# Taming the Jungle, Saving the Maya Forest: The Military's Role in Guatemalan Conservation

By Megan Ybarra

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**Abstract**
This article examines the significance of the role of the military in conservation in Guatemala through an analysis of discourses about the lowlands over time. Historically, Guatemala's national imaginary of the lowlands has been that of a dangerous jungle (*selva*) that must be tamed. During the civil war, the military employed this imaginary in its counterinsurgency campaigns, positioning the jungle as a dangerous space with suspect citizens, or potential guerrillas. In the 1980s, international conservation agencies called the region part of the "Maya Forest" in a political project to create an international park system, but they never tamed the jungle. I argue that the transnational conservation alliance, comprised of international NGOs and national elites, continues to evoke the violence of counterinsurgency in the territorial project of conservation. Both counterinsurgency and parks as territorial projects position nature as separate from agriculture. I argue that the use of jungle and forest discourses in successive territorial projects produces a racialized landscape that connects a violent past to a potentially violent present. These two divergent yet articulated signifiers also attach to peoples living in the northern lowlands. In recent years, the jungle discourse has articulated with advocacy for increased militarization of conservation to fight the "war on drugs" in parks. As such, I argue that conservationists and the military are complicit in reproducing social inequalities, often through violent exclusions.

**Keywords:** conservation; Guatemala; political ecology; protected areas; violence

## 1. Introduction

A New York Times headline starkly warns that "Ranchers and Drug Barons Threaten Rain Forest." According to a US archaeologist, "all the bad guys are lined up to destroy the [Maya Biosphere] reserve. You can't imagine the devastation that is happening" (Schmidt, 2010). Nonetheless, the article enjoins readers to imagine that "illegal squatters" have become pawns of drug traffickers. The goal of this paper is not to challenge evidence of deforestation in the rainforest, nor is it simply to defend small farmers. Rather, this paper will examine the current threat of "bad guys" to the rainforest in its political context. This is neither the first nor the last time that foreigners and elites have sounded an alarm about emergencies in the

rainforest. This paper examines recurrences of this narrative to illustrate territorial projects that simultaneously produce the rainforest as a place that needs saving and authorize drastic actions to do so.

While the article mentions that looters and poachers were "kept at bay when guerrilla armies roamed the region during [Guatemala's] 36-year civil war," I ask if current crises are, in part, an unintended consequence of creating a national park system in a nation still at war. Guatemala's park system was created at a conjunctural moment—the civil war had reached an uneasy détente, but it was not over. It was not until 1999 that the truth commission designated the primarily one-sided counterinsurgency campaign as genocidal because the military targeted Maya peoples, killing or disappearing 200,000 people. Nonetheless, threats to the rainforest led international conservationists to successfully lobby to create a national park system in 1989, thus enclosing one-third of the nation's territory before the peace process to address "the agrarian question" had begun.

My intervention here is two-fold. In terms of disparate impacts, I point out that instead of making sustainable development part of the 1990s Peace Accords process, conservationists saved the "Maya Forest" before internally displaced people and refugees resettled. As such, I argue the parks administration systematically underestimated competing land claims of rural people. International conservation agencies and national elites also agreed that immigration was degrading the Maya Forest. Conservation projects foster inequalities by celebrating "traditional" practices from both indigenous and non-indigenous groups, while condemning more recent homesteaders, even where these were indigenous people fleeing genocide. In some ways, the beginnings of conservation practice dovetailed on militarized practices of categorizing people in ways that may create refuge for "traditional" peoples, and dangers for people labeled "illegal" or "squatters."

Second, I argue that conservationists and the Guatemalan military have important affinities in their territorial projects. Building on Peluso and Vandergeest's (forthcoming) framework showing how counterinsurgency campaigns created "political forest" from the "jungle" in Southeast Asia, this article shows that Guatemala's conservation projects are built on sedimented histories of frontier colonizations and counterinsurgency campaigns to tame the jungle. The analysis focuses on two aspects of the relationship between conservationists and the miiltary: their shared territorial vision, which they use to author exclusions; and their shared role in implementing conservation policies that reproduce, sometimes exacerbating, social

inequalities. The implication of the military's role in conservation comes into focus through an analysis of jungle and forest discourses employed by the military and conservationists over time. These two divergent yet articulated signifiers attach to peoples as well, producing a racialized landscape that connects a violent past to the violent present. Finally, I argue that the resurgence of the jungle discourse signals renewed possibilities for institutionalized military violence in Guatemala in response to the region's "ungovernability."

1.1 Parks as Territorial Projects

I begin from a concern with the relationship between violence and conservation in the territorial project to transform wild jungle into tropical forest. This concern is both theoretical and practical given the resurgence of militarization in Guatemala's protected areas through recent impositions of martial law and the creation of "Green Battalions," or military-parks-police roving patrols through borderlands parks. The paper places recent instances of coercing conservation (Peluso, 1993) in historical context and promotes a discussion of moral dimensions of land conflicts in protected areas, integrating discourse and material practice (Peet and Watts, 2004; Peluso and Watts, 2001; Turner, 2004). My analysis takes a political ecology approach, employing landscape and territorialization analytics.

Specifically, this paper emerged from an engagement with Peluso and Vandergeest's (forthcoming) work on "taking the forest out of the jungle." They highlight the role of military violence in making political forests, arguing that military counterinsurgency operations in Southeast Asia produced the separation of forests and agriculture. By "taking the forest out of the jungle," they refer to the ways such territorial projects represented these regions as "jungles," or dangerous spaces peopled with suspect populations. Thus, the work of counterinsurgency to civilize citizen-subjects simultaneously facilitated protected areas management, articulating conservation and national security discourses. This is one contribution to literature that shows how boundary work in conservation serves to criminalize local resource users (Duffy, 2010; Jacoby, 2001; Neumann, 1998; Sundberg, 1998b; Zimmerer, 2000). In the Guatemalan context, the military's counterinsurgency project seemed to tame the jungle and lay the groundwork to save the Maya Forest. Contemporary events, however, suggest a resurgence of the jungle.

In territorialization, powerful groups such as state agencies or NGOs delimit boundaries, imbue territories with political claims, and enforce those claims through governance mechanisms (Lefebvre et al., 2009; Peluso and Vandergeest, 2001; Sack, 1986; Zimmerer, 2000).

