

# **Rhetoric and Reality: Local Agency in the Maya Biosphere Reserve**

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When the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR) was created in Peten, Guatemala in 1990, conservationists rejoiced. Guatemala had preserved 1.6 million hectares of territory—some of the most ecologically- and culturally-rich land in Central America. The country’s impressive biodiversity would be preserved for perpetuity, as would Guatemala’s cultural heritage—in the form of dozens of ancient Mayan archaeological relics. Moreover, the project was in accordance with UNESCO’s biosphere reserve model, the gold standard for responsible land conservation, specifically designed to integrate local communities, support sustainable development, and effectively balance its conservation objectives with the needs of local communities. The MBR would be divided up into three land use categories, as mandated by UNESCO—strict conservation zones, zones designated for sustainable use by local populations, and buffer zones focused on environmental education and sustainable development. The *Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas* (CONAP), a recently-created Guatemalan government agency would run the MBR, with the help of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Three international NGOs—the Nature Conservancy, CARE International, and Conservation International—would provide additional expertise. The project represented a seemingly successful collaboration between some of the world’s most influential actors—the UN and the US—and the Guatemalan government, a land conservation triumph in an otherwise contentious region of the world. Seven years later, sixty local men, now residing in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, burned one of the MBR’s new biological stations to the ground and took 13 workers hostage.

This paper is an attempt to account for this contradiction. I argue that, despite the widely propagated assertion that biosphere reserves are both inclusive and sensitive to local livelihoods, the creation and implementation of the MBR were fundamentally exclusionary processes, that

the MBR utilized a top-down, foreign leadership structure to impose from the outside their conservation and ecotourism objectives, that local populations were not consulted, or even considered, in the park's creation. I also seek to reveal the irony of celebrating Maya heritage and rhetorically suggesting the importance of local participation, while excluding indigenous and other communities from decision-making processes. To make my claims, I rely heavily on reports from the project's major actors: USAID, UNESCO, *Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas* (CONAP), *Asociacion de Comunidades Forestales de Peten* (ACOFOP), and others. I also draw from existing research on the topic, particularly the work done by Juanita Sundberg, Liza Grandia, and Ismael Ponciano.

This paper will be divided into three sections. First, I will critically analyze the biosphere reserve model, itself. I will describe the model's land use regulations in detail, before revealing—through document analysis—UNESCO's, and other actors', emphasis on local autonomy and participation. I will then suggest a few reasons to be skeptical of this rhetoric. The second part of the paper will discuss the exclusionary, top-down nature of MBR decision-making processes and expose the way that this reality contradicts the inclusive rhetoric of MBR leadership. Finally, I will describe how this same contradiction characterizes contemporary ecotourism initiatives in the region.

### **The Biosphere Reserve Model and the Rhetoric of Participation**

*“Co-operation not only serves as the master integrator of the other functions, but also provides the moral force behind the biosphere reserve concept” – UNESCO*

When the Guatemalan government established the Maya Biosphere Reserve in 1990, it adopted a decisively foreign land conservation model: UNESCO's "biosphere reserve" model, developed nearly 10,000 kilometers away. According to UNESCO, "biosphere reserves have multiple functions—conservation, sustainable development, research and monitoring, training and education..." (UNESCO 2002) In order to belong to UNESCO's biosphere reserve network, the MBR had to abide by a strict set of standards regarding land use. The Reserve was to be divided up into three land use categorizations: 1) Core Zones, "heavily protected wilderness and archeological areas kept free of human intervention." 2) Multiple Use Zones, "which are intended for a variety of sustainable activities and uses, depending on their resource potential...devoted to the sustainable harvest of xate palm, allspice, chicle gum, wicker, and other wild plants, seeds, timber and fauna," but are subject to "strict controls." 3) Buffer Zones, intended to "relieve pressure from the MBR through the stabilization of appropriate uses of the land and natural resources in the area adjacent to the MBR. In this zone, neighboring communities will be provided environmental education and rural extension programs on sustainable ways to use the land that do not depend on the exploitation of the MBR's natural resources, and as a result, permit their conservation." (Gomez & Mendez 2007) While the biosphere reserve model's standards are undoubtedly strict, its rhetorical emphasis on protecting local livelihoods and responsibly balancing them with conservation objectives is commendable.

