

Strategies for Authenticity, Space, and Place in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Petén, Guatemala

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ABSTRACT

Conservation and development organizations abound in Latin America. However, few studies have examined how conservation projects are being articulated in discourses and practices at the local level. In this paper I present findings from fieldwork in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Petén, Guatemala, from February 1996 to March 1997, to explore how different groups are engaged in a discursive struggle for control over the Reserve and its natural resources. Conservation organizations began efforts to protect the Petén's remaining tropical forest in 1992; particular communities were represented as authentic forest dwellers and their livelihood activities were said to be appropriate to sustainable development and conservation goals. Other groups, however, are defined as inappropriate inhabitants. Using ethnographic field notes and experience, this paper analyzes how local people incorporate conservationist rhetoric and representations into their narrative strategies and practices. I conclude that this process represents a demand for rights to space, place, and livelihood in rapidly changing regional, national and global economic conditions.

INTRODUCTION

Conservation organizations are attracted to environmental 'hot spots' in Latin America.¹ Some protected areas attract more attention than others, either by virtue of their natural beauty or because the issues specific to the locale engender compelling narratives; Guatemala, Costa Rica, the Andes, and the Amazon Basin come to mind. The sheer number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) implementing state-supported nature reserves in Latin America begs our attention. With financial support from international donors, political backing from the state, and moral support from the scientific community, NGOs are playing an important role in managing nature and human-land relationships. Moreover, NGOs are capable of generating powerful discourses to explain environmental degradation and land use. In regions where NGOs are prevalent, local people from all socioeconomic groups necessarily interact with these discourses.

My interest in how the relationship between NGOs and local people transforms landscapes and identities in protected areas led me to conduct field work in the Maya Biosphere Reserve in northern Guatemala (Figure 1).² I was immediately struck by the appearance of conservation's new vocabulary in the many voices seeking to be heard in the Reserve. This led me to theorize that certain individuals are appropriating conservationist discourses into their own to achieve goals consistent with their interests.³ Drawing from ethnographic field notes, this paper illustrates how local people (re)present themselves and their relationship to nature in new ways, thereby articulating new identities to meet changing power structures and values.

THEORETICAL APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Many geographers have turned their attention to the activities of NGOs in Latin America, with a focus on socioeconomic impacts (Adams 1990; Bebbington 1996, 1997; Bebbington and Thiele 1993; Price 1994; Zimmerer 1993). However, few studies have examined how conservation projects are being articulated in the discourses and practices of daily life at the local level (see Zimmerer 1993, 1996).⁴ This micro-level approach is critical to understanding how local political ecologies are transformed through their relationships with international conservation organizations. [end p. 85]

In this paper, I draw from discourse analysis to examine how institutions constitute and articulate power through discourse, representation, and practice (Duncan and Ley 1993; Peet and Watts 1996; Yapa 1996). In this vein, I assert that NGOs in the Maya Biosphere Reserve have generated a set of powerful discourses to explain the causes of environmental degradation that privilege certain ways of thinking and explaining while silencing or marginalizing others.⁵



Figure 1. Guatemala.

According to William Cronon (1996:26), environmentalist discourses achieve power and moral authority because they "appeal to nature as a stable external source of non-human values against which human actions can be judged without much ambiguity." In constructing their narratives, conservationists draw from the natural and social sciences, which presuppose that their models of 'reality' are "neutral, unbiased, objective,

and value free" (Yapa 1996: 711). Indeed, in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, studies of the biophysical environment are generally treated as true representations of reality.⁶

Science is perceived as bias-free and wholly outside of the social, political, and economic realms of human existence. Consequently, those who have access to the knowledge seem also to possess the *truth* about the natural world and how humans should interact with it. Knowing the *truth* about a place grants the knower a certain amount of power in relationships with those who are not considered to have access to that knowledge (i.e., they have not been trained in Western ways of knowing).

Moreover, conservationists' *truths* seep into policy and planning, directly impacting the lives of local people. Ecology is thus used to back a "program of moral enlightenment" that promises to restore the "equilibrium between humans and nature" (Worster 1990: 2). Indeed, NGOs in the Maya Biosphere Reserve have assumed the moral authority to speak for nature by defining which human-land relationships are compatible with the region's ecology and which are not. Relationships considered harmonious with the environment are also made to appear natural and therefore authentic, thus implying that there exists an *essential* relationship between people, place, and practices.⁷

How, then, do local people interact with these truths, generated about them by others? Using ethnographic field methods, I examined the 'conservation encounter' between NGOs and local people in the Maya Biosphere Reserve.⁸ I observed interactions between NGOs and locals and conducted structured [end p. 86] and unstructured interviews with a diverse range of individuals, including NGO personnel and local people. I paid particular attention to the narratives people constructed in talking about the environment and conservation. I found that the discourse of conservation is not being used by all the Reserve's inhabitants. People's class, ethnicity, gender, and past experiences interact with their articulation of shifting identities. Those who have shown the greatest facility at co-opting this vocabulary are cultural intermediaries, people who have learned to articulate multiple cultural values and practices through their relationships with ethnographers, archaeologists, NGOs, and other foreigners working in the Petén.