Territorial projects reflect the emergence of Western tendencies to link political sovereignty to land, resources and population, which Massey (2005, 65) calls "taming the spatial." When territorial projects are linked to nation-states, there are three important dimensions at play. First, they may rely on a national imaginary (Anderson, 1991) that defines a constitutive outside through difference, often racialized (Foucault, 2003; Hall, 2003; Thongchai, 1994). Colonization and counterinsurgency projects to incorporate perceived frontiers into nations produce sovereignty and territory (Malkki, 1992; Migdal, 2004; Neumann, 2004). Second, whether or not they are understood as war, attempts to control land and people are often imbued with violence (Flint, 2005; Huet, 2008; Moore, 2005; Oslender, 2007; Tyner, 2008). Third, territorial projects rarely succeed in their aims, but they often imbue landscapes with meaning.

In particular, I use the term political forest to describe both state and non-state agencies' claims that a territory is a "forest" (without regard to actual ecological status) and subsequent assertion of a mandate to administer that forest (Peluso and Vandergeest, 2001, forthcoming; 1995). Thus, when the Guatemalan nation-state faced a crisis of legitimacy as a government responsible for massacring its own people, the national government cooperated with environmental elites to designate territories as nature and itself the appropriate institutional entity to conserve this newly discovered patrimony, often requiring violent enforcement.

Critical geographies of landscape ask *why* landscapes look the way they do and *who* produced them. Landscape representations may erase traces of labor in land, or conflicting rights claims through an idealized nature (Mitchell, 1996; Mitchell, 1994; Neumann, 1998; Williams, 1973). Peluso and Vandergeest (forthcoming) argue that war does much of the territorial work in producing nature as landscape. Specifically, counterinsurgency practices aimed at thwarting insurgents from using forests as a cover had the effect of separating forest territories from villages.

Guatemala's northern lowlands, as part of the "Maya Forest," are today understood as rainforest landscapes, populated with endangered animals, lush but fragile plant life, and noble savages (Slater, 2003; Stepan, 2001). Sundberg (1998a; 2006) argues that the biosphere model compels a depoliticization of local landscapes in Guatemala, producing instead "United-Statesian" NGO landscapes. Rather than a depoliticization, this article presents the articulation of regional, national and international landscapes to show the political implications of jungle and forest discourses.

I argue that the use of jungle and forest discourses in successive territorial projects produces a racialized landscape that connects a violent past to a violent present. These two divergent yet articulated signifiers also attach to peoples living in the northern lowlands. Today, conservation and development projects use a series of assumptions to work in communities in or near protected areas with mixed results. As is widely studied, the question of whether an idealized target population 1) is indigenous; 2) has or wants "traditional," "subsistence," or "sustainable" livelihoods;" and/or is a marginalized population that merits special protection is hotly debated (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Conklin and Graham, 1995; Li, 2002; Redford, 1991). At issue in Guatemala's lowlands today is the role of swidden agriculture, which dates to colonial history. Recent works have examined the role of Q'eqchi' Mayas as swiddeners (Ferguson et al., 2003; Van Ausdal, 2002) as well as migrants (Grandia, 2009; Sundberg, 1998a; Ybarra, forthcoming). As such, the focus of this paper is confined to the positioning of different peoples within jungle/forest discoursest.

The next section describes the military's territorial counterinsurgency strategies to tame the jungle as a dangerous space in the wake of the last colonization project. I then show how a transnational conservation alliance produced the "Maya Forest" as a new territorial project. Finally, I examine the military's role in conservation to suggest that imaginaries of the untamed jungle are again influential in parks governance, authorizing violence to tame the jungle and save the Maya forest.

## 2. Frontier Colonizations

### 2.1 Background: Unconquered Jungle

In the nineteenth century, Guatemala became an independent nation, in practice still controlled by Spanish-descended elites. The country is divided into the temperate Western Highlands, the hot and dry East, and the hot and humid northern lowlands. Of the three regions, the lowlands have long been regarded as an uncivilized backwater. The lowlands are the focus of this paper because they are the site that was identified as a jungle to be tamed through colonization and counterinsurgency, then the Maya Forest to be saved through conservation, each of which contributes to current campaigns to militarize the Maya Forest and save it from "narco-peasants."

FIGURE 1

In the twentieth century, highland Guatemalans saw Petén as an unconquered jungle. Prior to the Spanish, there was significant human settlement, but park advocates believed that the land was "largely unsettled after the decline of the ancient Maya civilization" until the 1950s (USAID, 1990, 2). The haunting remains of crumbling architectural feats seemed to suggest that the Classic Maya collapse occurred because those great warriors failed to conquer the jungle and the natural order swallowed them up. In the 1970s, some archaeologists suggested that this was due to inappropriate intensification of agricultural to meet rising population demand. Today, there is a popular debate over whether the ancient Maya were bad environmentalists, leading to their "collapse" (Diamond, 2005; McAnany and Yoffee, 2010). If this were the case, policymakers should not allow the same practices to reoccur, or the jungle might swallow up their society, too.

After the indigenous population was almost decimated in epidemics and wars, Petén was sparsely populated until the late 1960s. By the twentieth century, most people in the region called themselves Peteneros to refer to their mixed heritage. In practice, Petenero refers not simply to a place of origin ("from Petén"); it refers to a social group with a mix of indigenous, Spanish, Mexican (both indigenous and mestizo), English, and African roots. Within Peteneros, there was differentiation by class, ethnicity, and county. When a new wave of migration beganin the 1960s, however, "Petenero" has moved towards a binary defined in opposition to "colonists." Today, some Peteneros claim they are proper stewards of a "forest society" (citing Schwartz, 1990). Meanwhile, Schwartz and others research whether traditional Peteneros enjoy a "pioneer effect," better access to land, education and political networks than immigrants (Grandia et al., 2001).

2.2 Twentieth Century Agrarian Colonization

Through the mid-twentieth century, most Guatemalans knew the tropical lowlands were "nobody's land" (*baldíos*), but did not claim them because they believed the jungle was more likely to bring misery than riches. In the 1950s, a leftist president implemented agrarian reforms to address staggering land inequalities. In 1954, following a coup supported by the US CIA, the militarized government reversed the reforms. Instead, the military and US government[i] proposed that poor highlanders should colonize the lowlands.

