
Guatemala: Conservation Perpetuates the Plunder of Forests

The creation of the Maya Biosphere Reserve has been legitimizing a destructive model: infrastructure and energy projects, hand-in-hand with Protected Areas “without people.” While conservation NGOs fatten their portfolios, peasant and indigenous communities are displaced, or conditioned to depend on NGOs and the market.

(This article is part of the report [“Conservation Perpetuates the Plunder of Guatemalan Forests”](#))

In the northern lands of Petén, Guatemala, a project is being developed by a group of international NGOs, together with their local partners and the financial support of institutions like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). These NGOs include The Nature Conservancy, Wildlife Conservation Society, Rainforest Alliance and World Wildlife Fund. Using a discourse of combating global warming and protecting forests, this project aims to profit from the indiscriminate sale of forests.

The creation of the Maya Biosphere Reserve in 1990 (RBM, by its Spanish acronym) generated the conditions to insert this territory—which covers 70 percent of Petén department—into national “sustainable development” plans. These plans are based on the exportation of commodities alongside conservation projects, and **they exacerbate the seemingly contradictory nature of these initiatives: The Mesoamerica Plan for infrastructure and economic-energy integration with its extractive projects; and its “green version,” the Protected Areas of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor.** Both of these land management models are financed by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

These models, which advertise “sustainable forest management” projects within the Reserve as conservation success stories, seek to shape the Guatemalan regulatory framework to include a new commodity for export: carbon credits. These credits come from so-called offset projects—in which contamination or destruction of one place is offset with a project in another place that claims to protect a “similar” area, or “recreate” what has been destroyed. This not only allows all industrial activity to continue—as long as its destruction is “offset”; it also causes double land grabbing: in the area of the industrial activity and in the “offset” area. In a context of growing militarization, these plans intend to **continue the forced displacement of peasant and indigenous populations who have been living in Petén for decades.**

“In all the Protected Areas, basic services are restricted: health, education, food, infrastructure,” says a peasant who lives within the area demarcated as Laguna del Tigre National Park (PNLT, by its Spanish acronym), which is also within the Reserve. “It has been worrying for us to see how **powerful business sectors have been destroying nature in what they call Protected Areas.** After we have been robbed of our lands, they end up in the hands of other people; and legally, they can belong to a company. We are outraged that they hassle us about so many things; yet we see the oil bids in Laguna del Tigre, where there is also (oil) palm....**Why do they have the**

right to be here? If they actually *are* contaminating nature!” asks a peasant. He is from a community that conservation NGOs and the National Council for Protected Areas (CONAP, by its Spanish acronym) criminalize, using a discourse that blames communities for deforestation.

Displacement: State Policy

On Friday, June 2, 2017, 111 peasant and indigenous communities fled their lands in the face of the threat of 2,000 army and National Civil Police troops. The troops were headed toward their community—known until then as Laguna Larga—with the sole purpose of reducing it to ashes. To this day, 450 people are living in a humanitarian crisis context on the border between Campeche, Mexico and Petén Guatemala. The case of Laguna Larga and other **forced displacement that has occurred in the Protected Areas shows how the Guatemalan State uses violence as a way to “solve” territorial conflicts in Petén.** The main objective is to prohibit the presence of communities that do not adopt the only model allowed: that of forest merchants in the lands of northern Guatemala.

The Path Toward Privatization of “Conservation”

Since establishment of the Reserve, the official institutions tasked with enforcing the Law of Protected Areas have operated on limited budgets. This context led to the proliferation of conservationist NGOs to fill the institutional gap. “The kind of conservation these organizations promote can be seen as part of the neoliberal model, given the way in which Protected Areas are viewed economically. If the State wants to conserve, it has to pay to do so. **The State was clearly not going to have the technical capacity to manage these areas; they were always intended to be transferred to conservation NGOs.** One of the first to be created, the Foundation for Eco-development and Conservation, is owned by Marcos Cerezo. Marcos Cerezo is the son of Vinicio Cerezo, who was the president of Guatemala when the Law of Protected Areas was passed. This NGO manages geologically strategic areas, where there is gas and oil,” says Rocío García, an anthropologist from the University of San Carlos. She denounces the irregular way in which the management of Protected Areas was transferred to private investors, who thus have the ability to administer state resources in the future.

The case of Guatemala, explains García, is a clear example of the interrelationship between international environmental policies—based on conservation under the Protected Areas model—and the territorial planning policies of the Guatemalan government.

“Sustainable development is linked to Guatemalan territorial planning policies from the administration of Óscar Berger (2004-2008), when the *rural territorial development* policy was implemented. This policy was drawn up using an IDB-designed methodology, and its objective is to insert territories into markets using principles of demand.” **The objective is for peasants to no longer be tied to the land for agricultural production (mainly subsistence), and instead begin to produce for the market.** To this end, it incentivizes nation-states to reorganize local institutions in order to impose models designed for entry into the global market.

NGOs: A Relationship of Dependency

After the peace accords were signed between the Guatemalan State and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity—following 36 years of internal armed conflict—agrarian reform was enacted, with the World Bank's influence. This imposed prohibitions on the granting of land tenure to peasant communities, despite the fact that in numerous cases they already possessed the lands—many of

which had been abandoned forcibly during the war.