This paper draws from a year of field research, divided into three case studies.⁹ The first two were located in San José, an indigenous village in the buffer zone of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. I focused on two local conservation organizations that have recently emerged in San José--the BioItza, created by male leaders, and the Itzaj Women's Medicinal Plants Group, formed by women. These local organizations actively solicit relationships with international NGOs, but attempt to maintain their autonomy. The third case study is located in San Miguel, a migrant settlement in the heart of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. San Miguel is home to the first community forestry concession, managed by the *Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza* (CATIE), a Costa Rican research institution.

THE MAYA BIOSPHERE RESERVE AND CHANGING LOCAL POLITICAL ECOLOGIES

In 1990, Vinicio Cerezo, Guatemala's first civilian president elected in 15 years, signed legislation creating the Maya Biosphere Reserve to protect 1.6 million hectares of tropical lowland forest in the northern department of Petén (CONAP 1996).¹⁰ Stretching over the southern reaches of the Yucatan's karst plateau, the Reserve's vegetation includes subtropical moist and semi-deciduous forests, wetlands and savannas. Important hardwoods include mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*), cedar (*Cedrela mexicana*), and *ceiba* (*Ceiba pentandra*). Species found in concentrated stands (often around Maya ruins) include: *ramon* or breadnut (*Brosimum alicastrum*), *pimienta gorda* or Allspice (*Pimenta dioica*), *copal* (*Protium copal*), and *chicozapote* (*Manilkara zapote*) (Reining and Heinzman 1992). Non-timber forest species highly valued on the international market include chicle latex from the chicozapote. Also important are *xate* palms (*Chamaedorea elegans* and *C. oblongata*), ornamentals used in floral arrangements in the United States and Europe (Reining and Heinzman 1992). Allspice is an important export to the United States.

In 1970, an estimated 70 to 80 percent of the Petén was covered in forest. By 1986, approximately 50 percent of that forest cover had been felled (Schwartz 1990). Most of the deforestation has occurred south of the 17th parallel, as the area to the north had been protected for controlled extractive activities, such as logging, chicle extraction, and harvesting of Allspice and xate palms.¹¹ The Petén's population expanded from about 25,000 in the early 1960s, to 120,000 in 1978, and to approximately 300,000 to 400,000 by the mid-1990s (Schwartz 1990; SEGEPLAN 1992). About half of the migrant population are *ladinos* from the Oriente region of Guatemala and another 20 percent are Q'eqchi' from Alta and Baja Verapaz (SEGEPLAN 1991) (Figure 2). Deforestation has been caused primarily by cattle ranching, farming, commercial logging, and oil exploration. Over 90 percent of recent deforestation has occurred within two kilometers of roads (Sader et al. 1994).¹²

The Reserve is administered by Guatemala's National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP 1993), which, in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), initiated a \$22 million project to promote sustainable development and the rational management of natural resources. The USAID's project is implemented through international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including Conservation International, the Nature Conservancy, and CARE International. The Petén has since become a mecca for NGOs--there are currently over 30 (SEGEPLAN 1996). Figure 3 shows the back of a tee-shirt illustrating a collaborative effort between various organizations.

The Reserve's creation led to a shift in regional power structures, bringing new actors to the northern Petén with the authority to enforce a legal framework that reflects a change in how nature is constructed and valued. Prior to these changes, the principal authority in the Petén was a military-led institution, the *Empresa Nacional de Fomento y Desarrollo de El Petén* or FYDEP (abolished in 1986).¹³ Municipal-level politics were dominated by *alcaldes* (or municipal mayors) along with local military commissioners. Both FYDEP and the municipalities [end p. 87] supervised land-use rights and regulated extractive activities like logging and chicle latex extraction (Schwartz 1990). Aside from this, however, they did not meddle with livelihood practices.