So too is the way that UNESCO repeatedly asserts the importance of providing agency and decision-making authority to local communities, at least rhetorically. "Key ingredients in the Programme are the involvement of local decision-makers and local people in research projects, training and demonstration in the field and the pooling of disciplines from the social, biological and physical sciences in addressing complex environmental problems." (UNESCO 1984)

UNESCO gloats that the biosphere reserve model is “innovative” because it involves “local participation,” and that co-operation among various stake-holders provides the “moral force behind the biosphere reserve concept.” (UNESCO 1984) In that same document, when outlining “the main characteristics of biosphere reserves,” UNESCO asserts that biosphere reserves are “examples of harmonious landscapes resulting from traditional patterns of land use.”

Presumably, they’re referring to indigenous patterns of land use. Later in the document, UNESCO celebrates “traditional land use systems, illustrating harmonious relationships between indigenous populations and the environment.” The biosphere reserve model can “help to foster pride on the part of local populations in their traditions, and to provide the basis for improving their means of livelihood, through the judicious use of science and technology, in ways which respect these traditions.” (UNESCO 1984) Respecting local autonomy, celebrating indigenous knowledge, including local populations in decision-making processes—the UNESCO biosphere reserve model seems, ostensibly, to be a laudable model for humanely managing human relationships with the land.

Other actors in the creation and management of the MBR seem equally celebratory and respectful of local tradition and agency. CONAP, the Guatemalan government agency tasked with running the MBR, stresses the importance of the cultural relics in Peten. “The territory occupied by the Maya Biosphere Reserve contains vestiges of ancient Mayan culture, which represent some of the ‘elements of conservation’ in this Plan. We have now discovered more than 175 ancient Mayan cities, which are a part of our cultural patrimony.” (CONAP 2001) Here, CONAP asserts, conservation refers not just to the tropical forest, but to the Maya way of life. In its *Plan Maestro de la Reserva de la Biosfera Maya 2001-2006*, CONAP repeatedly asserts the importance of local participation and acceptance. CONAP admits that initially, the MBR was not

accepted by local communities, but suggests that “today the level of support and participation from Petenero and indigenous communities is increasing.” The document lists three objectives of the MBR, one of which is to “manage and use sustainably the natural resources and cultural patrimony through the participation and support of the community.” Later, CONAP refers specifically to the spiritual value of nature among some local populations: “As such, it values the spiritual character of nature and the importance that this has for the Itza and Q’eqchi’ communities.” (CONAP 2001) Other international actors largely follow the same model. The Nature Conservancy—one of the three American NGOs responsible for helping to manage the MBR—celebrates indigenous land use practices on their website, suggesting that they are “focused on traditional economic activities that are forest-friendly and have not changed substantially from practices they have successfully employed in the area for thousands of years.” Like UNESCO, CONAP and the Nature Conservancy say all the right things about the importance of local participation and indigenous knowledge in the management of the MBR.

Still, a closer reading of these documents reveals perhaps a hint of ambivalence about the importance of local participation: UNESCO, for example, states that “People constitute an essential component of the landscape and their activities are fundamental for its long-term conservation and compatible use. People and their activities are not excluded from a biosphere reserve; rather they are encouraged to participate in its management and this ensures a stronger social acceptance of conservation activities.” (UNESCO 1984) Interestingly, after seemingly celebrating traditional patterns of use, UNESCO is here suggesting that local participation is valuable because it encourages “social acceptance” of conservation, not because local populations have skills and expertise that could help conserve their land. The rest of the document is equally difficult to interpret—at times boastful about its inclusion of local people, at

other times dismissive of these populations, at times exclusively focused on other, perhaps more important, functions of biosphere reserves. The scientific value of biosphere reserves is stressed throughout. They are described as “centres of endemism and of genetic richness or unique natural features of exceptional scientific interest,” which can be useful in developing “new pharmaceuticals, industrial chemicals, building materials, food sources, pest control agents, and other products to improve human well-being.” (UNESCO 1984) Science education and training are central to this mission, and are aimed at “scientists, resource managers, protected area administrators, visitors, and local people.” Co-operation in decision-making processes, too, is important. These processes involve “biosphere reserve administrators, natural and social scientists, resource managers, environmental and development interests, government decision-makers, and local people.” The fact that local people are listed last perhaps foretells the reality of the implementation and management of the MBR in Guatemala.

