Dynamics and Processes of Change in the Peruvian Amazon: Learning from the Kechwa-Lamas Peoples

The government claims that small-scale agriculture is responsible for deforestation. But this claim ignores government policies that drive land-use changes and destructive markets (oil palm, carbon sequestration, etc.), as well as the exclusion of indigenous peoples through the creation of reserves.

Peru has the seventh largest forest area of the world. Deforestation in Peru began later than in Brazil, and its deforestation rates of have been lower in comparison. The State's expansion into the Amazon began in the 1980s, through subsidized colonization projects. With the neoliberal government of Fujimori (1990-2001), the Amazon was further opened up with the development of highways, which led to large-scale migration of populations from the Andes. Additionally, several large-scale projects were launched to extract minerals, oil and natural gas.

The Peruvian government claims that small-scale, or "migratory," agriculture is to blame for 90% of the country's deforestation. But this claim is both methodologically and conceptually weak. In the first place, most of the data on deforestation in Peru has been compiled at an aggregate level through remote sensing (via satellite), and regional data has been based on opinions elicited from government officials and NGO workers. This has reflected the official narrative, and lacks empirical evidence and analysis of the factors that determine changes in land use.

Secondly, the term "migratory" agriculture is confusing, and groups together two different processes of forest use. The first is the slash-and-burn systems that indigenous groups, mestizos and river-dwelling peoples practice—which usually does not lead to the permanent conversion of forest to agricultural land. The second is the complete clearing of forests for agricultural use—practiced mostly by migrants. The distinction between these two processes, the actors involved, and their motivations and effects, is important to better understand the factors that drive deforestation and determine what solutions might be appropriate. **Blaming small-scale agriculture as the main cause of deforestation denies the role of the government's agricultural programs and policies in driving land-use changes. It also ignores the government's jurisdiction over the rights to access, use and control the land.**

Conservation and Agribusiness: Two Facets of Dispossession

The San Martin region in the Peruvian Amazon was relatively inaccessible until the 1960s, when the main 'Fernando Belaunde Terry' highway was inaugurated. In the 1980s, coca had become an important cash crop, which brought large-scale migration, changes in the landscape through forest clearing, and an economic boom. Coca production, in combination with the activities of two guerrilla groups (the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement and the Shining Path), caused instability and a high level of violence. This led to a strong military presence that avoided the separation of land into individual or commercial lots. After 1995, when there was less military presence, deforestation increased. **An estimated 30% of the regional territory was deforested by 2000.** This coincided with the decentralization process of 2002, when the regional government took charge of economic development and forest resources.

There were expectations that regional governments would be able to provide a more efficient and sustainable governance—by further strengthening democracy, including local people in decision-making processes, and improving public services for citizens. However, the *Nueva Amazonia* party ('New Amazon'), which was in government in the region from 2007 to 2015, developed **a vision of intensive agricultural production combined with "conservation" and ecotourism development**—promoting San Martin as the "Green Region." Large investments in infrastructure were made, coffee and cacao production increased, and **land was cleared for the agro-industrial production of jatropha and oil palm**.

Additionally, 70 percent of San Martin's territory was restricted for "conservation," with scarce consultation with peoples of the region. To date, 1,340,000 hectares have been marked for conservation, with a goal of 2.5 million hectares, as established by the National Program of Forest Conservation for Climate Change Mitigation. The aim is to **control access to and use of the forests.** The Cordillera-Escalera Regional Conservation Area (ACR, by its Spanish acronym) and the Conservation and Ecosystem Recovery Areas (ZoCREs, by their Spanish acronym) have largely overlapped with indigenous territories; and so far, the regional government has not addressed the issue of indigenous communities' rights, which are protected by law.

So far, conservation and perennial crops (crops that have a long or permanent life cycle) are seen as the region's answer to deforestation. However, the San Martin government's actions to delineate and **confine forests through conservation plans constitute an existential threat to Kechwa-Lamas communities, who access and use forests**. Furthermore, the focus on **perennial commercial agriculture has become a driver of deforestation**.

Migrant peasants move to forest areas that have been cleared in order to produce cash crops (for example coffee and cacao)—areas that Kechwa-Lamas communities consider to be customary territory. **Commercial plantations are also a growing threat**. Communities that are settled in remote areas, deep within forests, constantly patrol their territories to keep migrants away.

One thing is certain. When the distance between forest areas and communities increases, the average size of Kechwa-Lams peoples' farms decreases, patterns of cultivation shift toward a perennial crop, such as cacao, and forest use decreases. In contrast, when there is easy access to forests, forests are integrated into livelihood activities, providing an important source of food (from plants and animals). Where there is no nearby forest, this use may be limited to occasional hunting in a distant forest.

Thus, we see three dynamics influencing the forest territories of San Martin today. The first is claims by the indigenous population—mostly Kechwa-Lamas—to their customary territories; the second is the logging of the forest, mostly by migrant populations; and the third dynamic—linking the first two—is the expansion of conservation areas and perennial cash crops. **These dynamics in turn have overshadowed the potential of local agricultural systems to promote beneficial and sustainable livelihoods**, as well as the potential for diverse secondary forests (naturally regenerated forests) to be the best protection for native forests.

