

9-11-2008

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Recommended Citation

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<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9641>

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Mayan Megatourism Resurrected, Pitting Private Sector Against Narco-cattle Ranchers

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: 2008-09-11

A tourism project of astounding proportions, rising up out of the ashes of the grandiose but now defunct Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), has been proposed for the Peten, Guatemala's largest and most remote department (see NotiCen, 2008-07-03). President Alvaro Colom has proposed an archeological park extending some 22,500 sq km across this, Central America's largest, forested wilderness. The park would include both El Mirador, a giant ruins considered the cradle of the Mayan civilization, and Tikal, the gem of the Mayan Classic Period.

Some of this vast area has been raped, turned into cattle ranches, denuded of the forests that could not be seen for the trees whose value as illegally felled timber has spelled their doom. Some of it is pristine, still home to species extinct elsewhere. Colom has proposed an electric sightseeing train to take tourists through the jungle at 16 km/h and deposit them at these and other important archeological and biological sites. A new university specializing in studies relevant to the area is to be built as well. Colom has said this is to be a tourism project with mostly private financing and a target completion date of 2023. The train and the university are new wrinkles, but the idea of developing the area to tourism on a mammoth scale goes back years.

In 2001 the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) detailed a Mundo Maya tourism project incorporating southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras in a grand Mayan tourism scheme (see NotiCen, 2003-03-06). Included in it, within Guatemala, was the Mayan Biosphere Reserve, the same region covered by Cuatro Balam, as the new project is to be called. In 2006, the administration of former President Oscar Berger (2004-2008) began, with IDB money, the Proyecto de Desarrollo Sostenible de la Reserva de la Biosfera Maya. That same year, the government, together with the Asociacion Balam, the local affiliate of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), organized a negotiating roundtable to give a voice to local interests in the development process.

In May, a US\$5 million grant was announced for tourism development of the Cuenca Mirador. Donors are the Global Heritage Fund (GHF) and La Fundacion Patrimonio Cultural y Natural Maya (PACUNAM), a private-sector association composed of Central America's largest businesses Cementos Progreso, Banco Industrial, Pantaleon, Wal-Mart Centroamerica, Diasgro, Telgua, and City Bank. The two organizations are cooperating in a matching-funds arrangement. GHF is matching PACUNAM dollar for dollar. Apparently, the Mirador project was not intended to form part of Colom's megapark vision.

US archeologist Richard Hanson has been working in the Mirador-Rio Azul area for about 30 years and seemed surprised at the incorporation into Cuatro Balam. "It is a very ambitious plan," he said, "but that's good. You have to aim high to get good results." It was about this time in May that Colom presented the outlines of Cuatro Balam to a multisectorial group in Peten, composed of 32 institutions from civil society, government, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). At

that time, he called it Cuatro Esquinas but later found there was a park with that name in Peru, so the name was changed to give it a Mayan ring. He told the group the park would produce 9,000 permanent jobs, looking after somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 tourists a day, modestly 12 million a year. Colom gave the group a month to come up with a proposal for the park.

The rhetoric: community involvement and private-sector leadership

The project is unequivocally a private-sector initiative. Said Jeff Morgan, executive director of GHF, "Two of the most important prerequisites for successful long-term protection are community involvement and private-sector leadership. To save Mirador, the Multi-Sectorial Roundtable and PACUNAM are working together providing these two essential institutional frameworks. Another critical element for Mirador's long-term survival is jump-starting an economic engine from Archaeo-Tourism...." He went on to explain that income from the park would provide local income to replace "looting, poaching, trafficking, and logging as primary economic activities." A single month for these people to come up with a proposal seemed doubtful to some.

Influential columnist Mario Antonio Sandoval praised the audacity of the project in a *Prensa Libre* column, but concluded, "For the moment, the project constitutes the new toy of this government, as can be deduced from such optimistic declarations from President Colom. If the error of not taking into account all the legitimate interests of those involved is committed, Cuatro Balam will not only be a failure in itself, but it will maximize the destruction of the forest....One month to expect the final project seems to me too little time, which is problematic because of the risks. In these conditions, the one most interested in not starting something badly planned is the president. Let's hope a good idea is not ruined." By early August, ruin was on the horizon, at least for some of those involved.