Other UNESCO documents reveal the financial incentives for adopting the biosphere reserve model, suggesting that Guatemala’s decision to adhere to the model might not have been entirely voluntary, nor was it necessarily based on the model’s merit. UNESCO’s *Guiding Principles for Projects on Biosphere Reserves*, a document intended to help countries adopt and adhere to UNESCO’s strict standards for official recognition as a biosphere reserve, notes that “Many biosphere reserve authorities, and especially those in developing countries and in transition countries...do not have the capacity nor the resources to enable them to meet this global mandate. Countries and biosphere reserve authorities are therefore encouraged to seek funding in the form of projects and/or endowment funds from appropriate donor countries, multilateral funding sources (such as UNDP, GEF), regional development banks or agencies and, in certain cases, the private sector.” (UNESCO 2002) Later, in defining UNESCO’s role in the

process, the document states that UNESCO provides “financial resources” and can “help to identify suitable funding sources.” They can also “grant seed funds to aid countries and groups of countries in elaborating projects and/or securing appropriate counterpart contributions.” The rest of the document repeatedly encourages countries to abide by UNESCO standards and take advantage of the resources that they offer. To summarize, countries can get money from UNESCO if they adhere to their conservation standards. Further, the biosphere reserve model—by virtue of its association with the UN—serves to instill confidence in countries like the US that Guatemala is taking conservation seriously, allowing them the opportunity to garner even more financial support.

A critical look at UNESCO’s biosphere reserve model yields mixed results. Rhetorically, the model is sound, for the most part. It emphasizes local participation and agency, celebrates the importance of indigenous knowledge, and prioritizes the livelihoods of local populations. Still, given the strictness of the model and the financial incentives for participation, there are certainly reasons to be suspicious of its ability to grant agency and decision-making authority to local populations. The experiences of local communities in the Maya Biosphere Reserve overwhelmingly confirm this suspicion.

### **Local Participation and Exclusion in the Maya Biosphere Reserve**

*“This is the Maya Biosphere Reserve, we’re Maya, what’s the problem?”*  
- *Q’eqchi leader (Grandia 2012)*

To understand the reality of the MBR’s implementation—and the degree to which it conforms to its creators’ rhetoric—we must first ground ourselves in the historical context. The history of Guatemala’s relationship with its land—particularly in the Peten region—is largely

defined by foreign interference, exploitative extraction, and reactionary land use policy. The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the United Fruit Company (UFC) yield increasing political power in the country—with the support of military dictator Jorge Ubico. A group of Guatemalan nationalists overthrew Ubico in 1944, in part because of his corrupt alliance with the UFC, beginning a 10-year period of democratic and agrarian reform. Starting in 1953, newly-elected president Jacobo Arbenz Guzman began redistributing underutilized land—some of which was expropriated from the UFC—to peasant and indigenous populations for the purpose of agriculture (Grandia 2012). Peten became “the main supplier of government lands for poor, landless peasant and indigenous populations.” (Gomez & Mendez 2007) As a result, over the next few decades, Peten’s population increased from 25,000 to 730,000 (Sundberg 2006).

Meanwhile, as Peten’s population exploded, the ecological, economic and social health of the region suffered. In 1959, the United States—which just five years earlier had orchestrated a military coup, overthrowing Arbenz in an effort to protect the capital interests of the UFC and control the threat of global communism—once again took advantage of the Monroe Doctrine to meddle in Guatemalan affairs. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) helped create the Enterprise for the Promotion and Development of El Peten (FYDEP) to integrate the region economically and culturally and promote economic development. (Gomez & Mendez 2007). Soon after, FYDEP began the process of redistributing nearly 2 million hectares of land in Peten to various stakeholders, often giving preference to upper-class mestizo populations and both foreign and domestic businesses. What followed was a 30-year power struggle between FYDEP, private chicle, timber and oil companies, illegal loggers, subsistence farmers, and peasant and indigenous populations (Gomez & Mendez 2007). These peasant and indigenous groups, who had been sent to Peten by the Guatemalan government years

earlier, were once again at the mercy of a Guatemalan political and economic order stained with American interference.

Their prospects for political agency did not improve during the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even as a major transition took place in the management of Peten's tropical forest. By the 1980s, these northern Guatemalan forests were clearly under stress, bearing the burden of a booming population, competition among several actors vying for power, and a limited number of resources (Gomez & Mendez 2007). International conservation organizations were taking notice, and they were beginning to exert influence by calling for more effective land conservation in Peten. In the face of mounting international pressure, the Guatemalan government responded in 1989 by dissolving FYDEP—rendered almost entirely ineffective by this point—and creating the *Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas* (CONAP). At the same time, the government officially established the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR) in northern Peten, a 1.6 million hectare patch of biologically-rich tropical forest, to be conserved for perpetuity (IDEADS 2000).