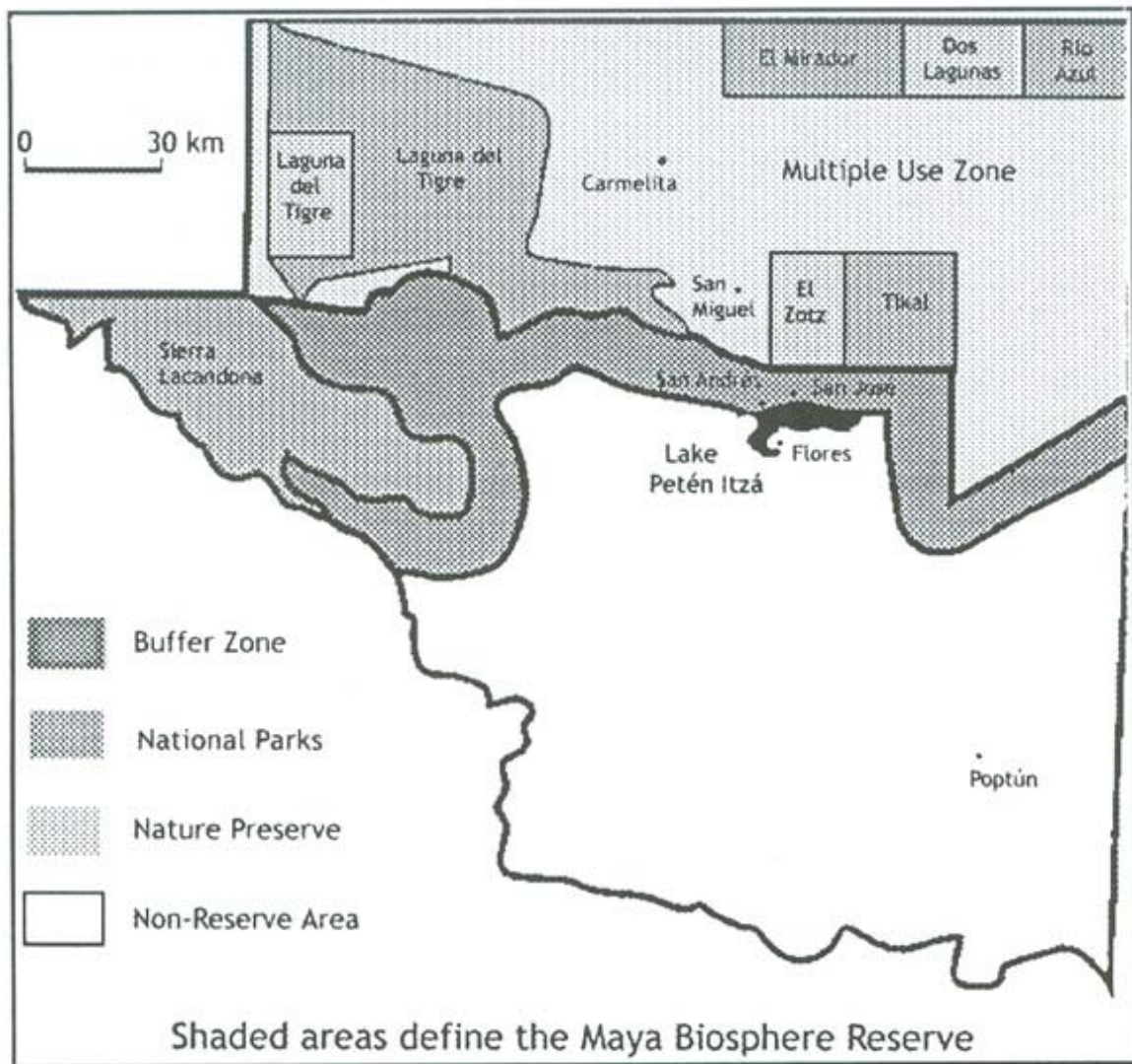


Figure 2. The Maya Biosphere Reserve, Petén, Guatemala



Figure 3. NGO Collaboration

The new legal framework delineating the Maya Biosphere Reserve, on the other hand, directly impacts and seeks to restructure local people's relationship to the environment.¹⁴ Many traditional activities became 'infractions' or 'crimes' under the new laws, including hunting, keeping certain animals as pets, and logging for domestic purposes; in certain zones, logging, gathering forest products, and slashburn agriculture are forbidden (CONAP 1996; SEGEPLAN 1992). Locals tend to be affected to a much greater degree than more powerful offenders. For instance, fieldwork conversations suggested that government officials and influential figures involved in illegal logging, trafficking in animals and drugs, and looting of archaeological sites go unprosecuted.

Although CONAP has principal authority in the region, frequently its power is eclipsed by NGOs operating under the Maya Biosphere Project. NGOs have no legal authority to enforce laws; rather, their authority derives from the increasing power of scientific and technological discourse to circumscribe how social groups *should* interact with nature. A host of experts has conducted studies of the Petén's biophysical environment, although basic socioeconomic data are generally regarded as a sufficient source of [end p. 88] knowledge about people's practices. For cultural and historical data, NGOs tend to rely on anthropologist Norman Schwartz's (1990) work, *Forest Society*, which seems to have acquired prescriptive status in the Petén.¹⁵

REPRESENTATIONS OF AUTHENTICITY IN NGO DISCOURSE

The principal characters within conservationist discourse as defined by NGOs are *Peteneros* and immigrants, to the exclusion of other groups also competing for control over the Reserve's resources such as ranchers, loggers, oil companies, drug traffickers, etc. Carmelita, Uaxacrun, San Andrés, and San José are Petenero

communities composed of farmers and forest collectors of chicle, xate, allspice, and timber. Since the first technical study conducted on the Maya Biosphere Reserve (Nations et al. 1989), NGOs have represented the forest collectors as appropriate forest dwellers for several reasons: they live within the forest and are said to be intimately familiar with it; they have a vested interest in maintaining the forest cover because it is essential to their livelihood; and it has a value to them that can be monetized: Petenero farmers are also considered appropriate because they don't engage in extensive agriculture and some have intensive agroforestry systems.

