
Guatemala: Campaign against oil activities in Maya Biosphere Reserve

The Maya Biosphere Reserve, located in the northern region of Guatemala constitutes the largest protected tropical forest in the country. The Reserve is at the heart of the Maya Forest, which is shared by Guatemala, Belize and Mexico, and is considered the second most important remaining tract of tropical forest in the Americas, second only to the Amazon. This precious area has suffered depredation because of oil concessions granted by the government regardless of their expected negative impacts, taking into account that oil prospection and extraction has proved to be a major cause of deforestation and forest degradation in the tropics. In March 1999 concerned local community representatives, together with national and international environmental organizations addressed former President Arzú, urging him to take the necessary steps to definitively stop oil concessions and protect the Maya Reserve (see WRM Bulletin 21). Nevertheless, the authorities have turned a deaf ear to these claims and the situation has got even worse.

On February 7th this year, Guatemala's Attorney General for Human Rights ruled that oil activities in the Maya Biosphere violate human rights "since they disrupt the right to a clean environment, to individual dignity, to the preservation of the cultural and natural patrimony of the country, and to social and economic development". The ruling also states that the violation of the Law of Protected Areas constitutes "an administrative tendency detrimental to the citizens of Guatemala, and especially, to the communities neighbouring the protected areas." The Attorney General puts the blame for the critical situation of the Reserve on "the lack of interest and irresponsibility of the authorities in charge of the National Environmental Policy." This categorical ruling is, however, not mandatory.

The official response to the General Attorney's resolution was disappointing since only one (that of Laguna del Tigre) of all the already approved or pending oil concessions was mentioned. Additionally, flagrant contradictions were observed between the reaction of the secretary of the Environment and that of the Ministry of Energy and Mines. In sum, forest protection policy in Guatemala appears to be subordinated to oil exploitation, thus enabling oil companies to continue making big business to the detriment of Guatemalan forests and people.

Guatemalan environmentalists are organizing an international campaign to save the Maya Biosphere Reserve. You can support this initiative by sending a message to the Guatemalan government (Coprekeh@guate.net), and copies to the Ministry of Energy and Mines (unimem1@pronet.net.gt) and Trópico Verde (tropicoverde@guate.net), expressing your concern about the present situation. A sample letter is available in our web page, that can be sent in its entirety, or modified as desired:
http://www.wrm.org.uy/english/tropical_forests/letters/MBR2402.html

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