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## Guatemala: Deliberate fires raze tropical forest and serve logging interests

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Thousands of hectares of forest were razed by the flames in a series of forest fires, which during March and April swept uncontrollably through the Maya Biosphere Reserve in the north of Guatemala. The fires reached the Tikal National Park, declared World Heritage site by UNESCO although they were controlled before seriously affecting the area. However, the national parks of Sierra del Lacandón and Laguna del Tigre were razed by the flames, while in the central part of the reserve, the uncontrolled flames advanced in the virgin forest.

As a reaction to the declarations made to the press by environmental organizations, Guatemalan government officials confirmed that many of the fires were intentional, although they did not mention who was responsible for them. Meanwhile, the environmental organization "Tropico Verde" stated that there were indications that the fires were caused by strong economic interests. The devastation of national parks "opens up the possibility of logging, mining and oil exploitation in these areas," affirmed a report carried out by this organization. "The magnitude and number of fires exceeded our capacity to control them," explained to the press in mid-April the director of the Guatemalan programme for the fight against forest fires.

For its part, Tropico Verde repeatedly denounced the incompetence of the authorities to the press. "There has been no programme for prevention and those responsible for the Integrated System for the Prevention and Control of Forest Fires (Sistema Integrado de Prevención y Control de Incendios Forestales - SIPECIF) have squandered the scant resources they had available" concluded the environmentalists following a meeting held in the Guatemalan Congress last 12 May.

The Guatemalan Government has been seriously questioned by environmental organizations, who affirm that the officials acted late and insufficiently. "The lack of governance in the most affected national parks is mainly responsible for the fires. The institutions have been unable to curb the major interests behind the destruction of Sierra del Lacandon and Laguna del Tigre" concluded Tropico Verde in a report submitted to the National Council for Protected Areas mid-May. In April, a Government official made a desperate request through the press, asking for "help from all the sectors of (Guatemalan) society." However, the environmentalists state that the Government never delivered the funds allocated to the prevention of forest fires since January. At the middle of last month, they denounced to the press that "The army has helicopters but cannot fly due to lack of a fuel budget." During a summons for questioning by the Guatemalan Congress last 12 May, the director of the fight against fires affirmed that the funds were available but that they had lacked the capacity to implement. "This would seem more like an excuse to avoid affecting the electoral possibilities of the Government party," stated to the press Carlos Albacete, spokesman of the Tropico Verde ecologist organization.

The situation was out of control for over two months. In the Tikal National Park, several fire seats were controlled in the northeast and southeast of the area. Various fires surrounded the archaeological site el Peru, where David Freidel, an internationally recognized archaeologist due to his studies on this culture and his numerous publications, is presently working. The relict oak

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(*Quercus oleoides*) grove protected in the Laguna del Tigre National Park disappeared in the flames. This park suffered generalized fires in the whole area, while the south and southeast half of the Sierra del Lacandon National Park was affected by fires caused in reiteration. While writing this article, there are still some active fires, although the largest have already been controlled. Official statistics stated that less than 10,000 hectares of forest had been burnt. However, the ecologists claim that fires have razed various hundreds of thousands of protected areas. "The National Forest Institute must revise its method of measuring burnt areas," concluded a deputy at the Guatemala Congress after listening to the official statistics and confronting them with independent information.

The Maya Biosphere Reserve is in the north of Guatemala, on the border with Mexico and Belize. It is part of the Selva Maya, the most important tropical forest in Mexico and Central America. With over three million hectares under protection it is a relatively dry tropical forest which contains numerous endemic species (which only live in this area), such as the howler monkey (*Alouatta pigra*) a primate in danger of extinction.

Disappearance of the Selva Maya would involve the extinction in nature of 11 species of mammals, 20 species of birds, 39 reptile and 11 amphibian species, exclusive to this forest. The abundant cloud cover and proximity of the rainy season forecast that, once more, it will be the natural phenomena that form an alliance with the survival of the tropical forest in Guatemala.

By: Carlos Albacete, Tropico Verde, e-mail: [mailto@tropicoverde.org](mailto:mailto@tropicoverde.org)