Guatemala's embrace of the biosphere reserve model made it subject to a leadership structure led, at least ostensibly, by CONAP, influenced heavily by USAID, and defined from the get-go by UNESCO. On its own, USAID spent an estimated \$40 million in Peten between 1990 and 2004. (Gomez & Mendez 2007) Most of this money was channeled through CI, CARE, and TNC—USAID's three main NGO partners in the MBR project—to carry out their conservation agenda. A whole team of other international actors got involved, as well, each with money to spend and influence to exert. Starting in 1998, the IDB supplied a \$22 million loan to the Guatemalan government to fund the Sustainable Development Program for Peten (CCAD-RUTA). German conservation organization KFW spent nearly \$15 million that same year to

create the Conservation of the Peten Tropical Forest Program (PROSELVA) in conjunction with the Guatemalan government. In total, an estimated \$90 million was spent by international actors in the MBR between 1989 and 2003 (Gomez & Mendez 2007).

None of this may seem ill-intentioned. Still, it is more revealing, and takes on more significance, when considering just how dictatorial the MBR management process was from the outset, and just how quickly the MBR leadership structure deviated from their rhetorical support for local agency and culture. Juanita Sundberg (2006) has effectively exposed some of these contradictions in her writing about the topic. As Sundberg explains, during the formation of the MBR, CONAP's first executive secretary said: "Our first job in Peten will be to make our presence felt. Once we have laid down precedents for a strict protection of the nuclear zones, then we can negotiate with interested parties for a limited exploitation of the secondary areas." Another CONAP official reflected that "the approach was to impose and enforce the law," and that the leadership was "driven by a TNC [The Nature Conservancy] vision: this is a park and we are going to enforce the law." (Sundberg 2006). When Sundberg asked the Guatemalan director of a US-based NGO about local participation, the director responded:

*The worst obstacle of all are the people themselves, the communities don't want to do it. After thirty years of nondeclared war, people's psychology is affected; they make accusations like: "Are you a communist? Are you a guerrillero?" This defines the socioeconomic profile of Guatemala today. We are a country scarred by a nondeclared war. People have come to manipulate the Peace Accords; they think, "now, the government can't do anything to me, the military can't do anything to me." (Sundberg 2006)*

Another CONAP official expressed similar sentiments about the difficulties of local participation: "Because people don't know how to read and write, so how are we going to involve them? They are thinking principally about making sure they have food for the following

day.” (Sundberg 2006) Sundberg’s interviews and analysis shed light on the mindset of MBR leadership—that regulations must be enforced in a strict and non-negotiable way because local communities are unwilling and unable to participate.

This local population, of course, is not simply a monolithic mass of like-minded primitive forest dwellers, as these troubling remarks might suggest. Rather, it’s a mix of several different ethnic and cultural identities, each with distinct values, land use strategies, and reasons for being there. The oldest of these communities identify themselves as *Petenero* communities, most of which settled in the area in the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries for the extraction of chicle, timber, allspice, and xate palm (Gomez & Mendez 2007). The Q’eqchi Maya, meanwhile, represent more than half of Peten’s population and a significant portion of the Maya Biosphere Reserve’s. The Q’eqchi people—often termed the “gringos” of the Mayan world for their impressive territorial expansion—migrated to the region throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly during the 1980s, primarily in search of land of work, and an escape from oppression. The third major demographic group in the Maya Biosphere Reserve are the *Ladinos*, peasants of both indigenous and Spanish ancestry who, like the Q’eqchi, have settled in the region over the last few decades in search of work (Carr 2004).

The majority of these residents were not even aware of the creation of the MBR, a testament to the exclusionary decision-making processes that characterized its implementation. Many local communities only learned about the MBR when park officials arrived in their communities to reprimand them for their traditional subsistence methods, now illegal under MBR regulations (Sundberg 2005). When these communities did learn about the MBR, they reacted strongly to the exclusionary nature of the project and the threat it posed to their livelihoods. Liza Grandia (2012) describes one particularly violent reaction:

*March 31, 1997. Days before Conservation International's Guatemala program, ProPeten, was to inaugurate a new biological station in Laguna del Tigre National Park in the northwestern corner of the 1.6 million-hectare Maya Biosphere Reserve, sixty armed men in four motorized canoes arrived simultaneously from different sites on the Rio San Pedro. They burned the station to the ground and held thirteen workers hostage for two days. (Grandia 2012)*

Juanita Sundberg describes similar incidents, in which local communities responded to MBR regulations by “burning down several CONAP checkpoints in 1991 and 1993. (Sundberg 2005)

Ismael Ponciano (1998) alludes to violent encounters in El Naranjo and El Cruce de Dos Aguadas, in which “both communities reacted violently against the forest guards of CONAP, going so far as to expel them from their communities in 1990 and 1991, respectively...