Instead of the jungle, planners reworked lowlands as an agricultural frontier. They claimed the land could be made to work using Green Revolution techniques, and posed colonization as a patriotic duty. Project documents show that state institutions wanted loyal

citizens to incorporate this "territory unknown to Guatemalans" into the rest of the nation, fighting of scourges of communism and usurping Mexicans from the north (International Development Services and U.S. Operations Mission to Guatemala, 1961). People speculated that Mexico might annex Petén (Samayoa Rivera, n.d.), so the military encouraged cooperatives along the border. In later years, the military also sought to use borderlands settlements to "eliminate sanctuary areas used by guerrilla groups" crossing over from Mexico (Dennis et al., 1988, 71).

A colonization official waxed poetic, calling on citizens to "come to the conquest of your own territory!" for "men who are willing to burn in the sun, or leave their life for an ideal of conquest and liberty, but always to be a *conquistador*" (Samayoa Rivera, n.d., 5-6). Poor Peteneros and landless Q'eqchi's to the south were not who Samayoa called to conquest. Rather, he wanted descendents of Spanish *conquistadores* to tame the jungle through cattle ranches and plantations. The southern two-thirds of Petén were opened to ranching and farming, and the northern one-third was allocated for logging. Despite that fact that colonization was supposed to meet land-poor farmers' need for land, government agencies allocated significantly more land for extensive cattle ranching (Grandia, 2009).

By the late 1960s, the population was comprised of three groups: Peteneros who already lived in the colonization region, most of whom did not have land titles;[ii] people who arrived in Petén as part of organized cooperatives (usually with Catholic Church assistance); and "spontaneous" colonizers who came looking for land, often fleeing civil war violence. This latter group was important in terms of planning because the established mechanism to claim land with FYDEP (*Fomento y Desarrollo del Petén*, military-run colonization agency) was by "improving" the land--cutting down forest and planting crops, then filing paperwork. Even today, deforestation is a legally recognized path to title. As a homesteader explained, "we must struggle for [the land] and the best way to do it is to work it, so that nobody can take it. If the land is unused, others can invade and screw us" (FEDECOAG, 1993, 59).

Although FYDEP and INTA (*Instituto Nacional de Transformación Agraria*, state land agency for the rest of Guatemala) condemned the "spontaneous" and "anarchic" settlers in planning documents, these comprised the majority of settlers. Most of their holdings (*agarradas*) were not legalized when international groups and national elites advocated for a national park system. Lowlands farmers often practiced swidden agriculture, whom planners disparagingly described as "floating populations," incorrectly asserting that their agricultural practices caused

them to move further out into the frontier, never replanting in fallows. One newspaper article attributes environmental degradation entirely to Q'eqchi's moving north, or "fleeting communities, which will disappear with the same ease as they appeared. Because the jungle has an implacable law" (1989).

Although planners only intended for the population to reach 50,000—150,000 inhabitants, by 1990, the population had grown to ten times its original size (Schwartz, 1990). The majority of the population repressed during both counterinsurgency campaigns in the 1970s and protected area enforcements in the 1990s arrived in response to the state's invitation to tame the jungle.[iii] On this basis, families arrived, cutting down the jungle and expecting state agencies and others to respect their property claims.

2.3 Insurgency

Most accounts date Guatemala's civil war to shortly after the CIA-sponsored coup. Marxist guerrilla groups began their opposition using small cells (*focos*) in the Eastern countryside, but the army decimated them by the late 1960s. Surviving guerrillas retreated north to Mexico, where they reformulated a strategy of radicalizing agrarian movements. Instead of organizing in the Ladino-dominant East, they targeted indigenous communities in the north. Guerrilla organizers were a motley mix of former military officers, students, and political organizers who were usually Ladinos from urban areas—there was some romanticism in leaving the city to recruit peasants in the jungle (e.g., Payeras, 1980). The general consensus today is that there were never more than a few thousand combatants, but in the 1970s guerrillas claimed larger numbers. Likewise, military intelligence overstated guerrillas' influence in rural areas as a justification to expand counterinsurgency campaigns.[iv]

In Petén, the guerrilla organization FAR (*Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes*, Armed Rebel Foreces) recruited in communities organized into legible governance structures and with relationships with outside entities (e.g., Catholic Church) to realize the promise of land ownership. Recruiting efforts met with mixed success: since these communities had land, guerrillas sought out farmers who lacked infrastructure, particularly where FYDEP failed to deliver development projects. Some communities may have joined due to threats by encroaching oil and cattle interests, worried that they would be displaced; many were forced to choose sides. Many communities were split between guerrilla and army supporters. The structure of guerrilla groups has led to a common binary image of two ideal types of guerrilla fighter—on the one hand, a *canche* ("blonde," supposedly from the capital or Cuba)

revolutionary who came down to the jungle from Mexico to lead the revolution, and on the other, a mass of indigenous foot-soldiers. This image has some truth in reality, as guerrilla leaders did not always support indigenous leadership (Velázquez Nimatuj, 2008). The military used this image to its advantage, claiming disingenuously that indigenous guerillas were duped by outsiders (Nelson, 2009). The military also played on Guatemalan anger about shrinking national territory[v] and its banana republic image. Thus, the military portrayed its extrajudicial killings of citizens as quelling foreign activity and protecting national territory from foreign interlopers.

### 3. Counterinsurgency: Taming the Subversive Jungle

While the military has historically played an important role in Petenero society, this grew during counterinsurgency. Most military officers were Ladinos from the east who saw Petén as an "unhealthy place populated by dangerous Indians" (Schwartz, 2000, 30), who might be "two-faced subversives" (Nelson, 2009), swearing allegiance by day and attacking by night. Given that guerrillas used jungle as a refuge, the military's goal was to tame the subversive jungle. If anti-communism was not reward enough, this work also offered the possibility of owning a cattle ranch.

As with Southeast Asia (Peluso and Vandergeest, forthcoming), the transformation from jungles in wartime to political forests produced a dichotomy between human society and nature. This dichotomy positioned both jungle and the people in it as wild and savage (Peluso, 2003; Slater, 1995). While divides between civilization and jungle existed prior to the civil war, swidden agriculture (with attendant fallows), seasonal tree-tapper camps in the forest, and ancient Mayan civilizations located beyond the contemporary "agricultural frontier," all belie notions of a pristine forest.

