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The Vanishing Jungle

Despite legal measures to protect them, Mexico's jungles are still shrinking; if the trend continues we may face a major ecological disaster

President Miguel de la Madrid established the Commission to Protect the

Lacandon jungle as part of Mexico's participation this year in International Environment Day first instituted by the United Nations on June 5, 1972. The Presidential Decree was the first step toward having the nature reserve, "Sian Ka A'n," declared part of the



Jesse Helms attacks Mexico from the U.S. Senate.

Mexico, on the other hand, holds the position that the responsibility of consumer-countries should be linked to the problem of countries where drugs are produced and illegally traded. This means the U.S. should accept the responsibility of reducing internal consumption of drugs. This policy is not in agreement with the emphasis U.S. policy places on fighting drug traffic, rather than dealing with the causes and consequences of widely extended drug-addiction in U.S. society.

The discussions in the Senate sub-committee have obviously brought the drug traffic issue to the forefront again in bilateral relations. This is the situation on the eve of the presidential meeting, despite Mexico's efforts to keep the problem within the bounds of judicial and law-enforcement relations between the two nations.

Blanche Petrich



The jungle gives way.

Photo by AFP

Photo from INAH, the National Anthropological and Historical Institute.

patrimony of all humanity. Just a few days later, the Commission announced the indefinite suspension of credits for range cattle operations in the zone, the intensification of controls to prevent the logging of precious woods species and the total prohibition of hunting in the region.

A CRUSADE TO SAVE THE LACANDON JUNGLE

In 1448, the skies above Lacandon jungle began to cloud over, the Aztecs conquered the Chiapa and Choconochco empires and the omens of destruction drew close on the horizon.

Years later, in 1527, the second Spanish expedition to the region finally managed to subjugate the Chiapan Indians. The first expedition had been turned back after

three years of fierce resistance by the Indians. The first direct assault on the jungle occurred when Catholic religious groups uprooted the Indians from their native habitats in the zone in order to "christianize" them and to set up new towns in parts of the area that had already been colonized. Nonetheless, Spanish domination was not strong enough to subjugate the might and immensity of the jungle, which silently contemplated as its most highly developed children were conquered, subdued by the sinister *encomienda** and sold as slaves to serve the Spaniards.

Some Indian groups were able to escape and return to their native homes. Two of them had the greatest luck and still survive today: the Quejaches and a small group of Choles. They first oc-

cupied an area called Lacamtum, which the Spanish called Lacandon. This is the name they used to baptize the most hostile region, the region which they could not conquer.

THE HEARTBEAT OF THE JUNGLE

The region known as the Lacandon jungle lies between 16°04' and 17°56' north latitude and 90°22' and 92°42' west longitude. It represents some 15 percent of the jungle area in Chiapas. Recently it has been the victim of a voraciously destructive process that goes far beyond the jungle's regenerative capacity or the ability of concerned authorities to assure its conservation.