Land Tenure and Forest Use

According to the law on native communities, the Kechwa-Lamas peoples have the right to use their forests; therefore the state's removal of their property rights to customary forests continues to be strongly disputed. There are no data on the scope of their claims, but according to an informal source, forty-two villages have claimed land within the Cordillera-Escalera ACR, for a combined total

of more than 120,000 hectares. The forest areas that communities have claimed vary from 50 to 120,000 hectares. Yuri Lamas, one of the few communities that has obtained title to forest territory, has 31,000 hectares within the ACR. However, the regional government has been slow to address most claims—arguing that it is not because of political reasons that it hasn't followed the law, but rather due to budgetary and technical reasons, as well as the difficulties of traveling to remote areas to make the necessary measurements.

The lack of access to their land rights opens the door for communities to seek other forms of titling, such as concessions. But these two things are very different. Land *titles* offer rights to use forests in perpetuity, largely based on customary practices, though with some restrictions. ***Concessions*, on the other hand, promote conservation activities implemented with the technical support of intervening organizations**—using experts, techniques, technology and regulations to train inhabitants in the management and preservation of forests, according to specific protocols and standards. Concessions also come **with reduced territorial rights, regulated use of ancestral lands and limited time agreements with no guarantee of extension.**

Therefore, options for the Kechwa-Lamas to maintain control of their traditional territories may be increasingly tied to the need to act as "custodians" or "ecological natives." But there are also signs that **the new governance of forests is headed towards a more commercial use of land, to satisfy growing global and "green" markets (for example, palm oil and carbon sequestration)**.

Does the Expansion of Perennial Crops Protect Forests?

There has always been a strong emphasis on agricultural production in the region's development plans. **The focus on perennial crops (mainly coffee, cacao and oil palm) is often presented as a kind of expansion that is more environmentally friendly than annual crops, and as a way to stop slash-and-burn agriculture**—thereby reducing the need to open up new lands.

There has been in increase in permanent cash crops in Kechwa-Lamas communities. Farmers have expanded production of coffee and cacao, with an emphasis on the latter. However, **cacao and coffee fields have not replaced slash-and-burn fields in any community.** While slash-and-burn fields used for food crops can overlap with perennial crops during the establishment of the perennial crop shade layer, these two land uses play fundamental different roles.

New Ways to See and Manage Amazonian Forests?

In the last 20 years, livelihood strategies in San Martin's forests have shifted toward agroforestry systems, and increasingly to non-timber products. The regional government and local universities have promoted "new approaches," based on science (cartography, soil management packages and perennial crops). The latest development has been ecosystem or environmental services. As fee for environmental services and offset programs like REDD have been been developed, new interests in land use have emerged. Some see **this emerging market for ecosystem services as the main reason for the low approval rate of forest titles for communities.**

Currently, there are few functioning fee-for-environmental-services projects in San Martin, and those that are underway are targeting forest areas with different levels of protection and small populations. So far, no REDD projects have been established on indigenous territory in San Martin, although **there have been attempts to persuade the Kechwa-Lamas peoples to sell carbon rights.** The REDD process in San Martin, which was organized as a roundtable, was considered to be the most progressive REDD process in the Peruvian Amazon when it began in 2009. But indigenous groups

felt they were poorly represented, and several of them jointly organized an “indigenous roundtable.” **The main criticism of the REDD process in Peru and in San Martin stresses that the Peruvian government—in its eagerness to implement this program—ignored the dispute over land tenure rights.** Indigenous organizations fear that REDD and similar programs will open up the Amazon to the exploitation of resources by transnational (green) companies, and will launch another extractive boom around carbon payments—as happened with rubber and oil.

Forest Landscapes or Market Landscapes?

At the heart of conflicts over land control are rights issues. On the one hand, from the perspective of the Kechwa-Lamas, **new actors have appeared, applying new forms of confinement and privatization. The state, by way of the regional government, is excluding indigenous peoples through the creation of reserves and conservation areas.** Control over people and forests is declared through mechanisms of territorial division—such as the creation of the Cordillera-Escalera ACR and the Conservation and Ecosystem Recovery Areas (ZoCREs). These areas are also **a way to create new “market landscapes,” through carbon sequestration and “pristine” forest landscapes for tourist consumption.** This process also neglects existing legal frameworks that grant customary rights to indigenous peoples. While the government is not openly challenging their rights per se, it is effectively undermining them through masterful inaction.

The development of new commercial agriculture and tree plantations is directly and indirectly promoting the interests of agribusiness capital and the globalization of the regional economy. The expansive activities of Andean migrants—who benefit from the commercial development of plantations promoted by the government—are especially significant. Therefore, **the processes emerging from the socio-economic changes, shifting agricultural practices and new urban dynamics are also creating a “work landscape.”** Processes that might not seem directly focused on forests often have huge impacts on deforestation, forest recovery and the livelihoods of indigenous peoples.

Meanwhile, the practices of Kechwa-Lamas families offer more hope for the future of the forest than the regional government’s conservation initiatives. **So-called forest conservation, and the discussion about REDD and carbon sequestration, have become so pervasive that they have obscured other dynamics at play—dynamics that are essential in the Amazon.** While the Kechwa-Lamas peoples are used as a regional “brand” to promote a symbol of ethnic and cultural diversity, the model being pushed for the use of lands and forests in the region is not based on Kechwa-Lamas practices, but on the rapid growth of cash crops, monocultures and large-scale plantations. **Kechwa-Lamista systems can help us understand essential aspects of production systems and more diverse uses of soil—that combine food production and forest preservation.** Unfortunately, the Kechwa-Lamas population is seen as a “colourful” ethnic group, not as a source of inspiration and knowledge for the future of forests in San Martin.

**** This article is based on research conducted in 2018, entitled "**Forest Dynamics in the Peruvian Amazon: Understanding Processes of Change***."***

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