

5-15-2003

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Mayan Biosphere Under Siege." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9089>

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Mayan Biosphere Under Siege

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: 2003-05-15

The Mayan Biosphere, a system of natural and cultural sites for which the government of Guatemala and a host of tourism-oriented businesses hold hopes of economic salvation, is in process of becoming a wasteland. The biosphere is the victim of forest fires burning out of control, looting of hardwoods and other treasures, clear-cutting, agriculture, cattle grazing, and drug-running. A government incapable or unwilling to intercede in the destruction rounds out the picture.

The fires started in March. Despite desperate calls from local residents and companies engaged in forest-related business, the government, besides declaring an emergency, reacted lethargically. The blazes quickly became a "crisis of grand proportions," in the words of the director of the Asociacion Gremial Forestal de Guatemala, Otto Becker. Becker blamed the government for having reduced funding for firefighting to the point that now, the authorities "are acting late, and in a very limited way, because of a lack of funds, equipment, and personnel."

President Alfonso Portillo had announced in mid-March, weeks before Becker made his remarks, that he had authorized about US\$1 million to fight the blazes, but with thousands of hectares charred, there was scant evidence that the money had been spent effectively, if at all. Fires raged out of control in Peten, Zacapa, Quiche, Alta Verapaz, Huehuetenango, Izabal, and elsewhere. About 25% of the fires were centered in protected areas. One such is the Laguna del Tigre, near the Mexican border, a premier site in the Mayan Biosphere, and one of the most important "lungs" of the hemisphere.

Somewhat tardily, Jose Lemus, coordinator of the Sistema de Prevencion y Control de Incendios Forestales (SIPECEF) told the press that his agency, together with the Coordinadora Nacional para la Reduccion de Desastres (CONRED), and the Comision Nacional de Areas Protegidas (CONAP) had mobilized all their resources toward controlling the conflagrations. Conred spokesperson Luz Emilia Gonzalez said that her agency had also taken steps to enlist international aid in the effort. This mobilization amounted to about 1,500 people fighting 37 different fires.

In the Parque Laguna del Tigre and in the multi-use zone of the Mayan Biosphere Reserve, soldiers and volunteers fought the flames. The fires spread through the archeological sites El Tzotz and El Peru, and the biological station Las Guacamayas. This last destroyed the last refuge of guacamayas (macaws) in the region. Lemus also speculated that the fires were deliberately set. "I don't know why these fires occur in protected areas, because these forests are watched over by the communities themselves," he said.

Luis Guerra of the Centro de Operaciones de Emergencia de Peten (COE), said that the Servicio de Proteccion de la Naturaleza de la Policia Nacional (SEPRONA) was investigating with an eye toward arresting responsible parties, because they were certain that the fires were set by human hands. Expressing other concerns, Carlos Albacete, director of the environmental non-governmental

organization Tropico Verde said, "The situation is so bad that CONAP is asking help from the environmental NGOs." The organization has been at the forefront of forest-protection efforts in Guatemala (see NotiCen, 2002-08-08). Albacete said these fires reflect the incompetence of these institutions and the government's lack of will to provide them with resources. "They deceive the public by sending US\$1 million, but as of last Monday, the responsible institutions had received nothing."

Explaining that once fires of this magnitude start, it is nearly impossible to stop them, Albacete went to the heart of the matter: "There are groups interested in destroying the national system of protected areas. If the authorities don't stop them, we should denounce the officials for incompetence." Albacete referred to unnamed groups who have sought changes in land-use regulations in the area, and who have burned the forests in the past for agriculture and cattle grazing.

In 1998 fires of this kind leapt their intended confines and consumed 363,475 hectares. Nearly 200,000 ha of the total was in the Laguna del Tigre and Sierra del Lacandon National Parks. In 1999, 374 of these fires destroyed 53,404 ha of forest. In 2001, there were 918 fires, consuming 22,884 ha. In 2002, 919 fires left 22,387 ha in ashes. Government investigations to date have laid the blame for most of this at the doors of the growers and grazers. To date this year, official sources have tallied 378 fires charring some 20,000 ha, of which 8,257 ha are in protected areas. Reporters and environmentalists flying over the burned out areas also noted that they had also been heavily illegally logged.