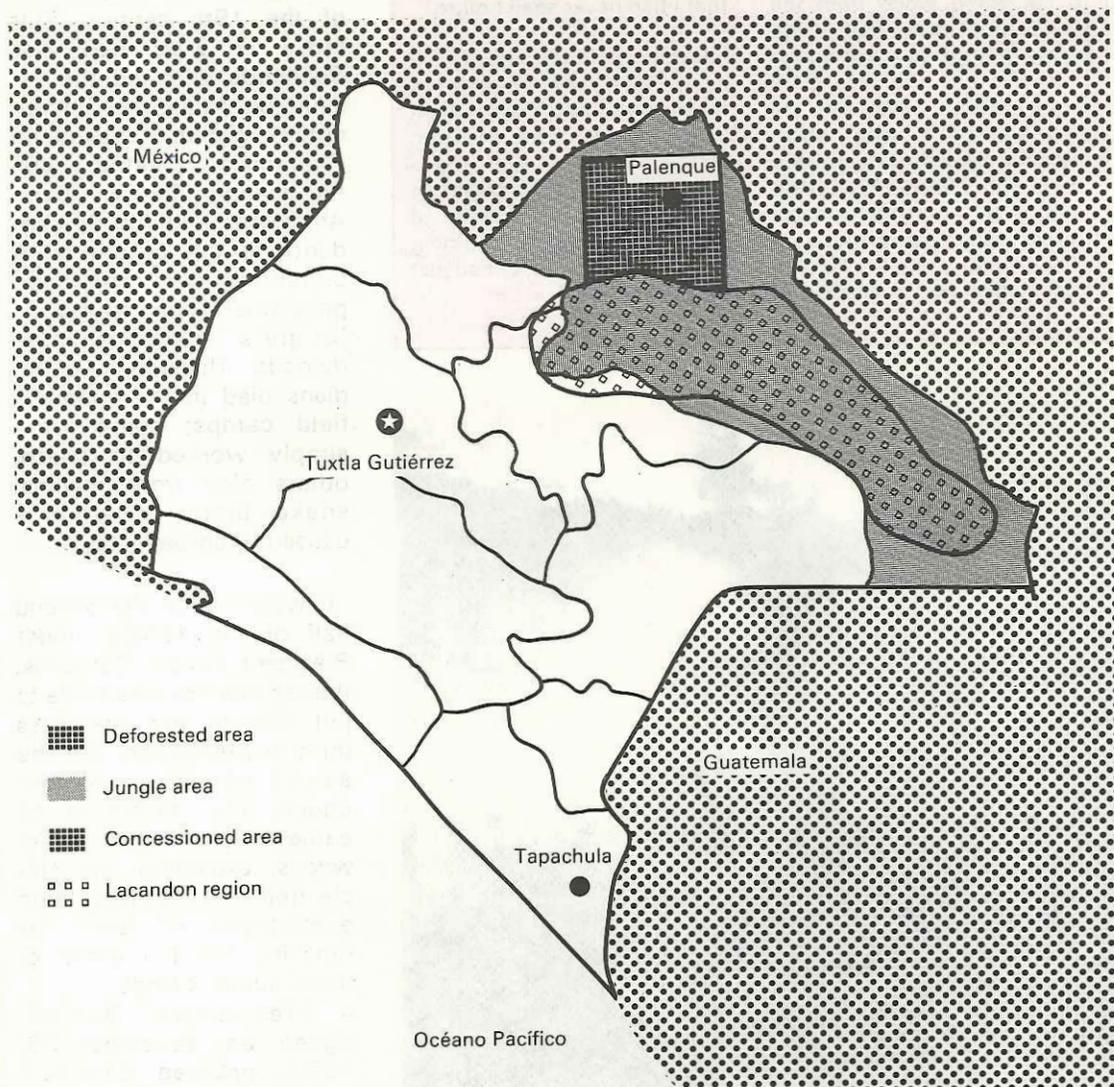
As old as America itself, the densest of jungle vegetation stretches as far north as the

state of Tabasco, as far south and east as the Guatemalan border and as far west as the Chiapan Highlands. A multitude of animal species live within its 614,321 hectares, and together give the jungle its unique voice. There are sounds that express anger, joy and sadness; combined, they are strong enough to swallow up anything that dares to defy the jungle.

Of the 25 million hectares of jungle that existed before the conquest, only 3.5 million still exist today in Chiapas. This includes the low jungle, or scrub vegetation, which covers those areas that have already been deforested and which have little possibility of being regenerated; and the high, or closed jungle, with its mahogany trees that take 200 years to grow to maturity, and that give the dense jungle part of its special character.

The closed jungle has two principal predators today. First, the Tzeltal, Chol, Tzotzil, Zoque and Lacandon Indian groups, who exploit the jungle because they have no land and no other job opportunities. Thus, they have been forced to move into the least productive parts of the forests. They use the age-old "slash and burn" method to plant corn, chiles and beans. "Slash and burn" consists of clearing the land that will become their cornfields of all vegetation, felling the large trees, letting everything dry in the 42° heat, average temperature in the zone, and then setting fire to it all. The leftover ash serves as fertilizer for the newly-cleared soil. The average productive life for a cornfield in the zone is only five years, after which the people who planted

*The *encomienda* was a system developed during the colonial period in which large groups of Indians were assigned to specific Spanish landowners, who were entrusted with their conversion to Christianity. In return for their salvation, the Indians were required to provide labor, goods and services to the Spanish.



State of Chiapas, Mexico.

there will have to choose another site and begin the cycle once again. It is estimated that with each planting season, some 40,000 hectares of jungle, with its wealth of plant and animal life, fall victim to this activity.

The other major predator is the Lacandon Forest Company, which logs precious tree species and razes everything that lies in its path. The company works in eleven communities or municipal areas, including Yajalón, Sitala, Tumbalá, Salto de Agua and Palenque.

