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The Zapatistas: An ecological revolution?

John Ross

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Somewhere in the Lacandon Jungle, Chiapas: The roots of the rebel Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) have long been intertwined with the roots of what remains of the Lacandon rainforest. The Tzeltal, Tojolabal, Tzotzil and Chol indigenous farmers who now form the core of the EZLN first came to the Lacandon as part of the great stream of settlers that poured into the forest 30 years ago. According to sociologists their long struggle to remain in the region, despite the objections of environmentalists dedicated to preserving the integrity of this unique lowland tropical jungle, have shaped the demands and the militancy of the Zapatista Army. Now, as tensions between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government ratchet up, environmentalists fear renewed hostilities could do irrevocable damage to the rainforest.

When the European invaders first reached this paradisaical region in 1530, they literally could not find the forest for the trees. The rainforest extended from the Yucatan peninsula southwest, blending with the Gran Petan of Guatemala at the Usumacinta river, a swatch of jungle matched in the New World only by the Amazon

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basin. The Lacandon region was a three million acre wilderness of pristine rivers and lakes, its canopy teeming with Quetzales and Guacamayas under which lived ocelots and jaguars, herds of wild boar and tapir, and the Indians who gave the forest its name. The first Lacandones and the Spanish interlopers fought a guerrilla war that did not end until the Indians did — by 1769, there were just five elderly Lacandoes left living outside a mission on the Guatemalan bank of the Usumacinta.

The story of the Lacandon jungle is one of massacres, both of Indians and trees, relates Jan De Vos, the San Cristobal-based historian of the Chiapas rainforest. Soon after Chiapas won its independence from Guatemala and Spain, expeditions were sent to explore the “Desert (jungle) of Ocosingo” — De Vos uses its more poetic name “the Desert of Solitude” — all the way to the juncture of its great rivers, the Jacate and the Usumacinta. Timber merchants soon learned how to move logs on the rivers, and priceless mahogany and cedar groves began to fall. By the turn of the century the jungle was seething with logging camps — monterias — in which the Mayan Indians, gangpressed in Ocosingo, were chained to their axes and hanged from the trees. The conditions in the monterias were exposed to the world in the 1920s in a series of novels by the German anarchist writer Bruno Traven.

Foreign investors bought up huge chunks of the jungle — the Marquis of Comillas, a Spanish nobleman, still lends his name to a quarter of the forest. In the 1950s, Vancouver Plywood, a U.S. wood products giant, bought up a million acres of the Lacandon through Mexican proxy companies, and made another dent in the forest. The Mexican government later cancelled all foreign concessions and installed its own logging enterprise, initialed COFALASA, which took 10,000 virgin mahogany and cedar trees out of the heart of the Lacandon every year for a decade.

The settlers began to stream into the forest in the 1950s, boosted by government decrees that deemed the Lacandon apt for colonization. Choles, pushed out of Palanque, settled on the eastern flanks

environmentalists. “Few armed groups have ever included these kinds of demands in their manifestos” comments CIES investigator Miguel Sanchez-Vazquez. Andrew Mutter of the Lacandon preservationist Na’Bolom Institute is also sympathetic to the environmental roots of the EZLN: “this revolution rose from the ashes of a dead forest...”

of the forest. Tzotzil Mayans from the highlands, expelled from landpoor communities like San Juan Chamula under the pretext of their conversion to Protestantism, arrived in the west of the Lacandon, as did landless Tzeltals and Tojolabales, newly freed from virtual serfdom on the great fincas (haciendas) of Comitán and Las Margaritas. In 1960 the Mexican government declared the Lacandon jungle the “Southern Agrarian Frontier” and non-Mayans joined the exodus into the forest. Oaxacan Mixes displaced from their communal lands by government dams, campesinos from Veracruz uprooted by the cattle ranching industry, and landless mestizos from the central Mexican states of Guerrero and Michoacán all pushed through Ocosingo, Las Margaritas and Altamirando, on their way down to the canyons — Las Canadas — towards the heart of the forest. The land rush narrowed the dimensions of the Lacandon and upped its population considerably. In 1960 the municipality of Ocosingo had a population of 12,000 — the 1990 census was 250,000.