Government authorities could not regain control of the region immediately after the incident, and those responsible were not captured.” CONAP authority in this area was not restored until 1995, when “a new guardpost was installed in EL Cruce de Dos Aguadas, with the protection of the Guatemalan Army.” (Ponciano 1998) These were not isolated incidents, however. The early years of the MBR were marked by disorder and discontent. “Despite the army’s strong presence, the government seemed to be unable to face any of these problems, which increased societal demands in terms of access to land and attention to the region. The discontent resulted in roadblocks, public demonstrations, and takeovers of oil refineries (Mendez & Gomez 2007).

Meanwhile, local communities were organizing in an attempt to gain access to the land. In 1995, a group of community leaders formed the Consultative Council of Forest Communities of Peten (CONCOFOP) in coordination with the Union of Chicle Tappers and Wood Workers (SUCHILMA). Upon gaining legal recognition, CONCOFOP changed its name to the Association of Forest Communities of Peten (ACOFOP). The organization was originally composed of 22 organizations from 30 communities residing within the MBR. “The organization’s primary strategic goal is to promote the socioeconomic development of forest

communities through the sustainable use of the forest. This objective is carried out through the organization's two main divisions: Community Development, which attends to strengthening social and human capital and advocacy work; and Product Promotion, in charge of the work related to forest management and biodiversity.” (Gomez & Mendez 2007) ACOFOP quickly became a critical actor in asserting the agency of local communities and demanding access to land.

Having implemented a foreign conservation model through predominantly foreign actors and decision-makers, and now facing backlash from local communities and ACOFOP, the MBR and its leadership structure was forced to placate the dissenters by granting them some agency in the form of community forest concessions. To be clear, this was not originally part of the plan in the MBR, but was rather a reactionary solution to local outrage and community organization. In listing reasons for the creation of community forest concessions, one report mentions “ungovernability and especially conflicts with peasant communities” and “growing pressure from organized communities fighting for land tenure and access to forest concessions.” (Gomez & Mendez 2007) Later, the report mentions that MBR leadership was not comfortable granting concessions to industrial loggers, and therefore saw community forest concessions as “a ‘lesser evil’ for conservation interests.” For CONAP, USAID and the rest of the leadership structure, these concessions were less than ideal, as there were “serious doubts about the communities’ ability to manage a forest.” Still, the concessions were considered “the only alternative to industrial loggers.” (Gomez & Mendez 2007)

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the community forest concession plan was put in motion. Since then, almost 500,000 hectares of MBR territory—out of a total of 2,112,940 hectares—have been designated for community management. “Concessions are granted for 25 years and

contracts are renewable; they permit the rational use of timber, the extraction of non-timber products such as xate palm leaf and chicle, and the development of tourism. However land remains property of the state.” (Gomez & Mendez 2007) Throughout the process of negotiating access—and determining which communities are entitled to access—ACOFOP acted on behalf of the local communities, differentiating between “more advanced” groups and “less developed” groups. More advanced groups—like the *Petenero* communities—are those that are deemed better-equipped to responsibly manage the land. They typically “engage in livelihood strategies closely related to forest management,” “have made significant achievement in developing their institutional arrangements and managing their production,” and have greater “internal cohesion and rotation of leadership.” (Gomez & Mendez 2007) These groups now manage about 70% of the community forest concessions that have been granted, and are typically given access to the areas with the most biodiversity. Less developed groups, on the other hand, many of which are migrant peasant communities, “show little knowledge of forest management” and deploy livelihood strategies that “still depend, for the most part, on subsistence agriculture.” Overall, community forest concessions represent an ostensible victory for local populations.