The jungle area receives an average of 2.1 meters of rainfall annually. There are deep rivers, such as the Lacantún that flows into the Usumacinta, lakes inhabited by fish and crocodiles, foliage that covers everything and twelve species of high canopy trees, including mahogany, cedars and pines, whose huges trunks provide dens for numerous animal species. The dense foliage of the canopy species prevents sunlight from penetrating to the lower levels, thus maintaining the moisture levels that permit the formation of humus. In turn the humus is crucial for soil fertility levels

Walking Through the Jungle

Marie Odile Marion, researcher at the National Anthropological and Historical Institute, has worked in the Lacandon Jungle, living among its inhabitants for the past ten years. She sits in front of me now, behind one of those desks that are so common in public offices, Odile's face expressing her enthusiasm as she talks of her most recent experiences among the Lacandon people. Her eyes are filled with the same excitement that marks her reflections on the complexity and grandness of the jungle. In our interview she describes what is a single instant in the marvelous richness of jungle life.

"We left early. K'inbor wanted to cut some wood from the *Chicozapote* tree and some palms in order to make a new bow. His old one was quite worn from so much use. He also wanted to hunt some birds for his wife, who wanted the feathers for her hair. After walking for hours along hard-to-distinguish paths, there are about twenty, and it's hard to know which one to take to get

to where you want to go...It is extremely difficult to maintain your sense of direction among so many plants and trees of the same type...

"It was already past noon; I began to feel the pangs of thirst and hunger. I couldn't stand it any longer and decided to admit my weakness."

"K'inbor, I'm hungry and thirsty; I can't go on."

"Don't worry; wait here for me."

"He leaped through the vegetation with the agility of a wild animal; in a moment, I lost sight of him. I didn't wait long, but had just enough time to reflect for a moment: despite my ten years of experience in the jungle, I wouldn't be capable of moving in it with that kind of agility. And then K'inbor reappeared with a gourd filled with water, fruit and some leaves that I had never seen before."

"If you get thirsty again," he said, "just chew some of these leaves and they'll take it away and even keep you from feeling hungry." And that's how it was. Even though we continued for a couple of hours more before returning home, I felt full, as if I had just finished eating."

since jungle soils, in themselves, tend to be rather poor.

Private companies hold 70 percent of the concessions permitting the exploitation of jungle areas, yet they have not made proposals for reforestation. The richness of the jungle has made it possible to develop precise exploitation regimes. Production now averages 275,366 cubic meters of lumber annually, or five percent of the total exploitable resources. Even at the present rate and without including clandestine logging operations which avoid official controls, the jungle flora will be totally depleted within the next eighty years.

THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

The penetration of the jungle accelerated rapidly throughout the second half of the 19th century. This time it was not the Spaniards who led the assault, but rather the German coffee growers based in Guatemala, together with the French, English, North Americans and the descendants of the colonizers. A brutal and inhumane company was formed to log the jungle's precious hardwoods. Thousands of Indians died in the infamous field camps; some were simply worked to death, others died from malaria, snake bites or wounds caused by chicle fly bites.

It wasn't until the second half of the 1930's, under President Lázaro Cárdenas, that an attempt was made to put end to this merciless form of exploitation. But the assault on the jungle continued. The profits to be earned from logging hardwoods, exploiting the chicle tree or controlling huge extensions of land for ranching fed the greed of many human beings.

A Presidential Decree, signed on November 26, 1971, granted 614,321 hectares of land to the Lacandon Indians as a



Photo from INAH, the National Anthropological and Historical Institute.

Slash and burn.

natural biosphere reserve. Nonetheless, these lands are once again threatened. A highway is being built that slices through the jungle from north to south, splitting the region and further facilitating the excesses of the hardwoods operations.

The jungle has eighty more years to live, before it is totally destroyed, together with the four Indian groups and hundreds of animal species which inhabit it. For more than a century now, the jungle has used its natural defenses against sophisticated forms of deforestation, but the toughest battles are yet to be fought. The death of the jungle would signify the loss of a part of our cultural heritage, the extinction of hundreds of plant and animal species and the

destruction of one of the country's most important "natural lungs," endangering adjacent areas of Guatemala and Mexico at the same time.

This is the imminent danger in the case of the ancestral Lacandon jungle. The situation demands that we develop a new consciousness of our **relationship** to nature: while it is true that people should take advantage of the environment for our own benefit and development, it is also true that we must do so in a programmed and responsible manner; if not, the environment will be ravished and the human species, too, may be threatened with its own extinction.★

Ramsés Ramírez