

# **Montes Azules**

## **Background:**

Montes Azules is a Biosphere Reserve located in the southeastern portion of Chiapas that, for decades now has been the site of continued conflict, refuge and hope for thousands of Chiapanecos. The region was largely uninhabited until the 1950s when it began to serve as a population release valve, accommodating campesinos displaced from their land as cattle ranching began to expand in Chiapas. In the 1980s, the government encouraged settlement of the area to deter the entrance of Guatemalan refugees fleeing the violence of their country's civil war. The 1990s saw the continued use of Montes Azules as a refuge for campesinos looking to escape violence from military or paramilitary forces as the armed conflict in Chiapas began. Also vital to understanding the current context surrounding Montes Azules is the relationship between a community known as the Lacandons and the Mexican government. In 1972 the Mexican government provided a land grant of 614, 321 hectares to the Lacandon peoples who, according to the government, are descended from the original inhabitants of the region and are the "last living Maya." By supporting the claims of the Lacandons over other indigenous groups, the government entered the struggle over control over Montes Azules and created a convenient local partner through which it could pursue its own interests, which it continues to do to this day.

## **Learning Objectives:**

This workshop is intended to offer participants an overview of the ongoing controversy surrounding the Montes Azules Biosphere reserve located in southeastern Chiapas. It is designed to touch on the basic players involved in the fight for control of the reserve, including their interests and strategies.

## **Preparation:**

Each participant should read the following three articles:

"Solicitud de apoyo a la sociedad para reconcentrar a 8 comunidades hostigadas" por EZLN

"LA SELVA LACANDONA Y MONTES AZULES, MANIFESTACION DE LAS DEMANDAS INCUMPLIDAS A LOS PUEBLOS INDIGENAS" por Ciepac

Conservation International Article by Aziz Choudry

## **Directions:**

Participants can take turns reading each of these sections aloud to the group from their Fact Sheet Handout. The Fact Sheet consists of this information without the facilitation directions.

## I. A History of Migration in the Lacandon Jungle

The area of the Lacandon Jungle that was turned into the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve has long been a receptacle for migrants. Often migration to this area was directly encouraged by the same government that later forcibly removed communities from the land.

### Historical Context: The Mexican Revolution and Agrarian Reform

One of the most important things to come out of the Mexican revolution was land reform. In Chiapas, land was redistributed throughout the 1930s, providing tens of indigenous communities with land they previously had not held. While these land grants were important, they were also a way that the government, through manipulative redistribution policies, could guarantee peasant loyalty and pit various indigenous groups against one another. This is an important idea to keep in mind when we discuss the land grant made to the Lacandons.

Dams create forced migration and population concentration.

1970's: Expansion of the hydroelectric industry into the Los Altos region creates waves of refugees into the jungle. 28,000 hectares of jungle are flooded and 20 ejidos are evicted by the Nezahulcoyotl dam at Malpaso (1969). This is the first of four giant dam projects. A massive 63,000 hectares are later flooded by the Angostura dam (1975).

1980's: Massive hydroelectric projects, and the ensuing flooding and displacement of communities, continues to be planned and instituted throughout the state.

Summary: Hydrodams are constructed to create electricity but, in the process, cause dramatic flooding, destroy fertile land and rainforest, in addition to causing massive displacement of persons who then resettle in previously virgin rainforest.

The cattle industry displaces small farmers in favour of large ranches.

The expansion of the cattle industry has displaced many campesino mayans, forcing them to move from the highlands to the lower tierra caliente of the Lacandon. Once resettled these displaced farmers are forced to clear forest to create new farmland. (NAFTA has only aggravated this clearcutting – as market prices drop farmers clearcut more land to try and increase their harvest to make up for lost profits.) Meanwhile, the presence of cattle in the highlands has accelerated soil erosion and highland farming practices used by farmers relocated to the lowlands is destructive to this delicate soil. This environmental destruction of has historically been blamed on the impoverished campesinos and not on the highland lords who forced the agricultural shift.

People are moved to the jungle after natural disasters.

1983: The Chichon volcano erupts in the highlands of Chiapas, destroying homes and communities. Hundreds of peasant refugees are relocated by the government to prefab housing in the Lacandon Jungle.

Immigrants in search of civil security.

Neighboring Guatemala's nearly 30 year civil war, which was ended in 1996 when Peace

Accords were signed, expelled refugees across the border directly into the Montes Azules region. The jungle has historically been a general receptacle for refugees, from Guatemala and other regions.

Activity: As a group, generate critical thinking answers to the following questions. Ideas and responses should be written up on large sheets of paper on the wall so that workshop participants can keep them in mind.