Examples of these representations are found in a local museum, the *Centro de Información de la Naturaleza, Cultura y Artesana de Petén* (CINCAP), located in Flores. The current exhibit, installed by CI/ProPetén, represents a chicle camp, creating the impression of a simple, low-impact life-style. Other practices represented as 'traditional' include harvesting non-timber forest products and making handicrafts. The museum also sells handicrafts made of local materials that are represented as *authentic* forest products made by *authentic* forest people. We do not learn that CI/ProPetén and a number of other NGOs funded workshops to teach people how to weave baskets and carve wooden figures (CI/ProPetén 1996).

I suggest that the museum's narrative and imagery 'indigenizes' or 'naturalizes' forest collectors; they become the indigenous group lacking in the Reserve. In the field, I heard NGO personnel lament the fact that the Reserve does not have an indigenous group, but they have found a way around this problem by creating a narrative complete with imagery that represents forest collectors as *authentic* forest dwellers with *authentic* forest practices. Moreover, this process transforms the Petén's forest into men's space, to the exclusion of the women that inhabit and interact with it. Apparently, women do not make appropriate conservation heroes.

Petenero farmers are represented as members of a wise traditional people. Indeed, Scott Atran (1993) argues that the Itzaj of San José sustain a symbiotic relationship with the forest's biodiversity that has its roots in pre-Columbian practices. In outlining this close relationship, Atran's studies imply that the Itzaj are a conservationist-oriented people who live in harmony with the forest. Another characteristic ascribed to Petenero farmers is that they have a non-commercial relationship with the forest. As Oscar, a CI/ProPetén staff member explained to me during field interviews, "the Petenero farmer has always planted primarily for subsistence, with a little extra thrown in to sell." These representations suggest that Petenero farmers exist outside of the local economy and market. Likewise, because some Peteneros maintain agro-forestry systems to supplement their diet and income, NGOs attempt to encourage this practice in others. For instance, CI/ProPetén has endorsed a new conservation hero, Don Juan, a native of San Andrés. Don Juan's extensive orchard garden, producing hundreds of pounds of fruit, is said to be exemplary of traditional practices. Hence, CI/ProPetén now employs Don Juan to promote agroforestry in other communities.¹⁶

So-called 'inappropriate' forest dwellers include immigrant farmers from the *Oriente* and Q'eqchi' from Alta and Baja Verapaz (see Figure 2). They are represented as inappropriate because they practice slash-and-burn cultivation, they are said to be unfamiliar with the forest, some engage in extensive agriculture for commercial purposes, and some wish to invest in cattle ranching. Although immigrants are ethnically and culturally diverse with distinct value systems, conservationist representations lump them together to create an image of destructive, desperate individuals who do not think about their future--they are said to have "no commitment to the land they work" (CARE 1996: 2). For instance, one conservationist explained to me during field interviews in 1996 that "the immigrants are not familiar with the ecosystems here in Petén, the soils are poor, and people just don't know how to manage their parcels." In addition, one NGO suggests that "the lush vegetation leads people to believe, mistakenly, that the land is extremely productive" (CARE 1996: 5).

To back these highly politicized positions, NGOs rely upon scientific studies conducted by their personnel stating that the soils in the Petén are infertile and that migrants are farming on fragile lands (Nations et al. 1989; Reining and Heinzman 1992; [end p. 89] SEGEPLAN 1992). These studies suggest that slash-and-

burn agriculture is incompatible with the tropical forest ecosystem. In articulating these positions, NGO personnel create '*truths*' about nature--those possessing the truth are thus able to speak for nature and determine how people should live with it.

NGO DISCOURSE AND BINARY REPRESENTATIONS

The ideologically charged representations described above create a set of binary oppositions between the appropriate and inappropriate, authentic-inauthentic, good-bad, and wise-ignorant inhabitants of the Maya Biosphere Reserve.¹⁷ However, NGO discourses establish the authenticity of appropriate forest dwellers by what they do not say. Excluded are three crucial elements that political ecologists suggest underlie the livelihood practices of social groups: cultural ecology, individual decision-making and socioeconomic and historical forces (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Bryant 1992; Hecht and Cockburn 1989; Peet and Watts 1996; Zimmerer 1994). In other words, I argue that Petenero relationships with the land emerge from these forces and their interaction in time and space, and are not essential characteristics absent in others.