At the same time, **throughout the Reserve, the Guatemalan government reinforced the prohibition on land titling, and, with USAID funding, created the “forest concession” model** in areas assigned for “sustainable forest management.” Although 12 concessions were initially granted, they are currently only operating in nine communities (1). Meanwhile, there are two industrial concessions in the hands of the logging companies, Batel Comercial Ltd. and Gibor S.A. The total concession area is 485,200 hectares.

“What they [USAID] did was **place an NGO in each community** in order to advise the community on organization, manage funds and become legally registered as forest concession areas. They had to conduct an analysis of the territory to know how much potential it had for logging and other non-wood products, since that is all they have to work with.” says Rosa Maria Chan, a former Guatemalan official.

In 2001, USAID channeled its assistance through the BIOFOR Project, implemented by the NGO Chemonics International. This organization implemented a business vision to seek out new market niches and increase forest production in concession areas. Although the official discourse talks about respect for the determination of communities that are operating forest concessions, a 2007 analysis by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) reveals the **vertical and paternalistic formula in the relationship between NGOs and the population in northern Petén**.

“The NGOs took on a leading role in the process; rather than accompanying or facilitating, they became service providers...the relationship between communities and NGOs was unbalanced from the start, given that the NGOs were managing and administering the funds, without promoting community building and self-management...the **NGOs promoted relationships of dependency in order to justify their existence and continue receiving funding from donors.**” So underscores the context analysis about the Association of Forest Communities of Petén (ACOFOP, by its Spanish acronym), an umbrella organization for the organizations operating the community forest concessions.

According to CIFOR's analysis, between 1989 and 2003 alone, USAID, IDB, KfW (a German development bank) and counterparts in the Guatemalan government directly invested 92 million dollars in projects in the Reserve. “Of this total investment, only a modest portion directly reached concessionary communities and their organizations. These resources have only deepened the dependency relationship between forest concessions and NGOs,” the report highlights.

Logging for “Conservation”

According to data from the NGO Rainforest Alliance, between 2007 and 2017, forest concessions generated US \$55 million from the sale of wood, *xate* palm, pepper, Maya nut and tourism services to European and US markets, in addition to creating 26,000 jobs. These numbers come from the project, *Climate, Nature and Communities in Guatemala* (CNCG), which was sponsored by the USAID and ended in February of 2018. The project received an investment of US \$25 million between 2013 and 2018, and is considered to be **part of the preparation phase of the Guatecarbón project—the local version of the REDD+ mechanism for the Central American country**.

CNCG is part of USAID's 2012-2015 Global Climate Change and Development Strategy, and was implemented by Rainforest Alliance in collaboration with the following organizations: the Nature

Defenders Foundation (Rainforest Alliance's local partner that co-administers the Sierra Lacandón National Park); the University of the Valley of Guatemala; the Guatemalan Exporters Association; The Nature Conservancy and World Wildlife Fund (WWF). For the Association of Forest Communities of Petén, the positive results are evident, given the millions in income obtained through the sale of forest products. However, **even the Reserve's current Master Plan mentions “the ever-present danger that logging activities can eliminate critical components of the habitat** with a resulting loss in animal populations.” Despite these warnings, **USAID's global climate change strategy looks more like a sales strategy**, which fully matches the objectives that the Wildlife Conservation Society developed in its Master Plan.

The plan states that **by 2021, in un-concessioned, multi-use forest areas in the region with productive potential, “there must be some kind of forest product use in order to strengthen conservation [of the area].”** This means prioritizing, among other areas, the “Candelaria Triangle.” This is the region where the Laguna Larga community was located and where three other communities are under constant threat of eviction.

Despite profits obtained from the concessions, a USAID internal audit published in 2016 reveals **deep-seated problems in the planning and implementation of the CNCG project**. According to the document, Rainforest Alliance provided erroneous information on different aspects.

The main problem found at CNCG is that “Rainforest Alliance should have prepared a sustainability plan from the beginning, explaining how the organizations and companies that receive support from the program would be self-sustaining after the program activities have ended. However, two years after the program was implemented, there was still no plan.”

The fact is that the Protected Areas created in Guatemala have aimed to green capitalism through **policies that reorganize the territory and tenure of forest lands**. Communities that have been guardians and protectors of these forests are being dispossessed of their lands, rights and ways of life. Meanwhile, conservation NGOs have fattened their project portfolios by supporting and intensifying a development model that only benefits the market.

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(1) There are two types of forest concessions: community and industrial. In order for communities to obtain a forest concession, it is necessary to carry out a legal procedure in which the community is not a subject of rights, but rather must be a legally registered organization. In other words, a community organized on its own terms cannot request a forest concession; rather, in order to operate as such, it must go through a legal maze and have the support and counsel of NGOs. Forest concessions establish a contract for up to 25 years between the Guatemalan State and a community organization. The community organization is guaranteed rights to use, access, manage and extract renewable timber and non-timber resources, as well as to carry out tourism projects. The property rights in these contracts belong to the State, and they exclude the possibility of sale or transference of concession rights.