Who are the people forced to migrate into the jungle? What social interests are being prioritized in each of these situations? What information about the government's relationship to the jungle can we glean?

Suggested Conclusions: The jungle has long been a destination for societies most vulnerable citizens; refugees, victims of natural disasters, government projects and indigenous peasant farmers. Repeatedly, as we see in the instance of the electricity-generating dams and with the cattle industry expansion, money-making interests have outweighed human interests and forced migration. Often times the migrants have been encouraged to settle in the jungle, as was explicitly the case after the Chichon volcano. Prior to the Montes Azules Reserve, environmental interests have not been of importance (dams are destructive, as is ranching and forced migration).

## II. The Lacandon People (or are they?)

1971: The government granted 614,321 hectares of land (1,517,371 acres) to 66 families who had only requested 10,000 hectares.

The origin of these families, called the Lacandons, is controversial. The government claims the Lacandones are the original inhabitants of the jungle and the builders of the Palenque ruins. For this reason, they claim, the land grant was justified; it was a return of the land to its original owners. Others contest this origin and believe this group immigrated into the area from the Caribbean and were then renamed the "Lacandons."

No matter what the true origins of the Lacandons, the land grant is excessively large for so few families. The grant was made in spite of 47 other pending land applications and the presence of other indigenous communities who had populated the land since the 1960s. The land grant did not, however, include the two privately held plantations that were in the area.

The government then signed a contract with the Lacandons for the extraction of 35,000 cubic meters of precious wood annually in exchange for 5,000 pesos every 6 months for each of the Caribe people, as well as projects and an airplane in exchange for these logging rights.

Activity: Have each participant, on a piece of paper, write down 2 reflections about the political situation that motivated this grant or its consequences, or any other reflections people would like to include. Have participants share their reflections with each other.

### III. Creation of Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve

1978 A Mexican presidential decree converts 331,200 hectares of jungle into the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve. The Reserve begins just north of Naha and extends to the Rio Lacantun. (map) Oddly, the canyons of Las Margaritas and Ocosingo are left outside of the reserve, although these zones contained the most biodiversity of any part of the jungle.

### IV. Profitable (Shams of) Environmentalism

#### Conservation International

#### CI on CI:

∑ CI was founded in 1987 in Washington DC, and focuses on creating nature preserves, singling out earth's biodiversity "hot spots" - regions comprising 1.4% of the Earth's surface and containing some 60% of its species diversity. CI claims that its corporate supporters "know that their customers, shareholders and employees share a common concern about protecting the environment."

∑ 1991: Debt for Nature Programs. Conservation International purchased \$4 million in debt for \$1.8 million with the stipulation that Mexico had to spend \$2.6 million on preservation programs in the jungle - a program begun in Bolivia in 1987 and replicated elsewhere with investments of more than 1 billion USD. Most all of this went to the Montes Azules research station, which was to be run by CI (in collaboration with USAID) to map the genetic wealth of the region.

#### The People on CI:

∑ In these biological "reserves", CI works closely with genetic engineering firms, pharmaceutical, petroleum, natural gas and other companies with a great deal of economic interest in regions so rich in biodiversity, and also promotes the private control of these regions allowing business interests to trump the stated goal of "conservation"

∑ Behind their "green" talk, CI works closely with major transnational corporations and governments that do not endorse the Kyoto Protocol (Indonesia, the Philippines, the Salomon Islands and the United States). These corporations include: Cemex, Citigroup, Chiquita, Exxon Mobil Foundation, Ford, Gap, J P Morgan Chase and Co., McDonalds, Sony, Starbucks, United Airlines and Walt Disney.

∑ Biosphere Reserves are theoretically designed to incorporate small populations of indigenous peoples, and integrate them into local management. Instead, the Mexican state's globally managed environmental policy only pitted the Highland Maya settlers in the Selva against their cousins, the Lacandons – and made the settlers hostile to the notion of "environmentalism." (Bill Weinberg, "Homage to Chiapae," p195)

∑ CI and USAID have openly admitted to aiding the Lacandon's legal claims against "irregular" and "destructive" settlements within the Reserve with statistical information and satellite pictures provided by NASA and USAID flyovers in the region. Delegations formed to investigate in the wake of these claims found that environmental was most prevalent around the military bases in the region and not around indigenous communities, therefore undermining the justification for removal of these communities.

## Exploitation of the "Reserve"

### Logging

∑ Logging firms are allowed to remove saleable wood up until the very edge of the Biosphere Reserve. Marcos: "Despite the current popularity of ecology, Chiapan forests continue to be destroyed. From 1981 to 1989, 2,444,700 cubic meters of precious woods, conifers, and tropical trees were taken from Chiapas."