To back my argument, I provide a few examples from my fieldwork experience. The first is from Carmelita, whose inhabitants are people of mixed ethnicities and histories who chose to settle in the region because the chicle industry pays well, as suggested by the local saying, "*chicleros no piden vuelta*" (chicleros don't ask for change). They are one of the wealthier social groups in Peténero society. Many come from *chiclera* and *cocinera* families of Mexican origin.¹⁸ Some are infamous looters of archaeological sites deep within the forest, while others plant marijuana during the off season (Paredes 1997).

It is difficult to envision chicleros as authentic, indigenized forest people when you consider that chicle extraction is an industry that has been linked to the global trade in commodities for well over a hundred years. Its collectors have fought for labor rights through a labor union established in 1948-1949, and they continue to demand a higher return for their labor and a better social security system (Schwartz 1990). Moreover, despite assurances to the contrary, the chicle industry causes changes in the forest landscape. A certain percentage of trees die each season and there are hundreds of chicle camps and paths throughout the forest. Finally, during the height of the chicle industry, hundreds of hectares were cleared for corn cultivation to feed chicleros (Dugelby 1995; Paredes 1997; Schufeldt 1950; Schwartz 1990).

The next example draws from my 1996 fieldwork with Petenero farmers, who historically have practiced slash-and-burn cultivation growing corn, beans, and other Mesoamerican crops in plots called *milpas*. Until the 1970s, these farmers had the advantage of large areas for crop rotation due to low population densities and usufruct land rights (Schwartz 1990). Because the Petén's inhabitants have suffered from poor access to outside markets, these crops were grown to meet family needs and to supply the small urban market in Flores and San Benito. I found that those individuals who continue to plant milpas use techniques that are not so different from immigrant practices--with one principal exception: immigrants tend to clear much larger areas to plant because they intend to sell to middlemen. Road improvements and better transportation systems now connect the Petén to Guatemala's national market.

Finally, those Peteneros with agroforestry systems are individuals who continue a practice that was appropriate in former times. Since times have changed, however, most have discontinued this practice for a variety of reasons. Many lost their land when the military reorganized the land-tenure system in the Petén between 1966 and 1974 (Schwartz 1990). Some moved to towns so that their children could attend school or because they feared the violence in the mid-1980s. Moreover, some lost their trees to the mysterious rising of Lake Petén-Itza, which drowned everything they had planted around their lakeshore homes. Others have dedicated their time to non-agricultural occupations. Still others have found that local demand has been filled by produce from other parts of the country. Those who continue to expand their orchard gardens are individuals that enjoy this occupation--"*le gusta sembrar*" (s/he likes to plant), as they say.

Many immigrants told me that they chose not to adopt these practices on an intensive basis because, according to their calculations, the benefits do not outweigh the costs in terms of time, transportation, and sales to middlemen. Nonetheless, during field work in 1996, I heard NGO personnel describe these individuals as lazy, ignorant, and incapable of thinking ahead. Others have said that this attitude is inherent to their culture. An extension agent told me that immigrants who did not adopt his project's orchard-planting practices "do not have a culture of planting trees." In this case, it was more an issue of [end p. 90] aesthetics and technique than cultural behavior. I found that many immigrants do have small-scale orchard gardens around their residences and even in their milpas, but these were not planted in straight lines as was desired by the NGO (Figure 4). Nor were they intensive, for the marketing reasons just mentioned. Thus, the extension agent did not recognize them as authentic or legitimate orchard gardens.



Figure 4. Tree Culture (Photo by the author).

In sum, the culture and practices of Petenero forest collectors and farmers emerged in specific social, historical, and spatial contexts. As times have changed, so have people's practices. Conservationists, however, have looked to the past to prescribe the future through the discursive construction of a Petenero traditional cultural ecology, which is then taught to immigrant communities as appropriate practice. In the following section, I explore how local people interact with these representations.

LOCAL IDENTITY AND CONSERVATIONIST REPRESENTATIONS

Conservationist discourses often embody Petenero-immigrant tensions, in that the Peteneros feel that their land has been invaded and destroyed by outsiders. Consequently, people who consider themselves Peteneros are more likely to express an affinity for NGOs. The words of Don Luis of San José in 1996 exemplify a commonly heard assertion: "WE knew how to take care of the forest." Many have told me that THEY know how to care for the forest, whereas the immigrants have come to destroy it. There is a great deal of resentment and even hatred between groups, and immigrants are commonly vilified. Educated Peteneros whose families once collected forest products and farmed small areas now proclaim themselves as the legitimate caretakers of the forest, often implying that THEY should have increased rights over its management. Most no longer depend upon these activities for their livelihood; however, their comments often reflect resentment of the period when many lost land due to immigration and subsequent privatization of land tenure by FYDEP between 1966 and 1974.

