoples. The Miskito, in contrast to many other indigenous peoples of the Americas, have thrived since contact with Europeans, expanding in both population and territory since the mid-1600s. During the last four centuries, the Miskito have made their living from slash-and-burn farming, fishing, and hunting. They have also worked in many boom-and-bust industries, such as mahogany cutting, gum tapping, gold mining, turtle fishing, and, since the 1970s, lobster diving. Work in these industries provided much of the contact between the pre-Miskito indigenous peoples and shaped what is now the modern Miskito culture.

The first contact known between the Miskito (or pre-Miskito indigenous peoples) and Europeans occurred in 1611 when three Spanish priests ascended the Rio Coco, baptized 130 Indians, but were then killed. The first sustained contact came about with the establishment in 1633 of a trading
post at Cabo Gracias a Dios by a company of Puritans from Providence Island. The trading station operated until 1641 when the Spanish captured Providence Island. The wreck of a slave ship at Cabo Gracias a Dios some time between 1641 and 1652 instigated the admixture of pre-Miskito peoples with Africans.

In contrast to most of Central America, the history of the Miskito Coast was more influenced by the British than the Spanish, up until the mid nineteenth-century. The lowland Caribbean region of Central America, from Belize to southern Nicaragua, was the scene of constant struggle between the British and Spanish. In this history, the Miskito played an important role by participating in trade and military exploits with the British. In addition to these activities, the turtle-fishing skills of Miskito men were highly valued by European ship crews, who often hired them as provisioners on their voyages. Miskito men also worked with buccaneers on their sea raids throughout the Caribbean.

The present day Miskito face a variety of challenges to their cultural survival: political representation within the republics of Honduras and Nicaragua that will allow them to have a national voice, defense of their traditional lands as land-needy farmers and ranchers migrate into their traditional territories and as nature reserves are created to save the rain forest, defense of traditional sea territories against commercial fisheries, defense of their labor rights as workers in industries such as lobster diving, and acquiring adequate health and education services in this relatively isolated region.

The Setting

The Miskito Coast, or the Caribbean coast from the Rio Tinto Negro of Honduras to the Pearl Lagoon area of Nicaragua, includes the lowland and hill countries extending toward the interiors of the two countries. Because of its latitude (between 12 and 16 degrees north of the equator), the climate is tropical and hot. There are two seasons: a dry season from February to May, and a wet, rainy season from June through January.

Ecologically, the Mosquitia is most famous for its rain forests and pine savannas. In addition to providing the indigenous peoples with many resources, the rain forests of the Mosquitia have provided export materials such as mahogany for furniture and tunu sap for chewing gum for export to the United States and Europe, especially during the nineteenth-century. During the seventeenth century, pirates visited the Mosquitia to cut pine trees for ship masts. Animal and plant species of the Mosquitia are mostly neotropical (belonging to the New World tropics), similar to much of lowland South America, like the Amazon. Because of its location in Central America, the Mosquitia is important as a cross-over zone for North and South American species, especially mammals. Many endangered animal
species inhabit the Mosquitia, including such mammals as tapir, white and
collared peccary (similar to a wild pig), paca (a rodent), white-tailed deer,
red brocket deer, puma or mountain lion, jaguar, ocelot, howler monkey,
spider monkey, and manatee. The harpy eagle, red macaw, and green mil-
itary macaw are endangered bird species native to the region. The Mosquito
Coast is also an important habitat for migrating birds who fly through its
forests and savannas to the Yucatán Peninsula, and then across the Gulf
of Mexico to the southern United States.

Because of its isolation and important biodiversity, the governments of
Honduras and Nicaragua have created several reserves to protect the re-
gion’s natural resources. In Honduras, the largest reserve is the Río Plátano
Biosphere Reserve, covering 5,000 square kilometers (1,900 square miles);
in Nicaragua, the largest is Bosawas Reserve, covering 8,000 square kil-
ometers (3,000 square miles). A series of linked reserves, which will link the
protected areas of Honduras and Nicaragua into one large conservation
area in the Plapawans reserve system, is almost complete. Much of the
area being declared as “reserves” in the name of nature conservation is the
traditional territory of the Miskito and related peoples including the Sumu
Indians.

Traditional Subsistence Strategies

The Miskito have traditionally made their living from swidden farming,
care of domestic animals, fishing, and hunting. However, this has usually
been complemented by money or trade goods obtained by working in the
extractive industries mentioned previously.

Swidden farming, also called slash-and-burn farming, is practiced in
many parts of the world. Swidden agriculture follows a cyclerical pattern of
cutting a plot from forest, then burning to further prepare the soil for the
planting, weeding, and harvesting of crops. Typically, Miskito households
maintain two types of agricultural plots: house gardens, which are planted
around dwellings within the village and may contain fruit trees and con-
diments, and outlying fields along natural waterways, in which are planted
the bulk of the major subsistence crops. The five major crops planted by
the Miskito are swidden plots banana/plantain varieties, manioc, rice,
beans, and maize. These crops, especially manioc and banana/plantain va-
rieties, provide the majority of the carbohydrate intake in the Miskito diet.

Important domestic animals, raised by the Miskito for food, include
chickens, cattle, and pigs. Most meat and dietary protein comes from these
domesticated animals. Fishing in lagoons or streams is also important, es-
pecially when there is not enough money for a household to buy meat.
Hunting is practiced less now in some coastal communities, probably be-
cause of the influence of cash which allows households to buy meat from
domesticated sources. The Miskito gather some materials from the forest, but not for food; gathering is done mostly for construction materials for building houses (wood for boards, leaves for thatch) and for traditional herbal medicine.

However, most Miskito consider themselves poor if they have no money or jobs to acquire money. Wage work, like lobster diving, and the money it provides are important to the Miskito. Money is used to buy many foodstuffs now considered traditional—coffee, sugar, salt, and lard—to complement the foods grown in gardens and swidden fields. Money is also important for buying clothes, medicines, and many other useful items like cooking utensils, radios, watches, and outboard motors for canoes.

Social and Political Organization

In everyday life, kinship is very important to the way in which Miskito work, worship, and travel. Most Miskito villages comprise a number of household clusters of people who are related as an extended family. A typical settlement pattern is to find from two to six houses located around the house of a senior couple, usually the parents of the wives in the surrounding houses (thus the children are the grandchildren of the senior couple). When people marry out of their village, it is usually the men who move to the other village; women usually stay in their own village. This matrilocal marriage pattern is important for the Miskito because most family household clusters are related through women who are sisters, daughters, and aunts. These women then share household chores and raise their children to be Miskito while men are away engaged in wage labor. The Miskito have a Hawaiian kinship system: the main feature is that a person’s siblings and cousins are called by the same term (e.g., in American kinship terms, one would call one’s cousins “brother” and “sister”). Because kinship is so important, people know their extended relatives, and a traveling Miskito can almost always find some relative to stay with in another village.

Above the level of the family household cluster, political organization is not strong, but it is considered egalitarian. Traditionally, a local older man, or wíta, was considered to be influential in village affairs, but he was not a “chief” with authority. Moravian lay pastors (sasnlkra) and schoolteachers have been important leaders within villages. In Honduras, the governor of the department (state) appoints local men to represent the villages to the department government. Until the 1990s, the Miskito of Honduras did not participate much in state politics, and they still pay very few taxes. In Nicaragua, after the Sandinista-Contra war in the 1980s, which had split Miskito communities and families by political ideology and violence, the Miskito became very politically active and negotiated with the Nicaraguan national government to create their own semiautonomous governments in
The Miskito of Honduras and Nicaragua

eastern Nicaragua: in the northern half, the RAAN (Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte) and in the southern half, the RAAS (Región Autónoma del Atlántico Sur).

