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## Central American Forests Face Threats Of Globalization

by LADB Staff

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The narrow land corridor connecting the northern and southern halves of the American continent has always played a crucial role as both a barrier to biological diffusion and a unique bioregion made up of diverse, species-rich ecosystems.

The UN Environmental Program's recently released report, Global Environmental Outlook 3 (GEO-3): State of the Environment and Policy Retrospective 1972-2002, says that Meso-America (defined as Central America and Mexico) had 73 million hectares of forested land in 2000, around 7.5% of the total forested area in Latin America and the Caribbean. While this is a fairly small percentage of the region's total forests, it holds a wealth of biological diversity and stands vulnerable to exploitation because of its key geopolitical location.

The GEO-3 report says the average rate of deforestation in Latin America is 0.48% annually, one of the highest in the world, but the rate in the Meso-American subregion is even higher at 1.2% per year. Of the 83.7 million ha of forest covering Central America and southern Mexico in 1990, 9.7 million ha were deforested between that year and 2000, according to the report. Now, Meso-America's remaining forests, covering 30.2% of total land area, are threatened by changes in land use, poor management, and political and economic exploitation.

Forest fires have also been a significant factor, especially as a result of seasonal droughts in recent years associated with the El Nino weather phenomenon. The GEO-3 report says that forest fires burned more than 2.5 million ha of land in Meso-America in 1998. Mangrove-forest depletion along the tropical coastlines of Central America is also high and has devastating effects on coastal ecosystems. The GEO-3 report mentions the shrimp-farming industry, particularly large in Honduras, as the biggest threat to mangrove forests.

The Guatemala-based environmental monitoring group Tropico Verde is bringing attention to the major threats facing Central American forests and the implication that forest loss has on the regional ecosystem. A Tropico Verde report, based on data from the UN, World Bank and World Resources Institute, says that Central America has nearly 4000 endemic species, most of these located in Panama, Guatemala, and Costa Rica.

The vast majority of threatened species in the region are located in Panama 1053 or 9% of all species found in the southernmost Central American country. Despite these statistics, Central America's total protected acreage is significantly higher than the 10% recommended by the World Wildlife Federation (WWF): 19% of Panama's land, 17% of Guatemala's land, and 14% of Costa Rica's land is under protection.

Carlos Albacete from Tropico Verde attributes this apparent irony to the poor design of protected areas the largest concentrations of species in the region are found outside protected areas and lack of political will to truly combat the threats to these areas. "The areas are protected only on paper," said Albacete. He added that the principal causes of forest degradation within these protected areas are hunting, logging, and agriculture.

### *Sustainable development: savior or agent of destruction?*

Despite good intentions, the politics of sustainable development actually contribute to regional forest destruction, according to Albacete. "The word sustainable has been manipulated to make everything within protected areas available for use," he said. For example, "certification [of mahogany] takes into account the number of new mahogany trees growing, but it does not take into account biodiversity." In other words, a species may be replaced as required by programs that certify forest products harvested under environmentally-sensitive forest management, but biodiversity may still be lost as forests are turned into monospecies farms.

The GEO-3 report notes that certification programs are under intense debate and criticized as restrictive by producer countries and trade groups. However, there is no mention of criticism from environmental groups like Albacete's. The report says that Guatemala is one of only four countries with tropical moist forest that has more than 100,000 ha of wood certified for sustainable forest management. Albacete also noted that economic benefits from wood and other natural-resource extraction are not guaranteed for local communities because of the unstable price of wood and the continuing growth of the communities.

### *Forests under attack from both north and south*

Currently, the Central American ecosystem is under threat from both the north, in the form of megadevelopment projects such as the Plan Puebla-Panama (PPP), and from the south, from more infrastructure projects and from the ongoing civil war in Colombia. A comparison of proposed PPP project locations and the region's most forested and biologically rich areas brings into question the plan's promise of sustainable development. Many of the projects are to be carried out near or within some of the region's most sensitive areas.

For example, three highways are planned that would cross Guatemala's largest protected area, the Mayan Biosphere. Additionally, hydroelectric projects are planned along the Usumacinta River, which runs along the northeastern border dividing Guatemala and Mexico. Numerous Mayan archeological sites could be inundated if the hydroprojects go ahead as proposed. Albacete says the jobs promised by PPP planners and supporters (including the US, Mexico, and Central American presidents, as well as the World Bank and other multilateral development organizations) will bring an influx of people to the region's most sensitive areas. Increased population in these locations will put a strain on water and forest resources and open up new areas to human settlement.

Although touted by local and international governments as a key sustainable-development alternative, regional tourism schemes also threaten to open up pristine areas. The Proyecto Mundo

Maya, promoted by regional tourism ministries, plans to develop the last remaining area in Guatemala that qualifies as a primary forest.

On the southern end of the isthmus, the Darien region of Panama, one of the most biologically rich tropical forests on earth, is in danger of being invaded by those fleeing increasing violence and human rights abuses in neighboring Colombia, as well as by drug and arms traffickers. Panama has more than 9,900 identified plant species, the second-highest number in Central America behind Costa Rica. These include 1,222 endemic species. According to the World Resources Institute, a plan to expand the Pan-American Highway through the region is the biggest threat, followed by logging and coca cultivation. US coca-eradication programs, most notably Plan Colombia, could cause Colombian coca growers to push further into the Darien jungle.

The March 2001 edition of *Foreign Policy in Focus* on the issue of coca eradication noted that "anti-narcotics offensives drive both growers and cocaine traffickers farther into the jungle, forcing them from roads and accessible lands." It pointed out that, while US-promoted coca-eradication programs in Latin American countries have been successful in decreasing coca production in certain areas, overall coca production has increased as growers merely shift cultivation.

Furthermore, although traditionally grown coca has been found to be one of the more ecologically friendly crops grown in Latin America, today "most cultivation is short-term and clandestine, rendering sustainable practices a poor investment." These threats to Central American forests are beginning to arouse strong protest among civil-society organizations and local communities throughout the region.

In the past year, numerous regional forums have been held to discuss these threats and ways to combat them. The most recent was the III Mesoamerican Forum held in Managua, Nicaragua, from July 16-18. Others have been held in Quetzaltenango and the Peten region of northern Guatemala, and in various locations in Mexico. Most of these forums have concluded by rejecting the Plan Puebla-Panama and other large-scale neoliberal development plans on the grounds that they exclude local participation, benefit foreign and corporate interests, and seriously threaten the rich environmental and cultural resources of local peoples. Albacete said that the preferable alternative is to seek the self-sustainability of local communities. This can be achieved by developing economies of scale, strengthening local participation in development schemes, and expanding value systems to include human and biological components.

To defend forests that already have official protection status, Albacete said consistent and strong government policies are needed, complemented by budgets sufficient to carry out those policies and to monitor infringements. "Civil society plays an important role in pushing and monitoring regional governments," said Albacete, "however, it is the responsibility of those governments to protect the region's forests."

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