Many educated Peteneros have sought to re-affirm their rights over the Petén's forest by working in conservation organizations or government institutions, which gives them input into policy and project design. Peteneros have selected those aspects of international conservation discourse that meld neatly with their own attitudes. I found their resentment against migrants to be manifest in their discourse, behavior and even in project orientation.

One plan designed to give locals more control over their forests is the community forestry concession, which is also intended to promote sustainable development. In Carmelita and Uaxactún, forest collectors understand that conservationists value their livelihood practices and knowledge of the forest. I found that particular leaders frequently appropriate this discourse to their own ends and reinvent themselves as harmonious forest dwellers and conservation heroes. This strategy supports their long-term desire for more control over areas of traditional use to keep out immigrants and to ensure that they, and not illegal loggers or the logging industry, benefit from timber and non-timber extraction.

Whenever he has an audience, Don Carlos, an outspoken and controversial leader from Carmelita, will explain that the forest collectors know how to take care of the forest because they belong to a "forest culture."¹⁹ He therefore demands community rights to control extraction, immigration, and especially industrial timber harvesting. During fieldwork I heard him state to a group of advisors and extension agents, "You people do your work from the office. We are the ones out in the field. We know the situation the wildlife is in. We want to protect the forest because we live in it." Interestingly, some NGO and CONAP personnel don't agree with this rhetoric; from their perspective, forest collectors may have managed the forest in the past but it was not done in a scientifically sustainable way. Hence the **[end p. 91]** need for NGOs to study these practices and write management plans that are in tune with the region's ecology.

In the case of San Miguel, a migrant settlement, residents are the beneficiaries of a community forestry concession--not because of their knowledge of the forest or even their traditional livelihood practices. Rather, after the neighboring town refused to consider a forestry concession in 1990, CATIE (1994), a Costa Rican institution, began to approach community members in San Miguel about their interest in a concession. Up to this point, the 30 families in the San Miguel area faced an uncertain future within the newly declared Reserve--many feared they would be forced out. All are immigrants to the Petén, although the majority have resided in San Miguel for 10-15 years. Despite their reservations and general suspicion that CATIE was trying to trick them into giving up their land, a group of male leaders agreed to form a committee and establish the forestry concession.

My interviews in San Miguel revealed that people support the concession, not because they are interested in forestry, or even because they think that it will be financially rewarding, but because it provides them with legal assurance that they will not be thrown off their land and out of the Reserve. As one man commented,

"the land is [now] ours and we are paying taxes to harvest. We are renting the land, which is 5,000 hectares for 40 years, and we are going to harvest 150 hectares per year." Moreover, it enables them to control the extraction of resources within the concession's boundaries, thereby ensuring that they will benefit and not others. As Francisco indicated, "The land is ours. We are paying taxes for it and the concession is for San Miguel La Palotada, La Milpa and Yarché. So, we are the only ones that have rights to it." Finally, the concession allows them to keep other migrants from moving into the area. This is indicated in Chema's assertion: "We know that we are renting this land and that they can't remove us, nor can others come in."

Although the concessions were designed to establish community management of space and resources, the CATIE staff are reluctant to relinquish control to local people on the presumption that locals do not have the knowledge or capacity to take on the mental tasks. The staffs training in agronomy or forestry gives them a certain amount of authority--if knowledge is defined as the result of scientific training, they then may assume its absence among the uneducated. Locals also see themselves as lacking this mysterious quality and the knowledge that they do have is disregarded. Consequently, local men tend to represent themselves as incapable of managing the concession. This way of legitimating knowledge--as that which pertains to the educated--feeds into Guatemala's entrenched class system.

During the 1996 logging season in San Miguel, I found that the CATIE staff perpetuated this class-based distinction, which effectively discourages a local sense of ownership or involvement in the project. I observed a distinct division of labor: mental work was done by the technical staff and physical labor by the community members (Figures 5 and 6). When felling and loading timber, for example, the staff delegated tasks to community members, who received a daily wage that came out of the Committee's earnings. San Migueleños regard this as simply another form of day labor. Ironically, the project director lamented to me that the committee members "just don't see the project as their own."



Figure 5. Mental Work (Photo by the Author).

My findings in San Miguel exemplify what one development consultant calls the 'culture of simulation,' which he has frequently observed in development projects. As he put it, the technical staff accomplishes the goals set out in the management plan, thereby 'simulating' that they are helping the locals. The locals participate in the projects and do as they are told, thereby 'simulating' their process of development. In the meantime, "things remain the same." In this case, I would argue that the simulation tactics are part of San Migueleños' strategy to get what they want from the project. It will be some time before CONAP and participating NGOs are able to determine whether or not the community forestry [end p. 92] concessions fit their model of sustainable development. Nevertheless, the project gives people in San Miguel legal rights to place, space and livelihood.



Figure 6. Physical Labor (Photo by the Author).