The military did not plan to create a protected area system, but the same characteristics that made the region appealing to insurgent groups and threatening to the military later made it ideal as park. Lack of roads lessened deforestation, and borderlands with Mexico first facilitated guerrilla movements and sparked national sentiments, and later encouraged conservationists to envision a regional "Maya Forest." The fact that "forest" burned in counterinsurgency, anti-narcotics activities, and logging did not lessen the appeal of the Maya Forest, but produced the need to save (reforest) it. In summary, the same characteristics that led the military to tame the

subversive jungle later led conservationists to rally to save the rainforest. Later visions of pristine protected areas may also have been facilitated by the army's villagization strategies.

By the late 1970s, the military sporadically clashed with guerrillas. By the 1980s, there were troop details posted in communities, particularly in cooperatives that FYDEP encouraged fewer than twenty years before. Members of these communities remember that they were engulfed in conflict, "because where the guerrilla appeared, the army would appear, too" (FEDECOAG, 1993). A FYDEP official placed blame on guerrillas:

> Here the people died, [guerillas] killed them and nobody realized, because they threw them in the river, or half-buried them, assuming that if they left them in the scrub, the raptor birds would eat them [in this] desolate zone, at first with only one inhabitant or family per 50 kilometers, the boat traffic scarce, gasoline expensive, death very cheap… In these far places died many Cobaneros, the floating population from Fray Bartolomé de las Casas that did not have land, and as the doorway to Petén, it did not cost them anything to get here seeking what they wanted without knowing they would only encounter death at the hands of the guerrilla, drowned in the swift river, or bitten by a poisonous snake (Samayoa Rivera, n.d., 102).

Leaving aside the official's misattribution of blame (military and paramilitary groups committed 93 percent of war-time violence), the official points to two important aspects of the war. First, in people's imaginations, the perceived dangers of the jungle combined with the dangers of war to make death very cheap. Second, people did not encounter death indiscriminately, but rather the "floating population" of migrants was disproportionately subjected to violence.

Many affected communities disappeared en masse—some people returned to their communities of origin, but counterinsurgent violence was often more intense in the highlands than the lowlands. Some people escaped to Mexico, where they became refugees, and others became Communities of Population in Resistance (CPR). The CPR were non-combatant communities formed when families fled the army's scorched earth campaigns and refused to turn themselves in as "subversives." Instead, they allied with guerrilla groups and hid from public view, forging precarious livelihoods in the remote jungle. By 1992, as the counterinsurgency campaign wore down, the central planning agency listed only six remaining cooperatives of the 68 formed by 1974 (Clark, 1995). Many never successfully returned, and some cooperatives today are an uncomfortable mix of old, new, and returned members.

Today, some people on the political left claim that if Guatemala falls into another civil war, it will start in Petén. One reason for this is that FAR supposedly believed that they could win the war and acquiesced to the Peace Accords process only begrudgingly. Although Petén did not suffer scorched earth campaigns to the same extent as Alta Verapaz and the Western Highlands, these claims seem doubtful. They do, however, point to the continuing mystique of Petén's image as an unsettled territory.

3.1 Counterinsurgency as a Territorial Strategy

Counterinsurgency in Guatemala is best known for the devastating impacts of scorched earth campaigns, in which the military burned over 400 rural villages to the ground, committing genocide (CEH, 1999). In this section, I focus on the ways scorched earth campaigns were concurrent with development projects designed to recruit improve people and land in a renewed effort to incorporate them into the nation. Guatemala's political forest was forged through processes of internal colonization and counterinsurgency campaigns that intervened to halt the "agricultural frontier." Given state agencies' inability to control "spontaneous" and "anarchic" colonization, the separation of agriculture and nature was established through counterinsurgency campaigns, not state planning. The army as an institution only sought to rework its mandate through participation in conservation enforcement beginning in the late 1980s.

During colonization phases, INTA and FYDEP encouraged settlers to establish uniform plots and to live in centralized villages in grid-like patterns. In interviews with Q'eqchi' settlers, elders explained that they sometimes preferred to work multiple plots of land, depending on ecological conditions, and to live in dispersed homes located near parcels. It was often only during war-time violence that people villagized themselves.

The military directly promoted this, using counterinsurgency as a spatial practice that enforced a separation between nature and agriculture. When the military decided that an entire village was subversive, it created a no-man's-land (Huet, 2008; Wilson, 1995), burning people, villages, crops and livestock. The military eventually allowed people to resettle some villages, but not others. The military warned some elders who were resettled that they could not return to their old homes if they were surrounded by dense foliage or had caves, as they were supposedly guerrilla territory—if people returned to these places, then the military would know they were guerrillas, too.

Instead, the military chose people on the basis of perceived "loyalty" (favoring former military officers and Ladinos over Mayas) to resettle in centralized communities. The paradigmatic image of this project is the development pole, or a strategic hamlet resettled under army control. Significantly, there were development poles next to Laguna Lachúa National Park, Cobán and Sierra de las Minas, Panzós. Q'eqchi' families who had been living on this land were prohibited from resettling first by the army, and later by conservation laws. Even where official development poles were not created, such as the Candelaria Caves National Park, Raxruhá, communities resettled only after obtaining army permission.

The Maya Biosphere Reserve encompasses 44 percent of Petén, which includes territory settled under the state-backed colonization program begun in the 1960s. In some places, such as the Dos Lagunas Biotope, the army simply forced communities to relocate. In others, such as cooperatives in the Sierra de Lacandón, communities fled repression and their subsequent assertions of land rights were hindered by the declaration of their land as a protected area. Other communities that did not flee but cooperated with the army, such as Bethel, seem more likely to have their land mapped outside park borders. When I asked a park manager in 2009 about differences in historical rights amongst cooperative members located in the park (some stayed, some returned, others came later under army auspices), he claimed that all cooperative members were the same as when the park was created.

Interestingly, the army never established control over much of the jungle that today comprises the Sierra de Lacandón park's strictly protected area. Instead, the Communities of Population in Resistance (CPR-Petén), a group of approximately 500 non-combatant families in three communities allied with the insurgents, controlled the territory. While they engaged in farming and subsistence activities, they proclaimed themselves caretakers of the forest. By all accounts I have seen, they took these responsibilities seriously, but were nonetheless forced to relocate following the park's declaration.