Religion and World View

Most Miskito consider themselves to be Christians. Moravian missionaries arrived in Nicaragua in 1849 and in Honduras in 1930 to proselytize among the Miskito, who accepted Christianity readily. Christian groups represented among the Miskito, other than the Moravian church, include Roman Catholic, Assembly of God, and Pentecostal churches. In Honduras, a few Miskito follow the Bahai faith after the establishment of a Bahai hospital. However, the Moravian church is by far the most important. Almost every Miskito village has a Moravian church, if not a lay pastor. Church meetings are held every Sunday morning, with other meetings during the week. Many Miskito learn to read so that they can read Miskito translations of the Bible and the Moravian hymnal. In the 1970s, the Moravian church of Honduras and Nicaragua became independent of support from the United States. Some Miskito view the Moravian church as restrictive and too obligating of their time and money and so avoid it.

Despite their general acceptance of Christianity, the Miskito also believe in many spirit-beings derived from an indigenous cosmology that includes a variety of types of spirit-beings. Some are evil and are associated with the Christian Satan. These evil spirits can cause people to become sick, kill children, and make people crazy by possessing them. Other types of beings are those which live in nature. Contact with these beings is dangerous because they are powerful and can also make people sick. For example, liwa live in streams, rivers, lagoons, or the sea. There are male and female liwa, and the liwa of the opposite sex are dangerous to a person. When Miskito lobster divers suffer from decompression sickness, caused by diving too long and surfacing too fast, they often blame this on the liwa mairin, or the woman water being, who has seen them and caused them to be ill. Other spirits, like the unta dukia (forest thing) live in the forest; other spirit beings inhabit the pine savanna, swamps, and rain forest; yet others live in whirlwinds and waterspouts. In addition to these nature beings, many plants have spirit owners. If an herbal healer wants to harvest a particular plant for making medicine, the healer must first speak to the plant’s spirit owner and leave a coin at the foot of the plant before uprooting it; otherwise, the spirit owner will be displeased and the plant will lose its medicinal value.

Since many sicknesses have spiritual causes (e.g., by being seen by a liwa or by having a spell placed on one), cures involve a spiritual dimension. There are various kinds of Miskito healers. First are the herbalists who know about plants and the medicines that can be made from them. Second
are the spiritual healers who may use plants, the power of plant spirit
owners, or prayers to the Christian God to heal people. Some herbalists
and spiritual healers say they learn their knowledge in dreams by angels
sent from the Christian God. Third, are sukias, or shamans, who are reli-
gious leaders and healers. Sukias, who may be men or women, are consid-
ered powerful people who can directly contact the spirit world, either to
cure or cause harm by invoking various kinds of spirits and casting spells.
Consultations with sukias are serious events and usually cost significant
sums of money to the person requesting service.

THREATS TO SURVIVAL

The Miskito have successfully survived at least three centuries of contact
with “outside” people such as Europeans and various other ethnic groups.
Yet, the Miskito face difficulties as they become even more linked to the
international economy and integrated with the nation-states of Honduras
and Nicaragua. Three of the most important difficulties are the dangers of
lobster work for Miskito males; the need to protect natural resources le-
gally; and population growth, land need, and nature conservation.

Dangers of Lobster Work

One of the most serious threats to the Miskito is the work of men and
boys in the lobster export industry: many have been injured or killed in
diving accidents. In Honduras, as many as 4,000 Miskito males may work
in the lobster industry and, in Nicaragua, from 2,000 to 2,500.\(^3\) A medical
study conducted in Honduras found that, from 1976 to 1989, at least fifty-
six Miskito divers died, and 157 were paralyzed or injured.\(^4\) Despite the
risks of lobster work, many Miskito choose to do the work because there
are few other well-paying jobs in this region. In one two-week trip, a lobster
deriver can earn as much as he would in a year working hard in the fields
farming and growing a crop like rice for sale.

Miskito males generally work at two kinds of lobster jobs: as divers
\((buzos)\) or canoemen \((cayuceros)\). Divers and canoemen work in pairs: the
canoeman accompanies the diver to the lobster bed and maintains the pos-
tion of the canoe \((cayuco)\) above the diver—in the canoe are deposited
the lobsters and extra diving tanks. Lobster boats based in the Bay Islands
of Honduras hire the Miskito as divers, and canoemen then go out to
‘lobster banks’ throughout the Caribbean, from the Bahamas to Colombia.
After spending usually ten to fourteen days at sea, the boats drop off the
Miskito crew at their coastal villages and return to the Bay Islands where
the lobster tails are frozen and exported to the United States. One of the
Miskito men constructing dugout canoe. Courtesy of David J. Dodds.

largest buyers of Honduran lobster is the company Red Lobster USA which owns the Red Lobster restaurants.

During the 1970s, lobsters were so plentiful along the banks (continental shelf) of Honduras and Nicaragua that lobsters were found in relatively shallow waters and lung diving with no tanks was possible. However, by the early 1980s, lobster populations became depleted in the shallow waters, and divers began using pressurized diving tanks to pursue the lobsters ever deeper. As depths have increased so have injuries and deaths to divers. Diving demands great physical strength since divers may descend to depths of ninety feet or more and may spend up to four or five hours a day underwater. The great depth and length of diving has led to the injury and death of many Miskito divers as a result of decompression sickness, or “the bends.” In addition to the risk of decompression sickness, divers are exposed to sun, wind, heat, cold, strong underwater currents, and the risk of bites by sharks and barracudas. In Honduras, a diving school was created at the impetus of the Moravian church in the coastal village of Cocobila. During 1994 the schools’ graduates had experienced no diving deaths and a reduced rate of injury. However, during a visit to the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve in 1997, coastal residents told me about numerous cases of paralysis and death which had occurred to divers in their villages since then. The plight of the Miskito lobster divers has received increasing press atten-
tion in both Honduras and Nicaragua but continues to be a serious prob-
lem.

**Natural Resource Needs and Legal Protection**

Like many other indigenous peoples elsewhere, the Miskito face the threat of loss of land to outsiders. The threat of land loss comes from a variety of sources. First, in Honduras and Nicaragua, an agricultural frontier of ladino farmers and ranchers has steadily been advancing from the west to the east into traditional Miskito territories. Second, various international companies have tried to obtain access to the natural resources of the Miskito Coast. For example, in Honduras, the Stone Container Corporation, based in Chicago, Illinois, signed an agreement with then President Rafael Callejas to clear-cut most of eastern Honduras to obtain trees for pulp to be processed into paper. When word of the deal leaked out, international protest by environmentalists, the indigenous inhabitants, and others led to the abandonment of the project in 1992. In Nicaragua, in 1991, a Korean firm almost obtained rights to extract timber from 90% of the Miskito Nation territory, but protest by environmentalists and Miskito activists stopped the project. In 1996 a U.S. engineering company began plans to build one of the largest dams in Central America in the Honduran Mosquitia, but the project was stopped in 1999 after a series of events, such as Hurricane Mitch (1998) and protests by indigenous people and environmentalists, made the project difficult to complete.

In Honduras, the 1982 constitution guarantees the right of indigenous peoples to have land, but in reality not much law has been created to protect the land of indigenous peoples, and many competing government agencies can claim “control” over the land (e.g., the National Agrarian Institute versus the Honduran Corporation for Forest Development). In Nicaragua, the situation is more complex historically because the British recognized a “Mosquito Reservation” (i.e., Miskito Reservation) in eastern Nicaragua. In 1894 the Nicaraguan government took control of the territory but did not respect the reservation. However, the Mosquito Reservation became the basis for the 1987 Autonomy Law by which the government of Nicaragua created the RAAN and RAAS as semiautonomous territories. The government of Nicaragua, however, retains the right to manage the natural resources within the RAAN and RAAS.