Albacete noted another observation: "Curiously, if you overlay satellite photos of the heat foci on the map of oil concessions, it turns out that there is a concentration of these red points over the [oil] leasing areas." These two areas total about 73,373 ha within the Biosfera Maya buffer zone, very close to the nuclear zone of the Sierra Lacondon. These are areas of low-growing flora and swampland, and the fires seemed to set the stage for easy access to the lease land. Albacete added that if these lands were already destroyed by fire, oil exploration would have an easier time of it in an anticipated land-use struggle with the environmentalists, since there is now no forest to protect.

The oil concessions constitute a separate threat to the biosphere, and are themselves the subject of intense controversy. The Ministry of Energy and Mines, on April 25, announced a public auction of two blocks of land for oil exploration. Both are within the buffer zone of the reserve, adjacent to Laguna del Tigre and Sierra Lacondon. Together, they cover about 15% of the reserve. The Ministry chose Earth Day to offer the leases. The fires will eventually burn themselves out, or be snuffed by the coming rains. But the greed that started them simply metastasizes. As the oil drillers suck the life from this vital planetary organ and the loggers carry it off piece by piece, others pluck it from the trees left standing.

Guacamayas, parrots, monkeys, lizards, snakes, and other species are trapped, drugged, and taken to cities for sale. The people who do this also set fires in order, for instance, to scare away adult birds so that they can safely take the chicks. Firefighters have found the skinned carcasses of reptiles. Their hides will turn up somewhere as boots and belts. Parrot thieves shot and wounded an agent of the Servicio de Proteccion a la Naturaleza when he came upon them in flagrante delicto, within Laguna del Tigre.

Once burned and looted, the land still yields profit as it is sold, illegally, to be turned into pasture for the grazing of cattle. The practice is growing within the Mayan Biosphere Reserve, and the government does not stop it. Between the remote towns of the far northern Peten, to the east of Laguna del Tigre, vast expanses, hundreds of square kilometers, of land can be seen to have been shaved and seeded for this use. Much of this begins with concessions granted by CONAP to the local communities with the understanding that the land still belongs to the state, that it cannot be sold or expanded, and that no new populations can share in its use. These stipulations are swiftly subverted.

Over the past three years invaders, some politically and financially powerful, have poured in, accompanied by armed employees (see NotiCen, 1997-04-17). They take or buy the lands from the concession holders, and expand them. They cut and harvest timber, let the land dry, and set it afire. Then come crops or cattle; then, the illegal sale of the land to new invaders. One of these concessions has now extended into the area designated as the biological reserve El Zotz, a presumably untouchable area of virgin forest administered by the Universidad de San Carlos. The extension has been burned to the ground. The protected area also serves the interests of traffickers in cocaine and smugglers of human beings.

The Peten is controlled by the cartel of Sayaxche, which flies shipments of cocaine into deep-jungle landing areas for further transport northward, with the help of ranchers, politicians, and other government officials, say reports.

In mid-March, three airplanes entered Guatemalan airspace from the south. One headed for Izabal, where it was apprehended and found to be carrying 1,025 kilograms of cocaine. The other two continued on to the Peten. They were not pursued due to the dense smoke in the area. Civilian aircraft discovered their wreckage two days later in Parque Laguna del Tigre. Laguna del Tigre has also recently become a route for the smuggling of northbound migrants. Local residents have told reporters that the human cargo is transported in trucks and buses along a road controlled by armed men and barricades. No police or officials of any kind have been seen in the area.

Finally responding to pressures brought about by the newspaper Prensa Libre, which originally chronicled these activities, CONAP executive director Noe Ventura convened an emergency meeting of its directors, the Public Ministry, the Defense Ministry, and Seprona. Ventura's agency has just 40 agents in the area, but he said that now they will be reinforced by army patrols. He also expects the Public Ministry to cooperate in prosecutions of individuals apprehended in the commission of any of these crimes.

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