∑ Throughout the 1970's, machines from the giant logging companies continued opening large swaths in the heart of the jungle, destroying the ground cover and now endangered species of trees (Caoba, Cedro, Guanacastle, Palo picho, Ceiba, Jolmashte, Matiliguat, Jobo, Cashan, Guapaque, Cedrillo, Guaite, Molinillo, Bojón, Papelillo, Petastillo y Ramoncillo.) With each tree that is cut, 2 or 3 others around it are also felled.

∑ Forestry company Triplay de Palenque reports that between 1970 and 1981, more than 400,000 hectares of the Lacandon Jungle were lost due to the politics of colonization, the booming cattle industry in the jungle and monocrop cultivation.

### Genetic Extraction

∑ The Mexican government, at the end of 1995, entered into a "bioprospecting" deal with the University of Georgia and California's Diversa firm, granting them the right to search the natural areas for profitable genetic material. The \$2.5 million dollar ICBG-Maya project, entitled "Drug Discovery and Biodiversity among the Maya in Mexico," was funded by the US government in September 1998 - through organized resistance the project, which would have paved the way for patenting and commercialization of medicinal plants and herbs used for generations by the Mayans, was terminated.

In Summary: Conservation International has come under fire for its role as the vanguard of "green" or "bio" imperialism - using the discourse of environmentalism as a cover for development projects such as the PPP, and the development of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (which, according to some sources, includes an 8-lane highway through the Montes Azules Reserve). These projects ultimately serve the interests of capital, and not the interests of the people nor even those of protecting the environment.

Discussion: How do claims that the indigenous Caribe are the "original" Lacandons, and the subsequent land claim (the largest in Mexico's history) fit in with CI's projects of creating these bioreserves? What, if anything, is the discrepancy between the government's new discourse of conservation and its past and current actions towards environmental protection, and how can we understand this discrepancy?

## V. Land-Based Violence

The Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve is not only the deepest part of the jungle but also the poorest part of Chiapas.

### Relocation of Settlements Within the Reserve

∑ Between 1976 and 1977, the government founds two new population centers, Frontera Echeverría (Nueva Palestina) and Velasco Suárez (Frontera Corozal), where 21 communal ejido lands were to be relocated. They are promised basic services as well as

productive projects, which never come through, causing many of these families to return to their lands in the biosphere. This comes after the Lacandon land claim and precedes the creation of the MA Biosphere.

Σ The Montes Azules Biosphere, created in 1978, demarcates 331,200 hectares of land, 80 percent of which belongs to the "Lacandon Community". Within the biosphere there are 27 legal settlements, 18 awaiting paperwork to legitimate their claims and 15 "illegal" settlements - occupying a total of 34 percent of the reserve, or 113,598 hectares.

Σ In February of 2005, 162 families, enticed by government promises of houses, land, projects, and a locale closer to the city of Palenque, willingly left their lands within the reserve (El Censo, Santa Elena, Petalcingo, Paraíso de las Ruinas, Zapotal, Villa de las Rosas y Tumbalá), only to find that their homes in the new settlement, ironically called "Montes Azules", were a disaster. They were too small for their families, lacked functioning bathrooms, had broken roofs, and with insufficient and arid lands unable to produce enough food. Many of the families have since returned to their former lands in the Biosphere.

#### Violence and Displacement

Σ In late 1994 the government demanded that hundreds of Mayan settlers vacate the border areas of the Montes Azules biosphere reserve, claiming that this was a necessary action to protect biodiversity.

Σ In 2004, Zapatista base de apoyo, Nuevo San Rafael was invaded by a number of elements of the military, burning to the ground 23 houses in the community. The land was retaken two years prior to this attack by residents of El Calvario, a community in the northern zone of Chiapas in the Municipality of Sabanilla.

Σ On November 13, 2006, settlers from Nueva Palestina (interestingly, one of the communities created in the wake of expulsions from the Montes Azules Biosphere) supported by the paramilitary organization OPDDIC, massacred the community Viejo Velasco, located in the reserve, leaving a toll of 4 dead, at least 4 disappeared, 2 in prison and nearly 40 people displaced from their lands.

#### Continued Violence in the Reserve and the Canyons

Σ In the wake of the Viejo Velasco massacre, and with the support of the new state government of Juan Sabines (PRI turncoat who now flies the PRD's colors) the paramilitary organization OPPDIC has launched a number of threats of violence and displacement against EZLN communities in and around the MA biosphere, now with the vocal support of the Secretary of Agrarian reform.