While territorial dynamics varied across Guatemala's northern lowlands, there are commonalities with Peluso and Vandergeest's (forthcoming) findings regarding the role of counterinsurgency in producing the political forest. First, following the coup that quashed agrarian reform, the militarized government actively encouraged colonization of the northern lowlands. Small insurgent groups that represented a threat to the militarized state tended to base themselves in the jungle. In response to this, the military's counterinsurgency campaign sought to tame the subversive jungle. Jungle as guerrilla refuge deepened the military's perceived need

for army control of the jungle and the territorial strategy to separate nature from civilization/agriculture.

3.2 Insiders and Outsiders

Counterinsurgency campaigns racialized the war. The army pathologized resistance to state imperatives, and the long history of denying rights to indigenous peoples in Mesoamerica positioned the Maya as vulnerable to the military's view that they were "suspect" citizens. Some indigenous people performed their loyalty by wearing different clothes, speaking Spanish, practicing an Evangelical religion and/or joining paramilitary groups. None of these actions could guarantee one's safety, however, and one of the biggest dangers was associating with someone who supported the insurgency. To protect themselves, many people became reluctant to associate with outsiders. This problem was acute in colonization zones because new homesteaders steadily trickled in. Many migrants relied on kinship networks to vouch for them, and rural communities became segregated by ethnolinguistic identity.

The Petenero identity hardened during the migrant influx. The term Petenero implies that one's family has been living in Petén for multiple generations. Historically, many Peteneros were smallholding farmers, although many lost their land and relocated to urban centers. This term also included men who extracted natural resources from the forest, especially chicle, whom local elites denigrated. Traditional Peteneros today disproportionately occupy military, commerce, government, and conservation posts.

Peteneros have developed a proud identity, and some assert that they know how to live sustainably in the forests, but migrants are deforesting it. I tested the frontiers of the Petenero identity multiple times to see how insiders decide who is a Petenero and who is an outsider (Hall, 1995, 1996). On one occasion in 2006, a park administrator explained to me that all the people usurping park lands were "migrants." When I pointed out to him that his own agency's survey indicated that the majority was born in Petén, his angry rejoinder was that they were not Peteneros. By definition, Peteneros do not invade parks.

## 4. Saving the Maya Forest

In 1990, the 1.6 million hectare Maya Biosphere Reserve became the crown jewel of Guatemala's new protected areas system. USAID approved a $27 million project to "improve economic welfare of the population of Guatemala through rational management of renewable natural resources" (SEGEPLAN, 1992, 118). USAID was the primary funder to shape the

parks system and thus is the focus of my analysis.[vi] Whereas one-third of the nation became a protected area, parks in Petén stretched beyond logging reserves, affecting more than 70% the department.

FIGURE 2

USAID (1990, 16) forecasted long-term benefits while acknowledging that "local people may be unaware of the benefits." Project framers acknowledged that the Reserve might be unpopular because it was created without knowledge or participation of affected communities, and would require some to relocate. Cost-benefit analysis was sketchy because planners declined to account for people living in core zones, noting that possibilities ranged from forced eviction to buy-outs (USAID, 1990, 252).

USAID (1990) posed the Guatemalan system as the continuation of a regional project for conservation and natural resource management in Central America. Equally importantly, conservation NGOs named the territory spanning southern Mexico, northern Guatemala and all of Belize the "Maya Forest." Conservation International placed the Maya Forest on its "biodiversity hotspot" priority list (Mittermeier et al., 1998). Guatemala's protected areas were part of an upswell of conservation biologists who decided that "if they want a tropics in which to biologize, they are going to have to buy it" (Jantzen, 1986, 306) in allegiance with big conservation NGOs.

According to Schwartz (1996, 2), "the conservationists who designed the MBR believed they had a narrow window of opportunity in which to act." Planners believed Petén's natural and cultural wealth had major economic potential that could be squandered if the "anarchic" colonization processes continued (USAID, 1990). Second, waning war violence without peace afforded a crucial political opening. Ironically, President Cerezo saw the park system as an opportunity to leave a legacy because the peace talks were stalled. Conservationists sought to create a park system before Cerezo's term ended (Nations, 2006). As a civilian president presiding over a demilitarization process, Cerezo represented a state that could legitimately authorize a massive conservation program, but was not accountable to citizens in a continued climate of repression. On the horizon loomed the return of 40,000 refugees, the resettlement of one million displaced people, and peace talks on "the agrarian situation." If the proposed park system had been vetted during the Peace Accords process, peasant and indigenous

representatives might have critiqued the park system. This more democratic process would have constrained the territorial reach of Guatemala's park system.

4.1 A Proper Forest Society

When USAID (1990, 2) funded the Maya Biosphere Reserve, it posed the crisis thus:

Largely unsettled after the decline of the ancient Maya civilization, Petén's population has increased ten-fold since 1964 to approximately 250,000, and the land area in agriculture has increased fifty-fold. Slash and burn agricultural practices are currently deforesting approximately 40,000 hectares per year. As a result of these factors, primary forests are projected to disappear within thirty years.

This characterization echoes representations by conservation NGOs and the Guatemalan press, shaping imperatives to "save the Maya Forest." USAID attributes deforestation to poor farmers who practice "slash and burn" agriculture, while failing to mention its own role in promoting agricultural colonization.

The same document later notes expanding cattle ranches are unsustainable (145). Although "expansion of cattle ranching will affect the protection objectives of the project" (269), the project did not address it. Contemporary works suggest that policymakers should examine the relationships between cattle ranchers and smallholders in deforestation (Jones, 1990). Instead, USAID (1990, 262) uncritically observes that "attitudes by most everyone (government officials, industrialists, conservationists) hold that the *milperos* [farmers] are the 'bad guys'—destroyers of the forest." As such, USAID allocated funding that exacerbated inequalities. Conservation projects targeted poor farmers as bad guys, while ignoring wealthy cattle ranchers.