NGO DISCOURSE, NGO LANDSCAPES

In this paper, I have argued that NGOs, as prominent social and political institutions in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, are able to construct *truths* about human-land relationships. In assuming the moral authority to speak for nature, NGOs' discourses frame the way environmental degradation is conceptualized. Certain perspectives are privileged over others and then worked into political and legal structures to delineate how people should relate to the environment in the Petén. Yet, NGO discourses are not objective, bias-free mirrors of reality; they are embroidered within the very fabric of society's power structures. In this way, the natural and social sciences are used to prescribe culturally constructed preferences that risk supporting/creating social structures that, in turn, perpetuate ethnic- and class-based inequalities.

In the Maya Biosphere Reserve, local people at every socioeconomic level necessarily interact with NGO discourses. I argue that certain groups have begun to draw from the discourses of conservation to reposition themselves in relation to NGOs. For instance, long-standing social divisions, such as Petenero-immigrant struggles, are reworked within conservationist discourses. As shown, Peteneros seek to establish their legitimacy as caretakers of the Petén's forest through discourses of authenticity that draw from and feed into North American idealizations of the *bon sauvage*. Lacking this authenticity, immigrants in San Miguel participate in the community forestry concession to achieve their goal of land tenure security. As they struggle to negotiate changes in how nature is conceptualized and valued, both groups reinvent their identities to assert rights to space, place, and livelihood.

Appropriating powerful discourses and reinventing themselves as forest dwellers serves the interests of particular groups in the Petén. The prickly question that continues to surface relates to those groups increasingly marginalized by conservation projects. In a country like Guatemala, where the state has little funding for social services, what happens to those people whose livelihood practices are deemed inappropriate by conservation organizations? This pressing question can be addressed by geographical research, which begins from the position that man-land relationships emerge within particular socio-economic contexts in time and space; they are not essential cultural traits. As geographers interested in people and environments in Latin America, we can play a critical role in mediating conservation discourses and local

political ecologies.

NOTES

1. See for instance, Conservation International's web page at <http://www.conservation.org>, which features 'hot spots.'
2. Funding for fieldwork in the Maya Biosphere Reserve from February 1996 to March 1997 was provided by an Institute of International Education Fulbright Fellowship and supported by a Dissertation Travel Grant from the AAG Latin American Specialty Group and Travel Grants Committee. My appreciation goes out to these institutions for funding research in cultural geography. This paper represents a small nugget of the research conducted and should not be read as a summary of my dissertation. I wish to thank my advisor Gregory Knapp for his fruitful visit to the Petén; helpful comments and suggestions were offered by Karl Offen and Jonathan Neumann, Department of Geography, University of Texas, Austin. Kevin Bray assisted me with the maps and images. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers at the CLAG Yearbook for their editorial and substantive suggestions. This paper would not have been possible without the participation of the women and men residing within the Maya Biosphere Reserve, who offered to share their perspectives with me.
3. By 'conservation's new vocabulary,' I am referring to an international, standardized discourse about ecosystems and nature protection. This discourse is most visible in documents produced by institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the United States Agency for International Development. Sachs (1992) and Escobar (1996) argue that this discourse expresses an economistic approach to nature that is foreign to many cultural groups in the Third World. Examples of this vocabulary include **[end p. 93]** terms like 'ecosystem,' 'natural resources,' 'nature protection,' and even the word 'conservation.'
4. Geographers have yet to turn their attention to how NGOs are effecting changes in the landscape, the subject of a forthcoming essay.
5. My argument draws from Michel Foucault's (1980) analyses of the relationship between institutions, discourse and material practices. See Peet and Watts (1996) for an extended discussion of how this approach can be useful in political ecology.
6. The studies I am referring to are conducted by NGO consultants or staff to augment knowledge of the region. However, several important studies conducted prior to the creation of the Reserve have had an influence on the discourse that followed (Nations et al. (1988, 1989) and Reining and Heinzman (1992) are widely cited; other studies by the extractive industries and research and development institutions are cited to a lesser degree).
7. The process of essentializing involves reducing an individual or a group's memorable or recognizable traits to fixed (or permanent) characteristics, which are then naturalized through discourse.
8. There are many different kinds of NGOs working in the Maya Biosphere Reserve. My research touches on three private, professionally-staffed North American organizations that have contracts with the USAID (1989) to implement the Maya Biosphere Project: The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International and CARE. Conservation International has created a local NGO, CI/ProPetén, which is dependent on CI Washington for funding and policy design. A fourth NGO is CATIE (Center for Education and Investigation in Tropical Agronomy), a private, non-profit educational institution based in Turrialba, Costa Rica. When I am referring to NGO discourses in general, I am alluding mostly to these organizations, along with a few others like Centro Maya, the Peregrine Fund and the World Conservation Society, as they have more financial, political and moral support than other institutions.