The new settlers were not kind to the forest. Infused with pioneer spirit, the campesinos cut the forest without mercy to charter and extend their ejidos (rural communal production units). Other settlers were more footloose, aligned themselves with the cattle ranchers, slashed and burned their way into the Lacandon, planted a crop or two, and abandoned the land to a cattle ranching industry fueled by World Bank credits. The zone of Las Canadas, the Zapatista base area, was one of the most devastated by the logging and cattle industries.

Two government decrees sought to brake the flow into the forest but backfired badly. In 1972, President Luis Echeverría turned 645,000 hectares of the jungle over to 66 second-wave Lacandon families and ordered all non-Lacandones evicted — settler communities were leveled by the military. Seeking to crystalize communal organizations that could defend the settlers from being thrown off the land they had wrested from the jungle, San Cristobal de las Casa’s liberation Bishop Samuel Ruiz sent priests and lay workers

into the region to build campesino organizations such as the Union of Unions, Union Quiptic, and the ARIC — formations from which the Zapatistas arose years later.

Then, in 1978, a new president, Jose Lopez Portillo, added to the turmoil by designating 380,00 hectares at the core of the jungle as the UNESCO-sponsored Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve, declaring that all settlers living inside its boundaries must leave. Forty ejidos, twenty-three of them in the Canadas, were threatened. A young EZLN officer, Major Sergio, remembers well the struggle of his family to stay on their land in Montes Azules: “the government would not hear our petitions. We were left with no road except to pick up the gun.”

Many Zapatista fighters — the bulk of the fighting force is between 16 and 24 years old — were born into the struggle of their parents to stay in the Lacandon in defiance of the Montes Azules eviction notice. “The first experience the young colonos of Las Canadas had with a factor external to their lives was the pressure brought by environmentalists to preserve the forest,” writes sociologist Xochitl Leyva in *Ojarasca*, a journal of indigenous interests.

A 1989 environmentalist-backed ban on all wood-cutting in the Lacandon also led to resistance and frequent clashes with the newly-created Chiapas forestry patrols. In one of the first EZLN actions, two soldiers, thought to have been confused with forestry patrolmen, were killed in March 1993 near a clandestine sawmill outside San Cristobal.

The EZLN uprising has highlighted the development vs. conservation controversy that has raged in the Lacandon for generations. The EZLN demand that new roads be cut into the region drew immediate objection from the prestigious Group of 100, which, under the pen of poet-ecologist Homero Aridjis, complained the new roads would mean “the death of the Lacandon.” The Zapatista demand for land distribution also worries Ignacio March, chief investigator at the Southeast Center for Study and Investigation (CEIS), who fears the jungle will be “subdivided” to accommodate the rebels.

“Ecologists? Who needs them? What we need here is land, work, housing,” Major Mario remarked to *La Jornada* earlier this winter, when questioned about the opposition of the environmental community to EZLN demands.

The June 10th EZLN turndown of the Mexican government’s 32-point peace proposal has heightened fears of renewed fighting, a worst-case scenario for ecologists. S. Jeffrey Wilkerson, director of the Veracruz-based Center for Cultural Ecology worries that a military invasion of the Lacandon by the Mexican Army would mean the cutting of many roads into untouched areas, the use of destructive heavy machinery, the detonation of landmines, bombings and devastating forest fires and even oil well blow-outs.

Because of national security considerations, PEMEX, the government petroleum consortium, does not disclose the number of wells it is drilling in the Lacandon — some researchers think there are at least a hundred. From the air, the roads dug between oil platforms scar the jungle floor, and painful bald patches encircle the drilling stations.

One of the Zapatistas’ most important contributions to preserving the integrity of the Lacandon was to force 1400 oil workers employed by PEMEX, U.S. Western Oil, and the French Geofisica Corporation to shut down operations and abandon their stations during the early days of the war.

Despite disputes with the environmental community, the EZLN may be one of the most ecologically-motivated armed groups ever to rise in Latin America. The Zapatista Revolutionary Agrarian Law calls for an end to “the plunder of our natural wealth” and protests “the contamination of our rivers and water sources,” supports the preservation of virgin forest zones and the reforestation of logged-out areas. The lands they demand, the rebels insist, should not be shorn from the Lacandon but rather stripped from the holdings of large landowners.

The EZLN approach to the forest in which they and their families have lived for decades draws grudging approval from some