By the late 1980s, the Petenero identity underwent a shift (section 3.2). When a transnational conservation alliance sought local partners to save the Maya Forest, they upheld "traditional" Peteneros and agreed that immigrant farmers were the cause of deforestation. Despite empirical evidence (Carr, 2004), swidden agriculture also became associated with Q'eqchi' migrants. Further, educated Peteneros often took on key roles in conservation organizations, while poor Peteneros were portrayed as sustainable natural resource extractors. USAID suggested that the project to abandon agriculture in favor of natural resource management had "essentially to be developed and implemented by 'Peteneros'" (1990, Appendix F.2, 4).

Although Peteneros comprised only 17 percent of Petén's population, international conservation organizations sought to work with them. Today, the common stereotype is that Peteneros are stewards of a proper "forest society" that they managed sustainably for centuries; on the other hand, Ladinos from the East are violent, while Q'eqchi's from the south are forest-eating termites. When conservation projects selectively celebrated "traditional" practices and knowledge (low-impact resource extraction, medicinal plants, but not agriculture), some Peteneros used this to entrench themselves against "immigrants."

Conservation policy's effects were diverse and beyond the scope of this paper, but I will briefly discuss the question of how it positioned indigenous peoples. The relationship between indigenous peoples and international conservation organizations has long been a source of controversy. Mac Chapin's (2004, 18) landmark critique argues that organizations are reluctant to work with indigenous people, noting that "Mayans slashing and burning the forests of the Petén of Guatemala are often trotted out as examples of the destructive tendencies of indigenous peoples." In Guatemala, Chapin's "Mayans" are understood to be immigrants and Q'eqchi' Mayas. Petenero Maya peoples are understood as the Itza' and the Mopán,[vii] and these peoples suffered discrimination within Petenero society. A new influx of scholars and organizations has celebrated Itza' traditional ecological knowledge and supported them in development projects since the 1990s (Sundberg, 2004). To show that Itza'es have special ecological knowledge, scholars contrast them with Q'eqchi' Maya migrants (Atran et al., 1999).

The largest indigenous people in Petén, Q'eqchi's, are positioned as outsiders, not Peteneros. Some Q'eqchi's had been living in Petén for centuries, but many arrived during the past forty years, often fleeing war-time violence. Schwartz (2005) found that Q'eqchi's in Petén are stereotyped as a "floating," disconcertingly large population practicing a nomadic slash-and-burn agriculture that destroys forests and threatens to usurp core protected areas. I do not believe that the conservation section set out to marginalize Q'eqchi' migrants. Rather, older narratives of farmers as "bad guys—destroyers of the forest" were reworked in colonization and counterinsurgency eras, attaching to this subset of the population.

It seems that the stigma on the Q'eqchi' is related to army accusations of them as "subversive," which have flowed into present judgments of who can be a citizen, an owner, or a good environmentalist. Recently, when a group of Ladino researchers were conducting fieldwork, they told me Ladino respondents repeatedly warned them against approaching Q'eqchi' households because they are "conflictive." What does that mean? I asked. While they

did not have a clear answer, Ladino enumerators agreed it was more difficult to work with Q'eqchi' households, not least due to language barriers. When I asked what I believed to be a logical question, what did the Q'eqchi' respondents say about their Ladino neighbors?, the enumerators had no response. Likewise, in choosing field sites for ethnographic case studies, Ladino friends counseled me to avoid Q'eqchi' communities because they are "conflictive" and "closed." After two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer and 17 months of fieldwork in the lowlands, it seems to me that Ladino development workers sometimes view Q'eqchi's in the same way as the Ladino military did before them, with suspicion.

4.2 Conservation Conflicts

Since the inception of the Maya Forest, the appropriation of conservation territories has come into tension with people with agrarian livelihoods. These conflicts did not arise when laws were passed and parks demarcated because most people were did not know about them (USAID, 1995). During the first few years, project evaluations warned that "project implementers are acting in an isolated way" (Farland, 1994), using a "top down" approach (Schwartz et al., 1996) to impose the park system in a spirit of "environmental protectionism" (Farland, 1994).

Environmental protectionism arose because CONAP struggled to separate nature from agriculture. As political ecologists have noted, this territorialization often denies local people access to extraction of renewable natural resources. In countries with high inequality, such interventions have disparate impacts on poor people. Relatively little aid has been devoted to helping farmers; instead, conservation projects have dedicated their funds to demarcating parks, funding biological research, and developing ecotourism. A major goal of the MBR was to halt the "agricultural frontier" and relocate communities from core zones. Locally affected people believe this is "the idea of conserving nature at the cost of the survival of the population living in protected areas" (FEDECOAG, 1993, 34).

The initial problems of boundary work were often not resolved. In Laguna Lachúa National Park, administrators decided not to recognize any competing land claims. Even in the case of one community that had state-issued land titles and paid land taxes, CONAP enclosed the land without offering the community compensation. When I asked a park official why they did not recognize this community's existence, he told me that if CONAP honored one claim, then other poor people would invade the park seeking similar concessions. Nonetheless, there

are other groups with historical ties to the area who plant maize every season, despite repeated evictions and arrests.

TNC opted to buy land from people who could prove historical land tenure.[viii] This works well when there is a single owner of a large parcel, but has met with mixed success in community relocations. According to the National Association of Peasants (*Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas, CNOC*), many communities were disappointed with TNC's fulfillment of promises to provide transportation, infrastructure (buildings, electricity, running water), and secure tenure on fertile land. In one exceptional situation, a man with legal title to the land TNC resettled a community on demanded they either buy the land from him or leave.

In other cases, CONAP and conservation NGOs seem not to have noticed that people with historical rights in a community did not share a similar history. One exceptional case is that of Centro Campesino, originally 64 Ch'orti' Maya families organized as a cooperative. In 1984, the army forced families off their land, leaving behind only ashes. Some families resettled on new land, apparently with the army's permission, which became Centro Campesino Two. When the old lands (Centro Campesino One) were mapped into a core area of the MBR, TNC purchased land rights from these families. In 2009, a park administrator explained that TNC paid the cooperative as a whole, then leaders distributed payments to their members. When I asked him about people from the cooperative who did not receive payments, he was visibly upset, insisting that everyone received a payment. Moreover, he asserted, none of those people were the same as contemporary invaders in "Centro Campesino Three." According to Corzo Márquez, refugees were excluded from the buy-out (1999). Today, some "park invaders" claim that they are the families that did not ally with the military, and thus did not receive compensation for their land.