A closer analysis, however, reveals that community forest concessions are perhaps not as participatory and inclusive as they would seem. When CONAP—under pressure from ACOFOP and others—established the regulations that governed the community forest concession plan, they mandated that any community granted a forest concession must work directly with an NGO to “ensure observance of forest management regulations.” The intention was for NGOs to provide technical assistance and impart knowledge and resources for effective forest management. The reality, however, was far more dictatorial. The relationship between concession-holding communities and their NGO counterparts was “top-down” and

“paternalistic” and didn’t allow “communities to develop and use skills for integrated forest management, administration, and enterprise management.” (Gomez & Mendez 2007) The NGOs—many of which were international—managed and administered all concession funds. Additionally, “NGOs also controlled the commercialization of wood, turning into intermediaries for the commercialization and sale of services.” Communities were often required to sign exclusivity agreements with NGOs in order to continue receiving technical support and funding, increasing their dependence. This initial phase of community forest concessions offered only minimal, at best, decision-making authority to local communities. Originally conceived as a way to appease the locals and quell protest, the community concessions model instead inspired further outrage and contention.

Once again, ACOFOP stepped up on behalf of its member organizations, managing to “get the concession regulations changed so that communities could operate without this style of accompaniment.” (Gomez & Mendez 2007) In 2001, CONAP and USAID began channeling funding through Chemonics International’s BIOFOR Project, rather than through international NGOs. This new strategy was aimed at strengthening the business capacity of concession-holding communities by reducing subsidies, allowing opportunities for business management, and reducing the role of NGOs in the management of concessions. Still, control of funding remained in the hands of a foreign actor.

While these official assistance models have largely stuck to the MBR’s script in terms of offering limited agency to local communities, ACOFOP and other organizations have offered more informal, and far more inclusive, forms of assistance throughout the existence of community forest concessions. ACOFOP, itself, receives significant funding from international donors—including the Ford Foundation, the German Development Service, and the Swiss

Cooperation Agency—which it distributes to member communities and local NGOs. These organizations serve as “accompanying organizations,” which embody “a more flexible type of cooperation, more horizontal and closer to populations and their social processes.” This community assistance model is “committed to local actors learning,” “avoids creating dependence on the outside,” and “invests in trusting relationships with local actors.” (Gomez & Mendez 2007).

This informal assistance—and its inclusive and participatory nature—is largely responsible for the relative success of community forest concessions, generally. “So far, the positive social and environmental effects from community management have been significant: a reduced impact from forest fires, the end of illegal logging and fewer new illegal settlements.” As of 2005, more than two-thirds of the land allocated for community forest concessions had been designated “sustainably managed forest” according to the Forest Stewardship Council’s SmartWood Seal. ACOFOP also estimates that about 100,000 jobs are created annually through the forest concessions plan, and that these jobs pay higher wages than the Guatemalan average (Gomez & Mendez 2007).

This apparent victory, however, belies the reality of the MBR’s creation and management, which—despite suggesting otherwise rhetorically—can best be described as exclusive, internationally-imposed, and neglectful of local populations.

### **Ecotourism and Future Prospects for Local Agency**

*“Tourism as a strategy for socioeconomic development carries great risks with regard to whether the communities will truly benefit, especially the poorest ones.”*  
- ACOFOP

While ACOFOP's demands for local agency and decision-making authority have been met with marginal success—at least in the case of community forest concessions—the threat of internationally-imposed, top-down leadership processes in the management of the MBR remains. One such threat is the Mirador Basin Project (MBP), a proposal developed by the Foundation for Anthropological Research and Environmental Studies (FARES) and the Global Heritage Fund (GHF)—both US-based organizations. The MBP seeks to expand the Mirador Basin Park by protecting an additional 2,000 square kilometers of land within the MBR, including parts of the Mirador-Rio Azul National Park and the Naachtun-Dos Lagunas Biotope, as well as land from six community forest concessions (Gomez & Mendez 2007). The proposal would effectively put an end to all economic activity within these forest concessions, forcing the local residents to abandon the livelihood practices that the MBR had imposed, and submit to the regulations of another internationally-controlled project. According to the MBP proposal, illegal logging and the looting of archaeological sites threaten the biodiversity and the Mayan ruins in the region. Their plan would impose complete protection of the land and would utilize stricter enforcement mechanisms (Gomez & Mendez 2007).