But not only land resources are threatened. Because the Miskito are a coastal people, much of their traditional territory extends into the waters of the Caribbean Sea. A geographer at the University of California-Berkeley calls the lobster boats of Honduras “pirates” for taking lobsters from the coastal shelf of Nicaragua. Shrimp boats also came from many countries to the coast of Nicaragua after the 1980s war had ended.
Population Growth, Traditional Agriculture, and Conservation

Like many other peoples in the tropics, the Miskito practice slash-and-burn, or swidden, agriculture. Under conditions of low population density, such as the Miskito before the twentieth century, slash-and-burn agriculture was very efficient because it allowed farmers to use fire to help them prepare their fields making it unnecessary to use draft animals like oxen for dragging a plow.

The swidden system is cyclical. Miskito farmers identify the crop they want to plant and the type of forest they want to clear. They can clear virgin forest or secondary (regrowth) forest. Virgin forest areas have the advantage of good dark soils with few weeds, but secondary forest areas are easier to clear by ax or machete because the trees are not as big as they are in the tall rain forest. After a field is used for one or two years, it is abandoned and allowed to regrow into forest again. After five or more years, the farmer may come back to the same plot to clear it, burn it, and plant it again.

The future impact of Miskito swidden agriculture on the environment may become more negative with time. First, there are more and more Miskito. In the twentieth century, the Miskito populations of Honduras and Nicaragua have been growing at over 3% per year, which means that population doubles in twenty-three or fewer years. Second, the Miskito have adopted new crops which change the amount of fields they clear each year from virgin forest. Dry rice is a very useful crop because it can be stored all year and can be sold at a good price, but in one Honduran village it is responsible for 45% of the new clearing of virgin forest. Third, the area of land to which populations can expand is becoming more limited because of rain forest reserves like the Rio Plátano and Bosawas. These reserves define core zones, where no people are supposed to live, and “cultural” zones, where people can live. This kind of zoning is good for nature conservation, but it forces us to ask how the Miskito will be able to practice traditional agriculture in the future if they run out of forest areas in their cultural zones to clear for fields.

Many Miskito realize that the best lands are already cleared for agriculture and that it is harder and harder to find accessible lands near a river with good soils (usually rain forest) to plant their fields. Can anything be done to reduce the pressure on local forests? One idea promoted by MO-PAWI (Mosquitía Pawisa), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) funded by the World Wildlife Fund and other agencies, is to use the velvet bean as a “green manure” in old fallowed fields. “Green manures” are crops that put nitrogen back into the soil. The idea is that if Miskito farmers planted velvet beans after harvesting their last crop (instead of letting it grow back into secondary forest), the soil would retain its fertility, and the
farmer could come back to the same plot to clear, burn, and plant, rather than clear a new field from virgin forest. An added benefit is that if a farmer has planted an abandoned field in velvet beans, it is less work to clear the vines of the bean than to clear the saplings and vines of the secondary forest. The velvet bean has been adopted by many ladino (Hispanic) farmers in the highlands of Olancho in Honduras because it raises crop yields and reduces re-clearing work. So far only a handful of Miskito farmers have chosen to use velvet beans.

Another possibility is that population pressure could be reduced by helping Miskito families reduce the number of children they have. A study with 200 indigenous women in the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve showed that women on the average had eight children but preferred to have only four or five children. Many women are interested in using modern contraception to limit the number of children they have, but there are many difficulties. Government clinics often run out of birth control pills. Also, some men want to have as many children as possible and do not want their wives to use contraception. An added complication is that the Miskito are a minority population. If the Miskito adopt family planning and have fewer children and a lower growth rate than the rest of Honduras, they will become even more of a minority through time.

However, it is important to keep in mind several ideas while thinking about the problem of Miskito population growth, their need for future agricultural lands, and local deforestation rates. First, the Miskito are long-time occupants to the region who have successfully managed to live with their environment for hundreds, and maybe thousands, of years (if you count the pre-Miskito people from which they descended). The Miskito plant small plots for subsistence agriculture (food eaten by the same household), rarely plant huge areas for commercial production, and have cleared relatively small amounts of forest to make cattle pastures (in contrast to local ladino ranchers).

RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

How have the Miskito responded to the difficulties they face? As for many indigenous peoples, struggles to sustain their cultural survival often mean political organization and action.

The most important response of the Miskito to threats to their wellbeing, lands, and way of life has been the creation of indigenous federations which work with each other, NGOs, and governments. In Honduras, before the 1990s, the most important federation was MASTA (Moskitia Asla Takanka), which was formed by a group of Miskito schoolteachers. However, many Miskito believed that MASTA did not adequately represent their interests. In the late 1990s, MASTA reorganized so that each village was represented by a local chapter, and each region of the Mosquitia had
The Miskito of Honduras and Nicaragua

its own chapter. This kind of democratic organization has been more successful in representing the needs of local communities to government officials regarding health, education, and other needs.

Organizations like MASTA often coordinate their interests with local NGOs. A recent example is the mapping project led by a geographer at Kansas University, who helped train local men from twenty-one regions of the Honduran Mosquitia to draw maps and identify key features of the landscape. After performing a series of field surveys and conducting workshops, a map was produced and printed by the Honduran National Geographic Institute, which depicted, for the first time on a map, all of the native communities of eastern Honduras as well as their natural resource use areas (see chapter 7). This kind of participatory research and involvement of indigenous people in documenting their own knowledge and history will be critical for the future success of indigenous peoples as they seek to represent themselves and their interests to others.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

This chapter raises several important questions regarding the specific dangers of lobster work as well as more general concerns about human population growth, traditional agriculture, environmental conservation, and the implications of religious changes on indigenous cultures.

Questions

1. What should be done about the injuries and deaths of Miskito lobster divers? Should North Americans stop eating lobsters or support bans of lobsters imported from Honduras?
2. Should the Miskito stop traditional slash-and-burn agriculture to help save the rain forest?
3. Should the Miskito have fewer children to lessen population pressure on the rain forest?
4. Do outsiders like Honduran government officials or North American conservationists have the right to tell the Miskito they should have fewer children?
5. Do you think it was right of missionaries to teach the Miskito new (Christian) religious ideas as well as ideas about modern medicine and how to read and write in Miskito or Spanish?

NOTES

1. Population estimates for Honduras are based on the author's estimates: David J. Dodds, "The Ecological and Social Sustainability of Miskito Subsistence in the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve, Honduras: The Cultural Ecology of Swidden Hor-


6. Dodds, “Ecological and Social Sustainability of Miskito Subsistence.”

7. Dodds, “Lobster in the Rain Forest.”


RESOURCE GUIDE

Published Literature


The Miskito of Honduras and Nicaragua


**Videos and Films**


**WWW Sites**

Mosquito Coast Ethnohistory, by Professor Michael Olien, Department of Anthropology, University of Georgia. http://quat.dac.uga.edu/research/miskito/


*Honduras This Week Online*. Weekly newspaper in English about Honduras often has articles about the Miskito and nature conservation. http://www.marrder.com/htw/


Chapter 7

Indigenous and Ladino Peoples of the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, Honduras

Peter H. Herlihy

CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The People

The Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve in Honduras is one of Central America's most important protected areas. The reserve is also home to indigenous populations who have maintained the forest cover through centuries of settlement and use, but who have been uninformed and little involved in conservation and development initiatives affecting their lands and life.

The lands of the Río Plátano Biosphere have been the cultural intersection of different Amerindian groups for centuries. Little is certain about the pre-Hispanic past, but when Christopher Columbus sailed along this coast in 1502, he probably saw native Pech (called Paya) who lived up the Plátano, Paulaya, Wampu, and possibly Patuca rivers in those days. Their populations once occupied the lands between the Aguán and Patuca rivers, but they were reduced by slavery, missionization, and exploitation by the Spaniards.

