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Belize’s Chiquibul Forest Under Threat from Illegal Timber Loggers

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Drug traffickers and smugglers of wildlife and precious wood are financing the incursion of impoverished Guatemalan peasants into Belizean territory, a practice that is decimating the Chiquibul Forest in the western part of the country, environmental NGOs working on the Belize-Guatemala border say.

The intensity with which logging has occurred has led the Belizean NGO Friends for Conservation and Development (FCD) to regard the problem as “one of the most critical threats” to the area’s biodiversity, to the extent that illegal loggers could wipe out half of the forest by 2023.

Located in the Cayo District, the Chiquibul Forest covers an area of 176,999 hectares (437,376 acres) and comprises three protected areas: the Chiquibul National Park (the largest in Belize), the Chiquibul Forest Reserve, and the Caracol Archaeological Reserve. Biologists have identified 17 ecosystems within the area. The western side of the forest lies along Belize’s border with Guatemala.

Species found in the area include keel-billed motmots (a bird species found in Central America and Southern Mexico), kinkajous, jaguars, jaguarundis, king vultures, margays, ocelots, ocellated turkeys, Yucatan spider monkeys, and Baird’s tapirs. The biological diversity of the forest has yet to be fully explored.

In order to safeguard the Chiquibul and other areas rich in biodiversity, Belize’s Forest Act forbids timber logging without permits in protected areas as well as the export of wild animals and plant species. However, unauthorized logging and poaching by impoverished Guatemalan peasants has increased in recent years and has become one of the main sources of conflict between the two countries.

Forest crimes reported by the Belizean authorities include the unauthorized logging of cedar and mahogany trees, the export of protected tree species without appropriate permits, the unauthorized movement of logs across the border, the use of chainsaws without the necessary permits, poaching, looting, camping in protected areas, and carrying firearms.

On April 20, an incident in which a Guatemalan teenager was shot dead by Belizean troops in the Chiquibul National Park led to an escalation in tensions between Guatemala and Belize. The Belizean authorities has said they were investigating illegal land clearing in the Cebada area of the park when they came under fire and shot back in self-defense, later finding the body of 13-year-old Julio René Alvarado Ruano, presumably killed in the crossfire (NotiCen, May 12, 2016). The Guatemalan government, for its part, says the teenager, his father, and his 11-year-old brother were attacked as they planted crops in San José Las Flores, a town on the border between Guatemala’s department of Petén and Belize. A delegation sent by the Organization of American States (OAS) is investigating the incident (NotiCen, Jan. 15, 2009, April 15, 2010, March 15, 2012).
Damage to ecosystems

According to a 2011 FCD report, incursions into the Chiquibul forest are carried out by peasants searching for the leaves of the xate palm, an ornamental plant that is harvested and exported in Guatemala, as well as by illegal loggers who search for precious wood, usually cedar and mahogany.

Loggers hunt for trees of interest, then return at a later date to fell the trees, cut logs, and saw these into planks. The planks are left standing to dry in order to facilitate transportation, which is usually conducted using horses, the report says.

Depending on the presence and location of patrols, loggers can operate by day or by night, which makes law enforcement difficult. Illegally logged timber is usually transported to the villages of Monte Los Olivos, Las Flores de Chiquibul, Las Brisas de Chiquibul, Puertas del Cielo Chiquibul, Nueva Armenia, and San José Las Flores, in the department of Petén. Trucks then ferry the lumber to other parts of Guatemala, where it is sold locally or exported.

While peasants searching for xate palm leaves, known as xateros, carry machetes, illegal loggers usually carry guns and have often been seen carrying a personal supply of marijuana. The FCD estimates that at least 30 illegal loggers could be operating within the Chiquibul Forest on a daily basis.

The ecological impact of illegal logging, says the FCD report, includes damage to ecosystems and the depletion of wild animal species; damage to other tree species; the reduction of seed trees, which damages the forest’s regeneration ability; an increased risk of forest fires; the reduction of carbon stocks; an increase in soil erosion and sedimentation; and an increase in water pollution.

“In general, the Chiquibul Forest is becoming more and more impoverished, and the country is losing what is considered to be the most prized tropical forest. Regionally, the Maya Forest [where the Chiquibul Forest is located] is becoming more fragmented and the expansion of the human footprint is endangering the complex ecological processes that provide environmental services and goods such as water, wild animals and aesthetic values,” the report concludes.

Poverty and organized crime

Following the border incident in which Alvarado Ruano was killed on April 20, public opinion in Guatemala has been highly critical of the government’s failure to offer alternatives to illegal logging and poaching to the impoverished peasant communities on the border with Belize.

Settlements on the Belize-Guatemala border date back to 1959, when the Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes (1958-1963) military regime set up the Empresa Nacional de Fomento y Desarrollo Económico de Petén (FYDEP), a bureau that facilitated the relocation of impoverished peasants from the southern parts of the country to the northernmost department of Petén. The FYDEP was purportedly created to “develop and colonize” Petén, but over the years, these peasant communities ended up spilling across the border into Belizean territory, Byron Castellanos Romero explained during a press conference held on July 14 in Belize City. Castellanos is executive director of Asociación Balam, a Guatemalan NGO that seeks to protect the environment by offering impoverished communities alternative livelihoods.

“The main causes that promote the flux of people coming to Belize are poverty and organized crime,” Castellanos said during the press conference. “Organized crime finances these poor
communities for them to trespass the border and come to Belizean territory to extract natural resources. For many years, the government has forgotten about these populations. A 50-year problem cannot be easily solved.”

Castellanos said here is a “perverse alliance” between poverty and crime. “They finance people to come across the Belize border to take Belize’s resources illegally. The sad story is that the poor people are in jail and those who pay are in the cities. That is one thing we have to change, make those who finance pay for their crimes,” he added.

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