Conservation conflicts persist—groups organize to take over protected areas, destroy NGO property, and occasionally take conservation officials hostage. A prominent environmentalist working for CI, Jim Nations (2006), points to a major confrontation as a pivotal success. During the confrontation, a group of peasants took conservation professionals hostage and a leader approached the NGO asking to talk about conservation's effects on the farming population. Instead, the NGO implied to the press that their employees were kidnapped to elicit a cash ransom—not for political reasons. Realizing how unpopular this would make their cry for land, peasant leaders let the hostages go. Although CI eventually entered into a dialogue process with some peasant leaders, Nations (2006, 275) believes Maya

people can no longer farm in the Maya Forest, because "deforestation rates and population growth have relegated this vision [of Men of Corn] to history." Rather than focusing simply on outcomes, conservationists would do well to consider if the mandate to conserve natural resources is marshaled as much to reproduce social hierarchies—often through violent exclusions—as it is to save the Maya Forest.

### 5. Ungovernability and the Jungle Reprised

Since the signing of the Peace Accords, optimism for a renewed social contract has plunged into concern about rising violence and a lack of government accountability that has led some, including a representative of the UN High Commission on Human Rights, to call Guatemala a "failed state" (Pérez, 2007). Parks have become a primary site of concern over drug trafficking. Newspapers and policymakers dub these territories of ungovernability (*ingobernabilidad*), "wild" places where Colombian drug traffickers land in "cattle ranches" (*narcofincas*) inside parks, taking drugs north through the "cocaine corridor."

In 2009 interviews, many conservation officials used a new term when describing park usurpers: narco-peasants (*narcocampesinos*), asserting that everyone in the park worked with drug traffickers. Less than a year later, Schmidt (2010) reproduced this narrative uncritically in the New York Times:

> The squatters are mainly peasants who have come in search of farmland. But the
> population of Petén has grown to more than 500,000 from 25,000 in the
> 1970s…. Not all of the residents are illegal, and many seek no more than
> subsistence. Willingly or not, they often become pawns of the drug lords. The
> squatters are numerous, frequently armed and difficult to evict. In some cases,
> they function as an advance guard for the drug dealers, preventing the
> authorities from entering, warning of intrusions and clearing land that the drug
> gangs ultimately take over.

We are left with little explanation about who the residents are, how and why some are "illegal," whether or not they are "willing" pawns of drug lords, and what it means to be a "squatter" (the primary method of obtaining legal land titles in the lowlands). Schmidt intimates that we have two options: "mini-narco-state" or "Maya-themed vacationland."

The article is of note because it is part of a chorus that calls for the army to make a comeback in the latest era in the "war on drugs." To do so, the article must show that the

people causing the emergency are nothing but "poachers, squatters and ranchers" with illicit connections to drug trafficking, naturalizing CONAP's relationship with the military in taming the "Maya Jungle" (*Selva Maya)* once again.

5.1 Military as Park Protectors

Although they have different mandates, conservationists and the army have been working together since before the park system's inception. Baseline maps to establish the parks were provided to the Environmental Commission by the National Geographic Institute (USAID, 1990), which was originally established as the Military Geographic Institute with US funding to provide maps to soldiers for counterinsurgency campaigns. Jim Nations (2006) begins *The Maya Tropical Forest* with a tale of being captured by guerrillas while conducting fieldwork to create Guatemala's park system. The team worries that the guerillas will find detailed military maps, but the guerrillas only find and take only glossy National Geographic maps of the "Maya Route," which they naively assure the conservationists will aid their struggle for social justice. Many conservationists in Guatemala consider themselves on the political left and claim to treat the army with suspicion, but they have been cooperating with the army to the exclusion of insurgents and the rural population. As one conservation official explained to me in 2009, the role of the army used to be combating subversion;[ix] now that the subversion doesn't exist anymore, why not reorient the army to conservation?

After the army's scorched earth campaign seemed to quell all popular dissent, its High Command began rethinking its mandate to justify continued institutional relevance. Here, two important possibilities came together to shape both the army's mandate and protected areas governance. First, as part of a regional shift in US aid in Latin America following the Cold War (Andreas and Price, 2001), military aid to Guatemala was increasingly directed to combat drug trafficking. Second, the military offered its assistance to CONAP to establish the park system.

The military was involved in the defense of natural resource extraction, particularly by halting contraband lumber exports and protecting petroleum transportation from guerrilla attacks. From the beginning of the parks system, the military was involved in patrols, because park guards are not allowed to carry guns. (The ostensible need for the guns was in the event of confrontations with guerrillas or Mexican loggers in the 1990s; in the 2000s, with drug traffickers.) As the army already had a significant presence in protected areas, they simply changed the work they were doing. Whereas the military originally justified its presence with guerrilla activities, by the 1990s, "the army has tried to justify its presence and its operatives

under the argument of protecting natural resources, which is belied by things like removing two key detachments from guarding against lumber trafficking across the Mexican border" (FEDECOAG, 1993, 37-38). Residents joked that the military detachments disappeared at the same time as the lumber season began.

These jokes (also denounced as crimes) point to a fundamental tension. While the military as a state institution supported CONAP and protected areas policy, as a network of actors, regional politics and illicit webs sometimes work against conservation practice. In Petén, there were paramilitaries and military officers who benefitted from the traffic of illicit goods and were inclined to sabotage conservation efforts; there were also paramilitary and military officers who were concerned about deforestation and supported conservation efforts. USAID (1995, 7) reports acknowledge the problem, pointing out that "CONAP's most successful enforcement and protection actions [in its four years] were conducted with military support," but many violent attacks on CONAP outposts also implicated local military officers.

Although there is suspicion that military members participate in drug trafficking in protected areas, park officials were circumspect about this problem. They pointed out that the military is less corrupt than other state institutions, particularly the police, which is the only other institution capable of providing armed security to park guards. One person explained to me that he attended the state university, whose politically progressive students suffered military repression. He is uncomfortable attending meetings with a number of military men in uniform, but he sees no other way to protect the parks. When I asked him about problems working with the army, he said the issues are simple ones, such as providing food so the hungry troops do not hunt bushmeat inside the park. On the question of whether military officials participate in lowlands drug trafficking networks, he declined to speculate.