At least initially, the project gained significant momentum. In 2002, the MBP successfully lobbied then-President Portillo to sign government accord 129-2002, which labeled the reserve as a *Special Archaeological Zone*, paving the way for the MBP's implementation. ACOFOP responded by filing a claim in court on behalf of the affected community concessions. The Guatemalan Center for Environmental and Social Legal Action (CALAS) filed a similar claim the following year, forcing governmental accord to be suspended, and eventually repealed in 2005. According to some, the MBP has been plagued by the same exclusionary decision-making processes that defined the MBR's implementation. "It has been a top-down initiative;

there has been no consultation with community concessionaires and other residents in the area or their organizations.” (Gomez & Mendez 2007) The MBP “has not sought any contact with the affected concessions or ACOFOP.” And while the proposal claims to accommodate local populations by including them in its ecotourism plans, “tourism as a strategy for socioeconomic development carries great risks with regard to whether the communities will truly benefit, especially the poorest ones.” (Gomez & Mendez 2007)

Aside from an apparent disregard for local communities, the MBP’s assumption that local communities are not doing enough to protect archaeological sites might, as it turns out, be flawed. According to a 2004 study commissioned by USAID: “It was evident from our observations that the concessions are making good faith efforts to protect the archaeological sites from damage resulting from logging operations and are attempting to adhere to the mitigation measures established in the planning and environmental impact documents, but their capacity is limited.” (Kunen and Roney 2004) The study recommends further training in cultural resource protection in order to increase that capacity.

Despite excluding local communities—some of which are of Mayan descent—from decision-making processes and underestimating their ability to preserve cultural relics, the MBP is not shy about celebrating the ancient Maya. On the MBP website, the project’s tagline is “the cradle of Maya civilization.” They describe the Mirador Basin as the site of “the first state society in the Maya lowlands.” The website also celebrates the area’s “unique architectural forms, construction techniques, and extraordinary architectural art.” The Global Heritage Fund meanwhile, states: “Mirador’s priceless ancient cities and monuments of the Preclassic Maya period are the most spectacular and unique in Central America.” The whole project, it seems, is an attempt to celebrate Mayan cultural patrimony through the protection of archaeological

sites—all with the intention of boosting ecotourism in the region. Unfortunately, any Maya descendants residing in the area don't have a say in how their cultural patrimony is preserved, and might, in fact, have their livelihoods uprooted by the efforts of outsiders to honor their ancestors' culture.

The idea of celebrating the Maya to promote ecotourism is certainly not new. In fact, some scholars have argued that the creation of the MBR, itself, was primarily an ecotourism project, rather than a conservation project. “The creation of the MBR in 1990 was more a product of a unique opportunity—the proposal of the “Ruta Maya” tourism project and paving of 200 km of highway between Cadenas and Flores, with financing from the German government—than part of a clear-cut environmental policy of then President Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arevalo.” (Ponciano 2012) While the construction of the highway was met with resistance, the “Ruta Maya” concept quickly gained traction. In 1989, a special edition of *National Geographic* “called for an integrated road and tourist attraction network that would highlight the cultures, ecosystems, and archaeological sites of the region.” The Ruta Maya, *National Geographic* argued, “would make a significant contribution to conservation and development in the region.” (Ponciano 2012) A year later, the MBR—the *Maya* Biosphere Reserve—was created. The descendants of the Maya, though, were nowhere to be found in creation and implementation of the plan.

The irony couldn't be more obvious. What they are celebrating, it would seem, are the customs of the ancient Maya—a much more convenient target, given the fact that the ancient Maya are not present to demand agency and assert their rights. The descendants of the Maya, on the other hand—who, like their ancestors, have been mass-murdered, manipulated, and displaced time and time again—are not being celebrated. The ancient Maya represent pristineness, the

foreign gaze, ecotourism, rhetorical poignancy; the Maya's descendants represent real communities struggling to assert agency, make decisions about their lives, and challenge the imposition of conservation from the outside.

This pattern has continued in recent years. In 2008, then-Guatemalan president Alvaro Colom launched the *Cuatro Balam* initiative in an attempt to boost ecotourism in the region. The plan sought to increase MBR tourism to 1.5 million visitors per year—particularly to the Mayan archaeological sites Tikal and El Mirador—by building “a silent train with a panoramic view that would travel through the rainforest at a speed of 16 km an hour.” (IPS News 5/9/12) The initiative also included plans to create a University of Biodiversity, focused on the study of native species, as well as the Centre for Maya Studies, dedicated to research about the ancient Maya. Even the name of the project, like the Maya Biosphere Reserve, is celebratory of Mayan tradition. *B'alam* means “jaguar” in many Mayan languages, so *Cuatro Balam* can be translated as “four jaguars,” a reference to the four main figures of the ancient Maya holy text *Popol Vuh*, each of which is aligned with a cardinal direction. In 2012, with the election of incoming president Otto Perez Molina, *Cuatro Balam* was put on hold (IPS News 5/9/12) It's difficult to know whether this project would have followed the same precedent set by the MBR and the Mirador Basin Project—celebrate the ancient Maya for the sake of tourism, while ignoring the needs and input of their modern-day descendants—however, early indications were that *Cuatro Balam* would be a more inclusive project. One ACOFOP representative stated that there had been “a great deal of openness to dialogue with local communities, which was one of the greatest merits of *Cuatro Balam*.” Still, ACOFOP was proceeding with caution: “There was a great deal of talk about tourism development in El Mirador, the construction of infrastructure and promoting tourism, although our participation was rather cautious, because we were concerned