The biosphere's well-known Miskito people are a hybrid population with origins going back to the mixing of natives (probably Sumu) with black Africans during the mid-seventeenth century. They expanded out from a hearth around Cabo Gracias a Dios to settle up and down the Caribbean coast incorporating blacks, natives, and even Europeans into their population. The Miskito developed their strongest alliances with the British at Black River (present-day Palacios) where 300 whites, 600 slaves, and 3,000 well-armed Indians, Zambos, and Miskitos occupied the nearby area in 1759. Cattle thrived on the savannas, while sugarcane, bananas, and tropical fruits were grown on the river margins. Sea resources were plentiful.
The aggressive Miskito raiders gradually displaced the Pech settlements on the Plátano, Paulaya, and Wampu rivers.

British presence on the Spanish Main was always contested. In 1787, after a series of conflicts and accords, the British yielded control of Mosquitia to the Spaniards and evacuated their settlement. The Spaniards reoccupied Black River, but the Miskito destroyed it soon after. During the late eighteenth century, the Miskito formed new communities on the north coast on the Brus and Ibans lagoons. They followed a loose political system begun by the British well into the nineteenth century—a Miskito General controlled the lands between the Aguán and Patuca rivers stationed near the mouth of the Plátano. By the 1840s, however, the Miskito population had been reduced by smallpox epidemics, and only five or six small hamlets in the biosphere area existed between the Black River and the Patuca River.

Garifuna populations came to Mosquitia in the early 1800s from the Caribbean Island of Saint Vincent where African slaves mixed with Island Caribs to become the hybrid black-Indian culture once called the Black Caribs. When they became rebellious, the British banished them to the Bay Island of Roatán in 1797. From there, they crossed to the mainland at Trujillo and spread along the coast. They reached the Patuca River in 1804, but retreated shortly after to the Black River area. Plaplaya, the only Garifuna community in the Plátano Biosphere, formed at the end of the century as the easternmost Garifuna settlement in Honduras.

**Miskito**

The Miskito are the dominant indigenous group in the Río Plátano Biosphere today with a population of 17,874, accounting for 44% of the reserve's population (see also chapter 6). They live along the northern coast and up the Patuca, Plátano, and Tinto rivers. The two largest settlements in the biosphere, Barra Patuca with 2,237 inhabitants and Brus Laguna with 1,811, are both Miskito communities. Other Miskito towns, including Ahuas, Paptalaya, Wawina, and Wampusirpi, each have over 1,000. Most villages have several hundred people, and some families still live dispersed along the river margin.

The Miskito language, which belongs to the South American Chibchan group, contains a large number of English and Spanish loan words. Most Miskito in the biosphere are bilingual: they speak their native dialect at home and in the village, and they learn Spanish in schools. Men, who travel and have more contact with outsiders, are more skilled in Spanish than women. With the absence of working men from the coast, strong ties develop among mother, daughters, and sisters who play powerful roles in maintaining the social fabric of the community. It is the women who maintain the Miskito language dominance and pass down traditions in the family.

The Miskito have a diverse economy that exploits both the sea and rain
forests for food and cash. They use slash-and-burn cultivation to grow yucca, bananas, plantains, rice, beans, and corn, and they hunt and fish and raise chickens and Muscovy ducks for fresh meat. Some families raise cattle on the savannas, along the river margins, or even in the settlement area.

The Miskito live in the breezy coastal villages during the May to November wet season, but spend considerable time on the family's riverine agricultural lands, called kiamps (from English "camp"), during the December to April dry season. The coast is the hub of Miskito life with the stores, churches, graveyards, schools, health services, transportation, and communication networks. The coastal villages are located on the easily traversed sandy strip of land, but are backed by lagoons, swamps, and savannas to the south. Therefore little agricultural production occurs along the coast aside from occasional yucca fields or fruit tree cultivation. Up river on the family's kiamp the Miskito grow most of their produce and family members hunt, fish, and collect from the rain forests, savannas, rivers, and lagoons.

Miskito men worked for foreign companies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cutting mahogany, harvesting sea turtles, and extracting sarsaparilla, rubber, and animal skins from the forest. Traditional Miskito subsistence economy was based on reciprocity, gift-giving, and sharing among related households. Now store-bought foods and manufactured goods are deeply integrated into daily life. Since the 1960s, Miskito men have worked as divers in a lucrative lobster industry run mostly by businessmen from the Bay Islands. The divers partake in the conspicuous consumption of beer, rum, cigarettes, or buy radios or flashy clothing. Their dangerous work and lifestyle have caused many young Miskito men the loss of life or crippling injury (chapter 6).

The Miskito seem to have a special ability to adapt easily to changing social, economic, and environmental conditions. Miskito men changed their cash-earning focus to exploiting different coastal and rain-forest resources while working for foreign companies in different boom and bust economies. They have also expanded their populations by mixing and absorbing native Pech, Tawahka Sumu, and Garifuna, but also outside Europeans, black Creoles, ladinos, North Americans, and even Chinese. The Miskito were indoctrinated into the beliefs of the Moravian church during the early 1900s. Evangelical missionaries preached a strict work ethic, communal cooperation, and Puritan ideology against vices. Today, however, Moravian dominance is losing ground as many Miskito convert to Catholicism or other Protestant churches.

Pech

The Pech, more than Miskito, have characteristic Amerindian features with their small stature, straight dark hair, reddish skin, and flat noses.
Only 479 Pech live in two separate parts of the biosphere today. The Las Marias area along the middle Río Plátano continues to be a Pech stronghold. Despite long-standing animosities, many Pech there have intermarried with Miskito and have lost much of their distinctiveness as a result. About 153 inhabitants in the Las Marias area (total population of 501) consider themselves to be Pech. The other Pech settlements are located in the reserve’s southwest corner where three out of every four residents of Jocomico (pop. 110) and Culuco (pop. 152) identify themselves as Pech. These villagers struggle to maintain their lands and identity when confronted with the massive colonization front that has circumscribed and reduced their historic lands.

The Pech language also comes from the South American Chibchan group. Many Pech lost their native language as a result of living in sustained contact with the dominant coastal Miskito economy to the north or the national ladino society to the south. Today only 77 villagers in the north and 112 in the southwest can speak it. Most Pech children learn Spanish in school and speak Miskito (north) or Spanish (southwest) in the village, but they cannot speak their grandparents’ tongue. Many parents and leaders now sense the urgency to speak and teach Pech at home while promoting bilingual education initiatives. The Pech were historically indoctrinated to the Catholic faith, but today Moravian and other Protestant missionaries work among them.

The Las Marias Pech depend largely on slash-and-burn agriculture, hunting, and fishing for their livelihood. They grow the same crops as the Miskito but, unlike them, place greater emphasis on yuca and corn. They also raise chickens, Muscovy ducks, and some cattle, but much of their fresh fish and meat still comes from the rain forest around them. They have a less-developed cash economy than the Miskito and are less involved in the lobster industry. Their subsistence relies on sharing labor and resources among related families. They sell surplus crops, fish, or game and buy household needs in Barra Plátano and other villages on the north coast. Many families continue gold panning along upper streams during the dry season, and families can now earn cash by providing room, board, transport, or guide services to national and international tourists.

Although the Plátano Pech have undergone a significant culture change from their contact with the more dominant Miskito and ladino societies, they have not abandoned their culture and work to maintain their language and identity.

