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## Meso-America: Communities issue statement on protected areas

The concept of protected areas, born in the United States in the nineteenth century as an idea of conservation by establishing “national parks,” was part of the colonization of the “Wild West” and, in many cases served as an instrument to appropriate indigenous peoples’ territory, handing it over to the States, research centres or corporate interests. Although an international organization such as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has acknowledged that when establishing protected areas, indigenous peoples’ rights to their territories should be respected and the value of their lifestyles recognized, most of the protected areas established since then have violated these rights.

Last March the Third Meso-American Congress on Protected Areas took place in the City of Merida, Yucatan, Mexico. Simultaneously, the Indigenous Peoples, Local and Afro-descendant Communities of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama gathered at the Third pre-congress of Meso-American Indigenous Peoples, Local and Afro-descendant Communities on protected areas and territorial rights, to claim that “we have existed since time immemorial on this territory and well before the formation of the present Nation States.”

The “Yucatan Declaration” (1) was a result of this meeting, reaffirming that “In our ancestral concept, the territory goes far beyond a physical space, because it is there that we are born, raised and our culture is reproduced and it is there that we must continue our life after life. It also represents the security and continuity of future generations.”

“Territoriality is where we develop our condition as subjects of political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights in self-management of Good Living and the continuity in time of our cosmovision.”

This reaffirmation seems particularly appropriate in the light of events over the past forty years, during which the rich indigenous territories of this area “have been subject to reiterated colonialist systems of looting, expropriation, bio-piracy, bio-prospecting, dispossession, declaration of protected areas and megaprojects.”

In this context, the Declaration demands recognition of the Indigenous Peoples, Local and Afro-descendant communities’ right to free determination and to reserve the right to establish management/conservation areas under their own regulatory systems and institutions, guaranteed by a legal framework implemented in each one of the Meso-American States. Therefore, “the States shall not declare protected or conservation areas of any type on the lands and territories that the Indigenous Peoples, Local and Afro-descendant communities have historically or traditionally used, possessed or occupied, without their free, prior and informed consent.” In those cases that protected areas have been declared without free, prior and informed consent, it is demanded that processes be initiated to return these lands and territories.

The declaration warns against projects promoted by national governments such as the Meso-American Biological Corridor, the Merida Plan, the Meso-American Strategy for Environmental

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Sustainability or the programme for the Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD), that directly affect indigenous territories and that therefore should guarantee full and effective participation of the local communities.

In short, what is at stake is the free determination of the peoples' and their right to Good Living.

(1) See full text of the Yucatán Declaration (in Spanish)

at: [http://www.indigenouspeoplesissues.com/attachments/4378\\_Declaracion\\_Yucatan.pdf](http://www.indigenouspeoplesissues.com/attachments/4378_Declaracion_Yucatan.pdf)