5.2 Green Battalions

Today, the "ungovernability" problem inside protected areas is so grave that popular support is widespread for new "Green Battalions," or army battalions charged with patrolling protected areas. There are only 450 park guards to cover 30,000 square kilometers of protected areas in Guatemala. Given CONAP's inability to cover its territory, and the park guards' inability to confront violent offenders, there are between 40 and 52 "invaded lands" (human settlements or cattle ranches) and approximately 32,000 people "invading" protected areas in Petén (Contreras, 2008). Although some people began calling for massive interventions when it became public that a number of *narcofincas* had legal title (illegally) inside national parks,[x] support

for the Green Battalions did not coalesce until the latest in a series of conservation conflicts (Zelada, 2009). Approximately 40 men from a settlement called El Vergelito inside Laguna del Tigre park took two park guards hostage from their post, in an attempt to force state authorities to negotiate for title to their illegally held lands. Ironically, they kidnapped the guards from the same post as the one ten years ago (section 4.2). In response, CONAP pressed charges against the men of El Vergelito for kidnapping, successfully obtained and carried out an eviction order, and advocates for armed support.

The army's new (old) battleground will be protected areas. The idea is still taking shape, but in 2008 the army and the US DEA reopened the military base in Livingston, Izabal to install one of the first Green Battalions. Although at first one of their primary jobs was to be combating drug trafficking, the government later clarified that instead they would focus on the "pillage of flora, fauna, archeological sites, and illegal drugs" (Coronado, 2008). The purpose of the Battalions is to protect the "green areas" of the nation in danger, which coincides with the Maya Forest: Petén and the Franja. Although there was an official denial, my understanding from 2009 interviews is that Green Battalions will tackle drug trafficking because their focus will be on land usurpations, including *narcofincas*. The Battalions will be based inside parks, some in existing control posts, but more will be built in Petén along the border with Mexico, with at least one in Laguna del Tigre, one in Sierra de Lacandón, one in the slice just north of Laguna del Tigre, and one in Dos Lagunas. The Battalions will be based out of control posts with constant patrols. As is currently the case with all park patrols, the roving battalion would consist of a triad: park guards, police, and the army.

The most important work of the Green Battalions will be to carry out eviction orders, burning down houses and crops, and then camping out on the land to prevent evicted residents from returning. Moreover, recent periods of "state of siege" in the lowlands have served to take the right to habeus corpus from citizens. Thus, the image of the military burning homes and crops, then camping on the ashes to prevent residents' return, evokes the scorched earth of the civil war.

## 6. Conclusion

Through a historical analysis of discourses of jungle and forest discourses, I have shown affinities between the counterinsurgency and conservation territorial projects. While these projects are incomplete, they have produced racialized landscapes that attach to peoples,

threatening to connect a violent past to a violent future. This discursive point may be of material consequence, as the renewed jungle discourse signals institutionalized military violence in response to the region's "ungovernability" (*ingobernabilidad*).

In their forthcoming piece, Peluso and Vandergeest point out that conservation discourse often ignores that Cold War violence took place in peopled jungles. They argue that political violence contributed to the racialization of forest landscapes, and those populations whose loyalty was most suspect to the counterinsurgency state are today least likely to have formal land rights. Likewise, the New York Times article is silent on the question of whether the squatters and drug traffickers lived through Guatemala's 36-year civil war, much less its effects. I have argued that past political violence was influential in positioning some subsets of the population as vulnerable to criticisms as "bad guys—destroyers of the forest" at the park system's inception during the war, and as *narcocampesinos* today.

In highlighting affinities in discourse and territorial projects between counterinsurgency and conservation projects over time, my overarching goal has been to argue that the military's participation in Guatemalan conservation has important consequences. At the end of the civil war, revelations of genocide of Maya peoples led to a legitimacy crisis and funding cuts for the army. Nationally and internationally, the triple good of defending the borders, fighting drug traffickers, and saving the Maya Forest seems like a way for the military to recuperate its reputation and funding. As a conservationist who is deeply concerned with human rights, this essay is intended to caution that the military's participation may harm conservation's reputation in lowlands Guatemala.

At the same time, I posit that the close relationship between the military and conservation projects could change the discourse of the latter in ways that may not be immediately apparent, but manifest in the spatial practice of conservation. As is often the case with territorial projects, there is no linear path from ungovernable jungle to "Maya-themed vacationland." While the rainforest is a place that needs to be saved, this article has worked to complicate the simple emergency narrative, questioning who the "bad guys" are that are lined up to destroy the forest. In highlighting this perspective of Guatemala's northern lowlands through an analysis of jungle and forest discourses, my goal has not been to show that the "bad guys" are the victims. Instead, I hope to show why the narratives of ungovernability, *narcocampesinos*, and the need to save the Maya Forest are so gripping. Before these narratives

take hold on the conservation community, I hope we think carefully about what kinds of actions we are willing to take.

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[i] US project funding was consolidated through USAID after its creation in 1961.

[ii] FYDEP told Peteneros they would have to purchase their land, but many believed they were already landowners (Schwartz 2000).

[iii] The central government supported this project, but regional agencies quickly grew ambivalent about massive migration. Although regional INTA and FYDEP offices stalled on land titling processes (notoriously slow, often dragging on more than 20 years), they did not stop people from settling the lowlands.

[iv] In many parts of the country, counterinsurgency was genocidal (CEH 1999). This was not the case in Petén, but was in Alta Verapaz directly to the south.

[v] Guatemala battled Mexico over territory during the nineteenth century, and has an ongoing border dispute with Belize today.

[vi] Most of the international conservation agencies mentioned here (Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy), as well as their Guatemalan spin-offs began working with USAID funding. USAID's Mayarema plan created NGO territorial zones that are still in practice today.

[vii] The status of Mopanes is more complicated because they are Petenero Maya, but sometimes intermarry with Q'eqchi's.

[viii] Many people, including those displaced during war violence, do not have documentation of their historical claims.

[ix] Although the dominant narrative remains that the army's role was to combat "subversion," truth commissions found that the army repressed and killed non-combatants.

[x] Although it is illegal for the land titling agency and the Property Register to register titles for privately held land already claimed by the park, these state agencies broke the law to grant legal title to *narcofincas* inside core protected areas.