Garifuna

The Río Plátano Biosphere contains the historic buffer zone between the Garifuna and Miskito cultures. Historic animosities are attested to, even today, by an unpopulated stretch of several kilometers that separates the settlements of the two groups. Strictly speaking, Plaplaya is the only Gar-
The Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve

ifuna settlement in the Plátano Biosphere, but others line the coast to the west and use lands within its boundaries. Plaplaya’s houses, school, stores, and churches are stretched out along the main east-west water route to Palacios. It has 421 inhabitants, of which 71% are Garifuna, 22% are ladinos, and 6% Miskito. The number of ladinos has risen in recent years due to intermarriages with colonists. The Miskito minority reflects a few families segregated in the historic neighborhood of Sambal.

More than the Miskito, the Garifuna are fisherfolk, and their seagoing dugouts (called dories), nets, and other fishing gear are visible as one walks through the community. They plant coconut groves and cultivate patches of yucca mixed with xanthosoma (an important food crop, whose roots, leaves, and stems are eaten), sweet potatoes, yams, and pineapples in the sandy coastal soils nearby their settlements. Fields for beans, rice, bananas, plantains, and more are prepared along the natural levees of rivers and streams behind the communities. Men also hunt and fish, in some cases sharing forests with their Miskito neighbors. Some earn cash working as fishermen aboard commercial fishing boats from the Bay Islands, but most also sell crops.

The Garifuna have both recognizable African and Amerindian heritage. Their native language, Garifuna, comes from the Arawakan group, and women still prepare cassava bread from bitter yucca using a technique learned in the Lesser Antilles. African influences are visible in their folklore, music, and dance. Most are Catholics, but Protestants are more and more common. The Garifuna are characteristically outgoing and vivacious when visitors pass through their communities, which is increasingly common with new eco- and ethno-tourism in the reserve. Like the Miskito, there are a large number of female-headed households because men are often away working in the Bay Islands or even in the United States.

Ladinos

Ladinos settled the remote and isolated area that would become the Plátano Biosphere in the first two decades of the twentieth century. As part of the national majority mestizo population, they came to work on commercial banana plantations set up by the United Fruit Company along the Tinto, Sico, and Paulaya rivers. Despite an enormous infrastructure development, productions failed due to banana diseases. Nevertheless, many families decided to stay. The descendants of these bananeros formed the base of the so-called native ladino (ladino nativo) population, principally in eight settlements. Their slash-and-burn agriculture, cash cropping of staple foods, hunting, fishing, and small-scale cattle-rearing practices were more akin to those of the indigenous villagers than those of ladinos elsewhere who are heavily involved in market economy and cattle production. Nevertheless, they remained culturally ladinos with their Spanish language and Catholic religion.
Today, these communities are growing rapidly because of the arrival of new ladino colonists from other parts of the country. The Paulaya Valley has experienced accelerated colonization in the last fifteen years. Thirty-five settlements in the valley with 5,019 inhabitants use lands within the limits of the Plátano Biosphere. Government plans for additional colonization have been met by opposition by conservationists and cattlemen alike. The Sico-Paulaya ladinos, who formed their own cooperative to represent local interests, point out that most lands already have owners.

A much larger ladino population lives in the southwestern part of the reserve. This area, drained by the headwaters of the Wampu and Paulaya rivers, part of the historic Pech area, remained isolated from the national economy until the 1950s when the pine and mahogany forests began to attract commercial lumber operations. Lumber barons cut roads from Culmi to Las Marias during the 1970s before the establishment of the reserve. During the 1980s, they extended the roads to the headwaters of the Paulaya and Plátano rivers, and east to the middle drainage of the Wampu to extract mahogany from lands in the newly established biosphere. Along these routes, land-hungry colonists established new homesteads after cutting fields from forests. Cattle ranchers then consolidated large holdings by buying up homesteaders' lands, planting exotic grasses, and introducing the grazing economy as the cattle front extends eastward into the Mosquitia Corridor. Today this southwestern corner of the biosphere includes lands used by more than eighty communities with nearly 15,000 inhabitants.

The ladinos of the colonization front participate fully in the cash economy of the national society. They cultivate corn, beans, rice, and coffee for cash sale and local consumption. Most families raise a number of cows or pigs for local sale and consumption, but some now have sizable cattle herds for sale to outside markets. Ladino men often work as wage laborers for the larger cattle ranchers. In general, the population has a vaquero lifestyle, riding horses, wearing cowboy hats, and carrying pistols. It can be a violent and lawless place, like other colonization frontiers, but it is also a place of families trying to carve a living out of the wilderness.

The Setting

The Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve was established in 1980 in the northern reaches of the Mosquitia Corridor located in the northeastern section of Honduras. The United Nations Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Program sets aside priority conservation areas into an international network of biospheres that accommodate protection, conservation, and human use through a conceptual model of a core or nucleus surrounded by buffer areas. The Río Plátano was an ideal choice for a biosphere with its expansive rain-forest ecosystems and limited outside influence. The resident in-
digienous population and rich archaeological remains also conformed nicely to MAB guidelines. A management plan was written, and the Río Platano Biosphere became the first such reserve in Central America. Designated a World Heritage Site in 1982, it remains one of the region’s most significant conservation units.¹

The largest part of the reserve is made up of tropical rain forests, but there are significant areas of pine savannas, as well as swamps, marshes, mangroves, and other freshwater and saltwater habitats along the coast. The reserve covers 815,000 hectares (2,013,050 acres) of the northern end of the Mosquitia Rain Forest Corridor, which extends from the Caribbean south across the Bosawás borderlands into Nicaragua, and is the largest contiguous tract of rain forest in Central America today. The Platano Biosphere is one of the most significant conservation areas in the greater Mesoamerican Biological Corridor—an idealized system of interconnected protected areas connecting the lands, flora, and fauna of Central America.

THREATS TO SURVIVAL

The Honduran Department of Renewable Natural Resources (RENARE) was initially responsible for the management and protection of the Platano Biosphere. Even during peak RENARE involvement, shortly after the reserve was established, financial support for reserve management was limited and park personnel included only a resident director and a few rangers. International donors financed the building of an administration building, a visitor center, and two ranger stations, but residents were basically unaware of the reserve’s existence. No concerted efforts to manage the reserve occurred during the 1980s as the western limits became part of the country’s most active colonization front.

Indigenous leaders became alarmed over the encroachment of colonists onto their lands in the Platano Biosphere during the early 1990s. Miskito leaders opened dialogue with the Honduran government to gain legal control of their lands over twenty years ago, and some now question the reserve’s establishment on historic indigenous lands. Over recent years, however, indigenous leaders have come to view biosphere status for their lands as a beneficial thing. In the early 1990s, Miskito leaders in the biosphere formed the Land Vigilance Committee, now called Rayaka or “life” in Miskito, to protect both their lands and the reserve. Other indigenous federations formed in recent years at Ahuas (BAMIsta) and Wampusirpi (BAKINAsta) express similar concerns for the protection of their lands and the conservation of natural resources.

The Platano Biosphere sadly was just another “paper” park (that is, a park that exists only on paper). Only two ill-equipped park rangers worked in the reserve when management responsibility was transferred to the State Forestry Agency (AFE/COHDEFOR) in 1991. At the time, the Palacios
office was abandoned, the Kuri visitor center was destroyed, and the Las Marías station was barely functioning. Development or conservation organizations were little involved in reserve management issues. As a result, lumbermen and agricultural colonists continued cutting forests into the heart of the reserve breaching the original nucleus zone. With the changing demographic and resource use patterns, only a little more than a decade after its establishment, the original biosphere boundaries needed redefinition.

The Río Plátano Biosphere fortuitously became a regional conservation priority as part of a 1992 biodiversity agreement signed by the Central American presidents. Along with other, more recent Honduran decrees, it calls for the development of a binational protected area system for the Mosquitia Corridor linking the Plátano Biosphere and the proposed Tawahka Biosphere Reserve with the Nicaraguan Bosawás Reserve.