El Mirador national park was, said a recent newspaper report, "at the point of the same destruction as other protected areas because the government has been unable to remove campesinos who have squatted in the sector." Two years ago, a group of 120 families from Quiche and Huehuetenango homesteaded the area. They are said to inhabit a five km strip 20 km from the heart of the ancient Mirador ruins and have cleared forty hectares and burned about 1,000 ha of forest for agriculture and homebuilding. The Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas (CONAP) had worked out a deal for a peaceful and voluntary relocation for the group, but it broke down. When the legal system is left to resolve issues like these, it sometimes takes years and often ends violently.

Development of El Mirador in an ecologically and socially responsible way is central to the overall plan. El Mirador is a grander and archaeologically more-important site than even Tikal, now Guatemala's most important archeological site and by far most commercially successful tourist venue. Mirador features the largest pyramid in the world, La Danta. Experts call El Mirador the Cradle of Maya Civilization. Taken as a whole, it is the oldest and largest Preclassic site in Mesoamerica. The cuenca, or basin, is surrounded by a karstic mountain range delimiting ancient cultural borders. The Preclassic cities at Mirador are larger and more numerous than Tikal, predating them by 800-1200 years.

GHF is promoting the area as a UNESCO World Heritage site. But the presence of the settlers places in question one of the tenets of the philosophy of the project, that a private-sector approach to

developing this ecologically sensitive but commercially valuable area would raise all local boats. In the case of these subsistence campesinos about to be evicted, such would not be the case. It also raises questions about the wisdom of the private-sector approach and about governability within the area. In an attempt to answer some of the questions, the environmental NGO Tropico Verde attempted to investigate the project and came up with some disturbing findings.

Tropico Verde director Carlos Albacete told NotiCen that one of the findings has to do with lawlessness in the area. Albacete noted that a video produced to tout Cuatro Balam, which is available for viewing on YouTube, shows a map that excludes the Parque Nacional Sierra del Lacandon and the Parque Nacional Laguna de Tigre. Without these areas, the project could not be anywhere near as big as the 22,500 sq km Colom claimed, but to include them would mean incorporating an entirely lawless region into which the state does not extend, where the forest is clear cut with impunity for cattle grazing, and where major drug smuggling routes abound. "With this perspective, the real possibilities of the project being profitable are minimal because it would be dangerous to visit the area, and if what they're looking for is conservation, then the most serious problem in the whole area is not being confronted, which is the loss of the forest to the narco-cattle ranchers," said Albacete.

Albacete said Tropico Verde first denounced the situation in 2006, and the organization has documentation showing that, in at least five cases, lands within the Laguna del Tigre park were illegally deeded to persons linked to narco-trafficking. In the Mirador area in the central zone of the Mayan Biosphere reserve, the group has documentary evidence of state lands taken over by drug traffickers that were subsequently robbed of their timber and turned to grazing. After Tropico Verde made its charges, authorities nullified the titles, but they did not act against the drug traffickers. "They don't mention that, to get the deeds issued, they had to bribe lawyers and officials or that in Laguna del Tigre so far 40 small planes used to transport cocaine from Colombia to Guatemala have been found," added Albacete. In view of these massive land grabs, Albacete finds the campesino evictions around El Mirador absurd, "cosmetic," because until this moment there is not a single one of these grand usurpers be they narco-cattle ranchers or just cattle ranchers who has faced indictment for usurping protected areas and attacking natural patrimony, both of which are crimes under Guatemalan law.

The Tropico Verde director also took issue with the notion that the roundtable introduces local voices to the planning. "The interesting thing is that after the first meeting Guatemalan society has been left totally aside, and WCS, the archeologists, and North American foundations that are promoting the matter are invited [to participate]," he said. "Just as happened in Berger's project, the local communities and other actors of Guatemalan society have only been consulted nominally." Albacete characterized the consultation process as a sham to provide an air of democracy to a process entirely determined by a few key players, "even when the decisions taken are going to affect many people and the Guatemalan natural environment."

The implications for the Cuatro Balam project are no less dire than are those for local residents, says Albacete. "This problem of the narco-cattle ranching is very serious and is leading this zone of Guatemala to a state of covert war in which groups of paramilitaries in the employ of the drug traffickers and organized crime control the area. In addition, the narcos have bought the military

officers, the politicians, the police, and others who are at the service of drug-trafficking interests. To establish a tourist project in this area without taking this problem into account is to make castles in the air, with little prospect of success beyond propaganda."

As a consequence of his work, Albacete and his wife Piedad Espinosa Albacete have been repeatedly threatened and victimized. He has been shot at and wounded. In January 2007, Amnesty International (AI) put out a fear-for-safety alert on their behalf. Soon after, Albacete left the country and is currently in exile in the US.

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