9. The findings presented in this paper should not be read as a summary of my fieldwork.
10. Prior to creating the Maya Biosphere Reserve, the President signed the Law of Protected Areas in 1989, creating the National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP), charged with the administration of parks and reserves (CONAP 1996). The Maya Biosphere Reserve Law establishes zones with distinct legal regulations, as outlined by UNESCO (see Batisse 1986; UNESCO 1984; Verhes 1987).
11. The Empresa Nacional de Fomento y Desarrollo del Petén (FYDEP, or the National Agency for Promotion and Development of the Petén), informally designated the region north of parallel 17° 1' 0" as a forest reserve for selective logging and extraction of non-timber products; the institution attempted to prevent agricultural settlements therein (Schwartz 1990; Soza Manzanero 1996). The Maya Biosphere Reserve encompasses this forest reserve.
12. According to Sader et al. (1994:325), the "greatest amount of forest clearing between 1986 and 1990 occurred along the road from La Libertad to El Naranjo in the southwest." This is an old and long-used road from central Petén to the western border with Mexico. Another major region of deforestation is "adjacent to the western border with Mexico" (Sader et al. 1994:322). A more recent Landsat image shows clearings along a newer road into Laguna del Tigre National Park, constructed for the purposes of oil exploration and exploitation (the image was produced by Maine Image Analysis Laboratory and the Department of Forest Management, University of Maine, in 1996).
13. FYDEP was a military-led, government institution given "extensive and in practice exclusive authority" in the Petén, ostensibly to promote economic development in the region (Schwartz 1990:253).
14. The Maya Biosphere Reserve Law establishes zones with laws regulating land use in the different zones, following UNESCO's vision of how biosphere reserves should function to unify conservation with sustainable development (CONAP 1996; UNESCO 1984).
15. *Forest Society. A Social History of Petén, Guatemala*, is the only English language text of its kind; it has been widely read and cited by people working in the Petén. The title of the book has taken on a life of its own, independent of the author and his intentions. I contend that it has acquired 'prescriptive status,' in the sense that in current discourse, society in the Petén is represented as authentic only if it is a 'forest society.' I wish to make it clear that when I reference the term 'forest society,' I am referring to its place in discourse, independent of the author who penned the term; my usage is not meant as a reference to Schwartz (1990) himself or his scholarship.
16. Scott Atran (1993) has collected significant data on agroforestry amongst the Itzaj in San José. Atran (1993: 634) uses the term 'agroforestry' to characterize a "multihabitat regime that sustains the forest's biodiversity indefinitely for the benefit of its keepers." Milpas may include maize, squash, chile peppers, beans, tomatoes, sweet potato, root crops, plantains, cotton, manioc, and tobacco. Orchard gardens commonly include sapotes, hogplums, anonas, avocados, exotic fruit trees and a host of useful timber species (Atran 1993:640). In my own research, I mapped orchard gardens and milpas belonging to people from San José as well as to migrants in the nearby settlement, San Miguel. My findings correlate with Atran's. Most importantly, I noted very little difference between native Peteneros and immigrants in terms of number of species and composition.
17. Here, my argument draws from theories that approach meaning as constructed by the creation and perpetuation of difference through binary oppositions. From this perspective, identity is continuously constructed through interactions with an Other and categorizations of the Other always draw from and construct a picture of the self. Linguistic and psychoanalytic theories have had an important impact on social

theory in the development of these ideas; most theorists today draw from the ideas [end p. 94] developed by de Saussure, Freud, Derrida, Levi-Strauss, Kristeva, Foucault, Said, and Lacan, to name just a few.

18. The word *cocinera* refers to the women who are hired to cook for the chiclero camps. This is a difficult, but well paying job.

19. Carlos Catalan was assassinated in June 1997, while transporting Carmelita's community forestry concession's first timber harvest. The causes are unknown and the culprit escaped.

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RESUMEN

Las instituciones de desarrollo y conservación abundan en la América Latina. Sin embargo, pocos estudios han examinado como los proyectos de conservación se articulan al nivel local. En este ensayo, presento algunos ejemplos de mi trabajo de campo en la Reserva de la Biósfera Maya de febrero 1996 a marzo 1997 para examinar como diversos grupos están comprometidos en una lucha alrededor de los significados que finalmente apuntan al control de la Reserva y sus recursos naturales. En 1992, las organizaciones conservacionistas iniciaron esfuerzos para proteger los últimos bosques Peteneros. En el proceso, algunas comunidades son articuladas como los auténticos habitantes del bosque y sus estilos de vida son delarados como las formas más apropiadas hacia el cumplimiento de las metas del desarrollo sostenible y la conservación. Por otro lado, otros grupos son articulados como habitantes no apropiados. Con base en observaciones etnográficas, este ensayo analiza como las comunidades locales incorporan las retóricas y discursas conservacionistas tanto en sus propias narrativas como en sus prácticas cotidianas. En conclusión, propongo que este proceso está expresando una demanda por el derecho a un espacio y un estilo de vida propio. [end p. 96]