Aware of the lack of financial and technical resources needed for management, the Honduran government, through the State Forestry Agency, solicited help from the German government to manage the Plátano Biosphere. The German Bank (KfW) hired a German consulting firm, Gesellschaft für Agrarprojekte (GFA), to do a feasibility study for a conservation project. None was implemented, however, owing to the Honduran government’s failure to meet two preconditions: the amplification of the biosphere limit and the relocation of the colonists from within the nucleus. When GFA updated the feasibility study in 1995, virtually no state presence was found in the reserve and very little nongovernment organization (NGO) involvement. The local population was without knowledge of the area or had little interest in it. The study proposed expanding the reserve’s limits to include additional areas of rain forest, pine savanna, and wetlands with indigenous settlements and the relocation of the colonists from the nucleus. To facilitate the project’s start, it was designed in two phases, the one-year preparatory phase and the five-year principal phase, to allow the Honduran government sufficient time during the preparatory phase to approve the new biosphere law.

The project began in April 1997. Honduras approved the new law (Decreto 170–97) amplifying the biosphere limits later that year, according to the recommendations by the German consultants. A related decision was made by AFE-COHDEFOR to establish a new Río Plátano Forestry Region exclusively for the protection and management of the biosphere. The National Agrarian Institute (INA) then passed legal title to the Plátano Biosphere directly to AFE-COHDEFOR. These actions were apparently aimed at stabilizing the land tenure situation and facilitating reserve management.

The enlargement of the Plátano Biosphere eastward to include the lands and peoples along the Patuca River, coupled with the natural population increase and continual immigration of colonists, has changed the demographic image of the reserve. The biosphere population that was once pri-
The Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve

marily indigenous is now half ladino. The new limits include 815,000 hectares (2,013,050 acres) of lands used by 180 communities with over 40,000 inhabitants. About 53% of the population is ladino, 44% is Miskito, 3% is Garifuna, and 1% is Pech. The distribution of the ethnic groups is similar to the past with indigenous villages in the north, east, and southeast, and with ladino settlements to the west and southwest.

The new design of the Plátano Biosphere divides it into three macro-zones. The Nucleus Zone, covering 215,000 hectares (531,000 acres) of the reserve’s center, is for nature and ecosystem protection and will be free of human settlement. The existing ladino population of about 100 homes and 650 people living in the Tilopo area are being relocated by the Honduran government in fulfillment of a condition tied to continued German support. The Cultural Zone, which covers 400,000 hectares (988,000 acres) of lands used by about 60 communities with 20,000 inhabitants, still contains predominantly natural ecosystems. It is designed to maintain biological diversity over the long term, permitting the sustainable use of resources while proportioning rights to ethnic groups. The Cultural Zone is mostly the historic patrimony of the Miskito (with 84% of the population), but there are also Garifuna (5%), Pech (1%), and ladinos (10%). Land use has been primarily for subsistence. Finally, the Buffer Zone covering 200,000 hectares (494,000 acres) along the west and southwest of the reserve is managed to guarantee the protection of the biological diversity over the long term while meeting the needs of resident communities. It is almost exclusively the domain of ladinos including lands of 100 communities with about 20,000 individuals; only two Pech communities remain in the zone today. Land use in the Buffer Zone is mostly for subsistence but farmers are involved in commercial coffee cultivation, cattle raising, and timber extraction.4

RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SUSTAIN CULTURAL SURVIVAL

Participatory Mapping and Zoning

The participatory resource zoning (PRZ) aimed at empowering residents of the Rio Plátano Biosphere in the management of their lands while aiding state regional development and natural resource conservation efforts. The primary objective was to define a community-approved land use zoning system for inclusion in the new management plan that reflects existing practices and is defined in consensus with the resident population. This would be done through using a participatory approach that helps local peoples articulate their own cognitive understanding of natural resource use into standardized forms. The indigenous and ladino societies of the reserve are fundamentally non text-based (not written down or dependent on written
documents) and their traditions and knowledge even today are mostly passed down orally. Three related specific objectives were: 1) to incorporate reserve residents into research to increase their participation in the management and protection of the biosphere; 2) to produce large-scale maps of community land use in the reserve; and 3) to design a consensual zoning system that recognizes state-established regulations while respecting existing land-use practices and proposals defined by the resident populations.

A technical team was formed to direct the process. The author initiated activities working with fellow Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve Project (BRP) staffer and GFA Consultant Lic. Luis Corrales. Moskitia Powisa (MO-PAWI), the most active NGO working on the development and conservation of the Mosquitia region, was contracted to handle the administrative and logistical aspects of the work, and a development expert was added to the team. The final member of the team was a university-trained Miskito leader. The PRZ process was directed primarily by this technical team, but other BRP project and AFE-COHOEFOREN staff were involved in decision making and added valuable expertise during many events. The director of the new forestry region, Rosman Marquez, and his assistant, José Varela, were particularly valuable participants. Technical assistants from the National Geographic Institute (IGN), as well as graduate students from the Department of Geography at the University of Kansas, provided valuable support.

To begin the participatory process, the technical team met with organizations interested in the future of the reserve, explained the zoning proposal, and requested support. They also met with community leaders, indigenous and grassroots organizations, and municipal governments in the reserve. From the onset, it was always emphasized that the PRZ activity would respect the rights of the resident populations while bringing them into reserve management.

Next came the selection of the coordinators. The biosphere was divided into seven work zones: Batalla, La Costa, Brus Laguna, Ahuas, Wampusiri, Tawahka, and Sico-Paulaya. Each would have its own coordinator and small number of surveyors. The technical team met with community leaders in each zone to explain the PRZ, look for their collaboration, and ask them to elect their own coordinator for the activity. While some people were suspicious or cautious, communities responded favorably and elected a respected group of three teachers, a nurse, a pastor, a businessman, and a mechanic. The coordinator comprised Garifuna, one Tawahka, one ladino, and four Miskito.

A two-day seminar provided the seven coordinators with training about the BRP project and PRZ activity. The coordinators would serve administrative functions, remain apolitical and nonsectarian, and act as conciliators. They would supervise and assist the work of the surveyors. The responsibilities, salary, and benefits of both the coordinators and surveyors
were defined by consensus. Specific training focused on how coordinators would hold community meetings to explain the PRZ activity and to elect surveyors. The communities again responded by carefully electing twenty-four well-qualified representatives, of which fourteen were Miskito; six, ladino; two, Tawahka; one, Garifuna; and one, Pech. Alternate surveyors were also selected at this time.

Everyone came together for the first workshop (June 14–23, 1997) held in the coastal Garifuna community and municipal capital of Batalla. Given the enormity of the reserve, it was decided that each successive workshop should be held in a different part of the biosphere to bring as many actors as possible into the process. About seventy individuals participated in the event, including the participatory team of coordinators, surveyors, and the technical team, but also representatives from the State Forestry Agency, municipal governments, indigenous federations, NGOs, and cooperatives. A variety of educational and training activities provided participants with background about the conservation of natural resources and the concept of a protected area. Specific focus was placed on the objectives, limits, and population of the Río Plátano Biosphere. The technical team explained the PRZ activity to the assembly. The roles and functions of the surveyors were discussed, and the precise geographic area covered by each was defined. Exercises were developed to identify, describe, and analyze land-use activities in each zone of the reserve. Here, the surveyors used their own cognitive knowledge to explain how they farm, hunt, fish, pan for gold, and use the forest. Finally, draft land-use questionnaires and household census
forms were critiqued and rewritten. Role playing, mock meetings, and inter-
terviews with Batalla residents were used to train surveyors how to admin-
ister the questionnaires.

Mapping was the keystone activity of the PRZ activity. The content,
objective, and importance of maps were discussed in this first workshop,
and the surveyors learned how to draw simple pencil-and-paper sketch
maps of their rivers, settlements, and resource-use areas. They considered
different ways to develop a collaborative mapping exercise during com-
munity meetings for recording toponyms, or place-names, and drawing cog-
nitive sketch maps of village lands. The workshop concluded like the
subsequent one with the coordinators and surveyors developing work plans
and budgeting expenses for fieldwork.