about whether economic development would directly benefit local communities.” (IPS News 5/29/12)

Meanwhile, international money and influence continues to pour into the Maya Biosphere Reserve. In 1998, the US government passed the Tropical Forest Conservation Act (TFCA), enabling “debt-for-nature” swaps. As USAID describes, the act offers “eligible developing countries options to relieve certain official debt owed the US Government while at the same time generating funds in local currency to support tropical forest conservation activities.” (USAID 2014) In describing the TFCA’s benefits, USAID once again touts the idea of local agency and participation, suggesting that debt-for-nature swaps can create “stronger civil society” by providing “grants to community and other non-governmental groups” to “build grass-roots capacity.” USAID also celebrates the fact that “resources that once went to the US Government for debt payment...are redirected to local organizations.” As of 2013, about \$223 million in debt payments had been forgiven through 19 TFCA projects. These agreements will generate an estimated \$326 million for tropical forest conservation initiatives.

As it turns out, the US government, with the help of the Nature Conservancy, made one of these debt-for-nature agreements with Guatemala in 2006. In the agreement, the US government forgave \$15 million in Guatemalan debt and the Nature Conservancy and Conservation International contributed \$1 million each, helping to generate a total of \$24.4 million for the conservation of Guatemala’s tropical forest—at the time the largest debt-for-nature swap in history. Guatemala’s usual debt payments, as the agreement mandates, are redirected to a conservation trust fund that is “managed by an oversight committee made up of the Conservancy and other participants in the deal.” While this agreement was made several years after the creation of the Maya Biosphere Reserve, it undoubtedly influences its present-day

management. It is also emblematic of MBR decision-making processes generally—bribe dependent countries to undertake conservation projects, insist that they will be granted local agency, put ultimate decision-making authority in the hands of international actors. In celebrating the historic deal, Conservation International CEO Peter Seligmann remarked: “This is how modern conservation works, with partnerships involving all stakeholders to protect crucial ecosystems that sustain life on Earth.” He continues, “We are proud to help the Guatemalan people conserve tropical forests essential to their well-being and the overall health of the planet.” (ENS 10/6/06) The local communities in the Maya Biosphere Reserve have heard this kind of empty rhetoric before.

For ACOFOP—and the local and indigenous communities that it represents—the question is always the same: how will it *really* affect us? Unfortunately, all that these communities can really do is wonder and speculate. Time and time again, they have found themselves at the mercy of foreign actors—their agency and autonomy stripped away. These actors claim to have local interests at heart. They say all the right things. They celebrate local heritage and ancestry. But the answer to the communities’ question is always the same, too. Their livelihoods will be questioned, manipulated, deemed illegal. Often times, they are displaced. They will not be consulted, or even told, about what is happening to their land. It’s a familiar story, but that doesn’t make it any less unjust.

It’s also a decidedly complex story—one that raises questions about a community’s right to make decisions about its own land, the importance of international resources and expertise in land conservation projects, and the perhaps questionable motives of these outside actors. These are difficult questions to answer. Ultimately, land needs to be preserved and local livelihoods and autonomy need to be protected. But to disaggregate land conservation from the sociopolitical

context is a nearly impossible task. And to conclude that the outsiders are concerned with conservation, while locals are concerned with food, would be an oversimplification. As geographer and anthropologist David Harvey pointed out, “all ecological projects (and arguments) are simultaneously political-economic projects (and arguments) and vice versa. Ecological arguments are never socially neutral any more than sociopolitical arguments are ecologically neutral.” (Harvey 1996) Harvey’s claim is a bold one, as it lays the groundwork for the not uncommon “conservation as 21<sup>st</sup>-century imperialism” trope. If imperialism is defined by outside actors subtly controlling and manipulating resources, disingenuously asserting that they are doing what is best for local populations, then to call the Maya Biosphere Reserve anything different would be a mistake.

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