Σ The EZLN lands falling under new threats of displacement, new settlements on lands taken in the wake of the 1994 uprising, are primarily concentrated in the Canyons of Ocosingo and Las Margaritas. While they are not all within the Reserve, the canyons are some of the most biodiverse areas in the region

Σ On May 9, 2007, the Federal Government announced the further expropriation of more than 14,000 hectares of land in the municipality of Ocosingo, in order to create another protected reserve - but without indicating which, exactly, were the lands to be affected.

Activity: Participants divide into groups (based on the number of participants, at least 2 per group), and each group is assigned one of the following roles:

- ∑ A Zapatista Community within the reserve under threat of displacement
- ∑ Comuneros from the "Lacandon Community"
- ∑ A soldier present in the 2004 attack against Nuevo San Rafael (where 23 houses were burned to displace the community)
- ∑ President of Conservation International
- ∑ Mexico's Secretary of Agrarian Reform

Each group will have 5 minutes to speak amongst themselves to make their case from the given perspective, speaking on the question of the MA reserve and the displacements of communities within it.

## VI. The EZLN

Around half of the communities that hedge along and within the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve are EZLN bases of support. The military (and paramilitary) is also heavily positioned along the edges of the reserve. The paramilitarization of the Montes Azules area and the displacements of communities can be understood as a politically motivated action and as tactic of low intensity warfare against the zapatistas. Eviction and relocation of communities disrupts autonomous institutions and zapatista functioning, dispersing the population and weakening the resistance.

### Alternative Proposals for Environmental Preservation: Harmony with the Land

The Mexican state's globally managed environmental policy unnecessarily and falsely pits people against nature. This has made mayan settlers hostile to the idea of "environmentalism" by using the concept as one that exploits the rights of the settlers, campesinos and indigenous in the name of profit, rather than taking a true and active interest in the sustainable and just preservation of the jungle.

The zapatistas want no more ecological reserves and call for a more sustainable and equitable plan for environmental preservation that takes into account both the interests of the people and the welfare of the land. The zapatista proposal understands environmental degradation as based in land-poverty. They call for a redistribution of the large ranches and estates so that virgin areas of the jungle can be protected. They believe that the proximity of thriving forest to farmed land is essential.

Closing Activity: We've been focusing specifically on the Montes Azules Biosphere, but clearly these are issues that extend far beyond the boundaries of the Reserve. We see the EZLN as one response to not only environmental destruction but to the poverty and inequality that go hand in hand with it - challenging not just environmental destruction but the systems that perpetuate it. What are some other instances of the sort of double-talk that we've been looking at in our own countries and communities? And what form, if any, is resistance to these projects and these systems taking? How can we understand these disparate situations, despite vastly different contexts, as nevertheless being related? At this point, individuals will spend 10 minutes or so writing on these questions, later coming back together and sharing some of these reflections as a group as a form of closing the workshop.

## Sources:

Collier, George A. and Quaratiello, Elizabeth Lowery. "Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas." The Institute for Food and Development Policy: California, 1994.

Weinberg, Bill. "Homage to Chiapas: The New Indigenous Struggles in Mexico." Verso: New York, 2000.

## Textual Information

Summary of Montes Azules histor

<http://www.ecoport.net/content/view/full/21223>

Centro del Análisis Político de Investigaciones Sociales y Económicas (CAPISE):  
Informe on Montes Azules

<http://www.laneta.apc.org/capise/espa/inicio.html>

Detailed Report on Montes Azules

<http://www.parkswatch.org/parkprofile.php?!=eng&country=mex&park=mabr&pa...>

Brief article addressing several of the ongoing controversies relating to Montes Azules, such as international conservation groups and the territorial rights of the Lacandon Indians.

<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2004/04/290083.html>

## Visuals

Photo of two children from Montes Azules with a sign demanding the recognition of their rights to the land.

[http://globaljusticeecology.org/imgs/photo\\_essays\\_3/montesazuleschildren...](http://globaljusticeecology.org/imgs/photo_essays_3/montesazuleschildren...)

Photo of two men working a milpa in Nuevo San Gregorio, a community in Montes Azules.

[http://globaljusticeecology.org/imgs/photo\\_essays\\_3/milpamen.jpg](http://globaljusticeecology.org/imgs/photo_essays_3/milpamen.jpg)

Map of Montes Azules that identifies various communities as well

<http://www.chiapaspictures.com/displayimage.php?album=48&pos=4>

Additional Montes Azules Map

<http://www.chiapaspictures.com/displayimage.php?album=48&pos=5>

Map identifying the area inhabited by the Lacandon people within the Selva Lacandona

<http://www.chiapaspictures.com/displayimage.php?album=48&pos=9>