The surveyors returned to their respective work areas and went from
village to village administering the land-use questionnaires and drawing
sketch maps in village meetings. They went from house to house adminis-
tering the census. At times, this first field work was particularly difficult
because it required repeated village meetings to gain confidence, complete
questionnaires, and draw sketch maps. The surveyors stimulated partici-
pation and interest among families and community leaders more often than
not, but some villagers remained suspicious. Coordinators helped by trav-
eling to villages to meet with leaders to clarify the system and answer ques-
tions.

The second workshop (August 17–September 5, 1997) was held in the
historic bananero community of Sico, now better known for its ranchers.
Some indigenous surveyors, fearing reprisal given historic animosities, were
apprehensive about meeting in this ladino community, but the event actu-
ally helped strengthen interethnic relations and cooperation.

Cartographic analysis of the community land-use questionnaire infor-
mation was a central focus of the second workshop. Village resource-use
locations for agriculture, hunting, fishing, forest use, and more were re-
corded as toponyms on the questionnaires. The surveyors’ sketch maps
provided firsthand accounts of locations. Participatory mapping combines
the mental faculties of the surveyors, coordinators, and geographer for fix-
ing location. The plotting of each toponym, settlement, and resource-use
location involves relating the surveyor’s knowledge to that of the sketch
maps and standard cartographic procedures. Fixing location often involved
“virtual trips,” traveling up and down rivers, streams, and hillslopes in the
mind’s eye to determine distance and location. Thousands of resource-use
sites were meticulously plotted onto large-scale base maps (1:50,000 scale)
of each of the communities in each of the seven work zones.

The results of the household census were analyzed and organized by
community and zone. Additional presentations and discussions about nat-
ural resource conservation, the PRZ process, and the roles of the participa-
tory team occurred during this second assembly. Emphasis was placed
on the objectives and geographical limits of the nucleus, cultural, and buffer zones of the reserve. The surveyors were then prepared for the next round of fieldwork, and an approach for validating the zonal maps was developed.

After the workshop, the technical team returned to BRP project headquarters in Tegucigalpa to redraft the cartographic information. New zonal maps, some exceeding 2 by 1 1/2 meters (6 feet by 4.5 feet) in size, were drawn in black ink including rivers, settlements, and resource-use zones, and the boundaries of the BRP. Copies were sent to all the coordinators and surveyors. The logistical realities of working in the country's most inaccessible zone were daunting at times.

During their second fieldwork phase, the surveyors held community meetings to review advances in the work, to correct and validate the zonal maps, and to discuss the need for a zoning system. Taking the work seriously, many communities spontaneously formed their own "biosphere committees" to review the information produced. Members of the technical team also visited each zone to hold informative town hall-type meetings and to work with the coordinators and surveyors to begin a definition of a land zoning system.

The surveyors and technical team studied resource-use characteristics displayed on the zonal maps and tried to define appropriate land-use categories. Discussions led to the notion of a multiple-use zone where agriculture was present with other uses. The forests had more extensive use. The surveyors explained repeatedly that their communities had pretty clear understandings of where they did not want to see deforestation or the extension of agricultural lands. This clear criterion led to the simple proposal of a multiple-use (with agriculture and ranching) and extensive-use (without agriculture and ranching) zones. A special-use zone was added by consensus to accommodate the changing needs for the establishment of areas for watershed protection, forestry, protection, ecotourism, archaeological sites, and more. The technical team also used these field visits to train the coordinators and surveyors in the use of Global Positioning System (GPS) technology to collect map information.

The third workshop (November 11–24, 1997) was held in Brus Laguna, the municipal seat and historic center for education, the Moravian church, and Miskito activism. The event strengthened understandings of the zoning process, and its protagonists helped convince indigenous leaders and government authorities of the need to define a zoning system for the management plan. The assembly opened with a progress report and a more specific look at the validation of the zonal maps. The assembly divided into zonal groups to analyze existing land-use and tenure practices. The notion of establishing community regulations for conservation and protection was explained.

This workshop focused on defining the zoning system for the buffer and
cultural zones of the Plátano Biosphere. The rationale for establishing land-use zones and boundaries was hotly debated. The assembly finally agreed on the simple zoning design of multiple-use, extensive-use, and special-use zones. The coordinators and surveyors worked together in their zonal groups to define potential land-use regulations by listing activities permitted, not permitted, and permitted with restrictions for each type of land use in the multiple- and extensive-use zones. Each group presented its results for debate in the assembly. Most proposals were logical and met assembly approval, but some were hotly contested. Much deliberation occurred, for example, over the size of a “protection strip” to guard water edges, decided to be 100 meters (328 feet) along rivers and 50 meters (164 feet) along streams and lagoons. Equally conflictive were the dimensions of the multiple-use zone put at a kilometer inland from the protection strip along rivers and half that for streams. Regulations concerning the transfer and sale of lands were unknown in the region. Differences in opinion also existed over the extent cattle ranching would be permitted. Reaching consensus often meant long and heated debates. Nevertheless, the assembly reached preliminary agreements over most matters concerning the proposed zoning system.

During the workshop, the technical team and surveyors plotted the proposed limits of the multiple-use zone onto the zonal maps while incorporating corrections and new GPS points from fieldwork. Surveyors were given additional training in GPS use. The workshop concluded with the development of a methodology to review and validate the proposed zoning scheme with the communities, emphasizing the need to attain the widest participation possible.

Copies of the proposed land-use regulations and revised zonal maps were forwarded to the coordinators and surveyors who held village meetings for their analysis. The surveyors discussed the content of the land-use activities permitted, not permitted, and permitted with restrictions with villagers. While the review process varied between one village and another, community participation was significant, and the villagers understood the importance of the work. More communities formed committees to conduct in-depth analysis. The increasing community involvement brought increasing support.

The fourth workshop (February 1–13, 1998) was held deep within the Mosquitia Corridor along the reserve’s southeastern margin in the Miskito community and municipal seat of Wampisirpi. The technical team outlined the principal features of the new Plátano Biosphere law and an archaeologist from the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History provided technical orientations about the documentation and protection of archaeological sites.

This workshop focused on the review of the land-use regulations follow-
ing the observations and recommendations obtained from the communities. It took a week to discuss and revise the proposed land-use regulations of activities permitted, not permitted, or permitted with restrictions for the multiple-use and extensive-use zones. Long debates continued concerning some land-use practices, but a final draft was agreed upon. The limits of the multiple-use zone on each zonal map were revised to incorporate community recommendations, and new observations and GPS points were added.

The notion of comanagement (management of the reserve shared by the national government and local indigenous and ladino peoples) was debated for the first time in this fourth workshop. Discussion focused on the structure of the National System of Protected Areas which calls for establishing “orientation committees” at the zonal, regional, and national levels. Many communities had already formed similar committees, as mentioned above. The assembly discussed the composition and functions of the orientation committee that would supervise the implementation of zoning and land-use regulations in collaboration with AFE-COHDEFOR, the municipal governments, and other governmental organizations and NGOs. At the close of the workshop, the director of the forestry region worked with the assembly to identify sites for AFE-COHDEFOR control posts and initiated a selection process for employing the surveyors as park rangers, with community approval.

The technical team sent copies of the newly revised zonal maps and land-use regulations document to the surveyors who again reviewed the zoning system, maps, and land-use regulations in village meetings. Copies were also presented for analysis by government authorities, indigenous leaders, and representatives from cooperatives and other concerned organizations.

The final workshop was held in the ladino community of Palacios in an attempt to incorporate it more completely into the PRZ activity. Municipal and indigenous authorities, as well as high-level representatives from AFE-COHDEFOR, other conservation projects, and organizations participated in the event. The focus was on the final revision of the land-use regulations. In open assembly, the final contents of each of the more than 200 land-use regulations were discussed, sometimes hotly debated or eliminated, but usually slightly corrected or changed before approval by a consensus vote from each zonal group. Some broader dispositions concerning biosphere management were also added at this time. Additions and corrections were added to the zonal maps, and the limits of the multiple-use and extensive-use zones were reviewed one final time.

The development of the comanagement structure with the new AFE-COHDEFOR Forestry Region was a topic of speculation. Advances made in the formation of the orientation committees were impressive, and there was broad acknowledgement that these could help AFE-COHDEFOR ap-
ply the new zoning system and land-use regulations. This was also the occasion for the forestry region director to make final arrangements for contracting a number of the surveyors to work as park guards.

The workshop ended with the assembly questioning how to provide follow-up to the process. Now that the participatory zoning was ending, there was concern that the BRP project, state, and NGOs should continue related activities to maintain levels of interest and awareness and to develop the comanagement structure.

The participatory zoning of the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve provides a powerful example of how maps and mapmaking can be used to enhance cultural survival and conserve biophysical environments. The participatory mapping process used here allowed the biosphere's indigenous and ladino populations to articulate their own knowledge of resource use into a community-approved zoning proposal, involving them in reserve management for the first time. Through the process, communities formulated their own land-use regulations, many of which were previously unthinkable.

The PRZ brought unprecedented levels of interest and participation in the management and protection of the reserve. Congressmen and conservationists, municipal authorities and leaders from indigenous and nongovernmental organizations, as well as from churches and other community-based groups, joined in some level of involvement. Most important, for the first time, reserve residents were brought into the conservation formula.

Indigenous and ladino community-elected representatives were integrated into a participatory team through 500 hours of instruction and training concerning the management and protection of the BRP. They worked with the technical team to develop the workshops, design the questionnaires, collect and analyze field information, draw sketch maps, draft standard maps, design the zoning system, formulate the land-use regulations, and create new comanagement strategies. Each in concert held dozens of community meetings for the collection, analysis, critical review, and validation of the information produced. Today they have emerged as vocal conservation experts, and about a dozen now work as park guards for the new Río Plátano Forestry Region.

The participatory mapping produced accurate standard maps of settlement and resource use at 1:50,000 scale for the entire biosphere. The process helped residents understand how their land uses relate to the biosphere limits and macro-zones. The maps and mapmaking process helped provide the spatial understandings needed for defining the new zoning system. Additional baseline information produced for reserve management included a census of every family in and around the reserve and a community-level questionnaire on socioeconomic conditions.

The PRZ activity developed a zoning system with land-use regulations as the central component proposed for the reserve's new management plan.
The system, which reflects existing practices, was defined together with the resident population. It has four land use zones: protection strip (along water edges), multiple use (agricultural and other uses), extensive use (hunting, fishing, collecting, and forest use), and special use (archaeological, tourism, water supply, and so on). It is regulated by the elaborate set of more than 200 community-approved land-use regulations which define the activities permitted, not permitted, and permitted with restrictions in each zone.

Another important outcome was the understanding and even empathy that developed between the different ethnic groups of the reserve who found themselves confronted by many of the same problems and opportunities. Broad consensus now exists to help manage and protect the Plátano Biosphere, and indigenous and ladino communities alike embrace the notion of comanagement committees for implementing the new management plan. At the same time, the process facilitated the entrance of the State Forestry Agency into reserve management. Past indifference and corruption by forestry personnel have been excused by biosphere residents who now embrace the possibility that AFE-COHDEFOR is opening a new era of cooperation and collaboration, and that their rights to lands and resources will be respected. Critics are not so optimistic.

The consensual zoning system is a powerful instrument for managing and protecting the biosphere. Significantly, indigenous federations, local governments, grassroots organizations, and NGOs openly endorse the design. Its implementation as part of a new management plan, however, will probably depend on the state’s ability to accommodate community guidelines. Most should not be a problem, including the prohibition of new colonization, the absolute protection of the nucleus, and the ban on hunting endangered fauna; all these fit nicely with state policy. At issue are some homespun land-use regulations that do not conform exactly with state laws. Villagers want a protected strip along waterways (rivers, 100 meters [328 feet]; streams and lagoons, 50 meters [164 feet]), for example, but their dimensions do not conform with larger ones set in forestry law. Nevertheless, these restrictions are applied nowhere in Honduras, and the biosphere residents are serious about enforcing the limits they approved. Similarly, a regulation that limits landholding to about 35 hectares (86 acres) may seem excessive to some authorities who lament that farmers in other parts of the country have much less land; others think it too small eliminating the possibility for large landholdings. Dozens of these types of issues related to the community-approved zoning and management guidelines must be reviewed by state agencies. If viewed objectively, state authorities will find most of the community proposals reasonable. Then, even after state approval, administrators working on biosphere management will need to understand the values of the consensual zoning system and respect the fact that it reflects an enormous level of community involvement and decision making.

Additional dangers lie in the fact that AFE-COHDEFOR now holds legal
title to the land in the reserve. Under enlightened stewardship, this can help protect the area from outside invasions. It is also possible, however, that given the corrupt history of the state forestry institution, this might open possibilities for granting concessions to business interests without considering the rights or desires of the local population.

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

The participatory zoning of the Río Plátano Biosphere confirms that diverse, local peoples can, and must, be involved in the comanagement of their lands and resources within protected areas. However, while the collaboration and community involvement needed for the success of such an undertaking are easily understood conceptually, practically speaking they are complex, expensive, and difficult objectives to attain. Community-based, participatory mapping initiatives in Central America, like the example discussed in this chapter, have enabled indigenous and rural mestizo populations to produce standard maps and descriptive information about their lands and livelihoods that are intelligible to both themselves and to outsiders—and can contribute to cultural survival. Similar approaches have gained wide acceptance in conservation and development projects affecting indigenous lands and protected areas around the globe. The PRZ demonstrates that participatory mapping can provide a keystone activity around which other greater concerns can revolve. The process shows that local peoples can be empowered in the management and control of their lands and resources while promoting natural resource protection, land tenure security, and improved indigenous-state relations.

**Questions**

1. What is participatory mapping? How is it different from other kinds of mapping?
2. How did this participatory mapping project demonstrate the political power of maps to sustain culture?
3. What do you suppose were the major conflicts between the various peoples living within the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve (ladinos, Miskito, Garifuna, Pech)?
4. Given the past history of corruption within the Honduran forestry department, what are the likely constraints to successful implementation of the consensual comanagement plan for the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve?
5. Advanced information technologies, including geographic information systems (GIS) and GPS, have been criticized because of their potential to increase the control of the poor or ethnic minorities in the Third World by the rich, powerful, and military. How does this project address this serious criticism?
The Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve

NOTES


RESOURCE GUIDE

Published Literature


Toledo Maya Cultural Council and the Toledo Alcaldes Association. *Maya Atlas: The Struggle to Preserve Maya Land in Southern Belize.* Compiled by the Maya People of Southern Belize in conjunction with the Toledo Maya Cultural Council and the Toledo Alcaldes Association, with the Assistance of the Indian Law Resource Center, GeoMap Group-U.C. Berkeley, and the
Endangered Peoples of Latin America


WWW Sites

_Honduras This Week Online_
Weekly newspaper in English often has articles about nature conservation in the Mosquitia region of Honduras. http://www.marrder.com/htw/

_Patuca River Campaign_

_Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History, Department of Botany,
Information about the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve._
http://nmnhwww.si.edu/botany/projects/centres/platano.html