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ETHNOCARTOGRAPHY IN HONDURAS AND PANAMA: HOW THE PROJECTS EMERGED

The idea for ethnocartography in Honduras and Panama grew out of the situation on the ground, where indigenous peoples were under increasing pressures and in danger of losing control over their land and resources. A precursor for the idea of showing land use to bolster land tenure claims was a 1992 map of Central America prepared by Native Lands (in its earlier guise as the Central American Program of Cultural Survival) for the National Geographic Society showing the connection between indigenous peoples and the last remaining wilderness in the region (Chapin 1992). The leap from that map to applied ethnocartography was gradual, and unfolded according to the specific needs of groups in Honduras and Panama.

THE MOSQUITIA

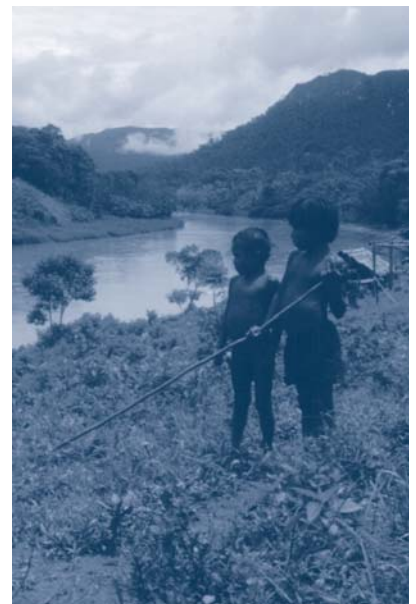
The Mosquitia is a roughly 20,000 km² expanse of relatively intact wilderness situated in the far northeast corner of the country, including the department of Gracias a Dios and portions of the departments of Colón and Olancho (see Figure 3). A mixture of mangrove forest and associated wetlands runs along the Caribbean coast, with pine savannah mixed with lush broadleaf forest farther inland. As many as 50,000 people belonging to the Garifuna, Miskito, Pech, and Tawahka peoples — interspersed with pockets of Ladinos who have lived in the region for decades and, in some cases, centuries — inhabit more than 170 communities. It is the most sparsely settled region of Honduras, covering approximately 20 percent of the nation's land surface but containing barely 1 percent of the nation's population. It is also the most remote. No roads enter the Mosquitia to connect it to the rest of the country; it can only be reached by boat along the coast, by small plane, or by trekking overland on foot or horseback.

MOPAWI (see box on page 13) had operated a diverse program of integrated development in the Mosquitia since 1985, yet early on had realized that land protection was the key to everything else, and in 1987 created a Land Legalization Program. During the previous 25 years, colonization by landless peasants and cattle ranchers, primarily from Olancho Department, has advanced steadily along the southern and southwestern flanks of the Mosquitia. The intruders have been moving across the mountains and down the major river valleys at an ever-increasing pace, securing new areas by clearing land, and each year expanding deeper into the forests of the region. Not only was this a

Figure 1. Pine savannah near Wampusirpi, La Mosquitia.



Mac Chapin



Mac Chapin

Figure 2. Children at Yapuwas, along the Patuca River, La Mosquitia.

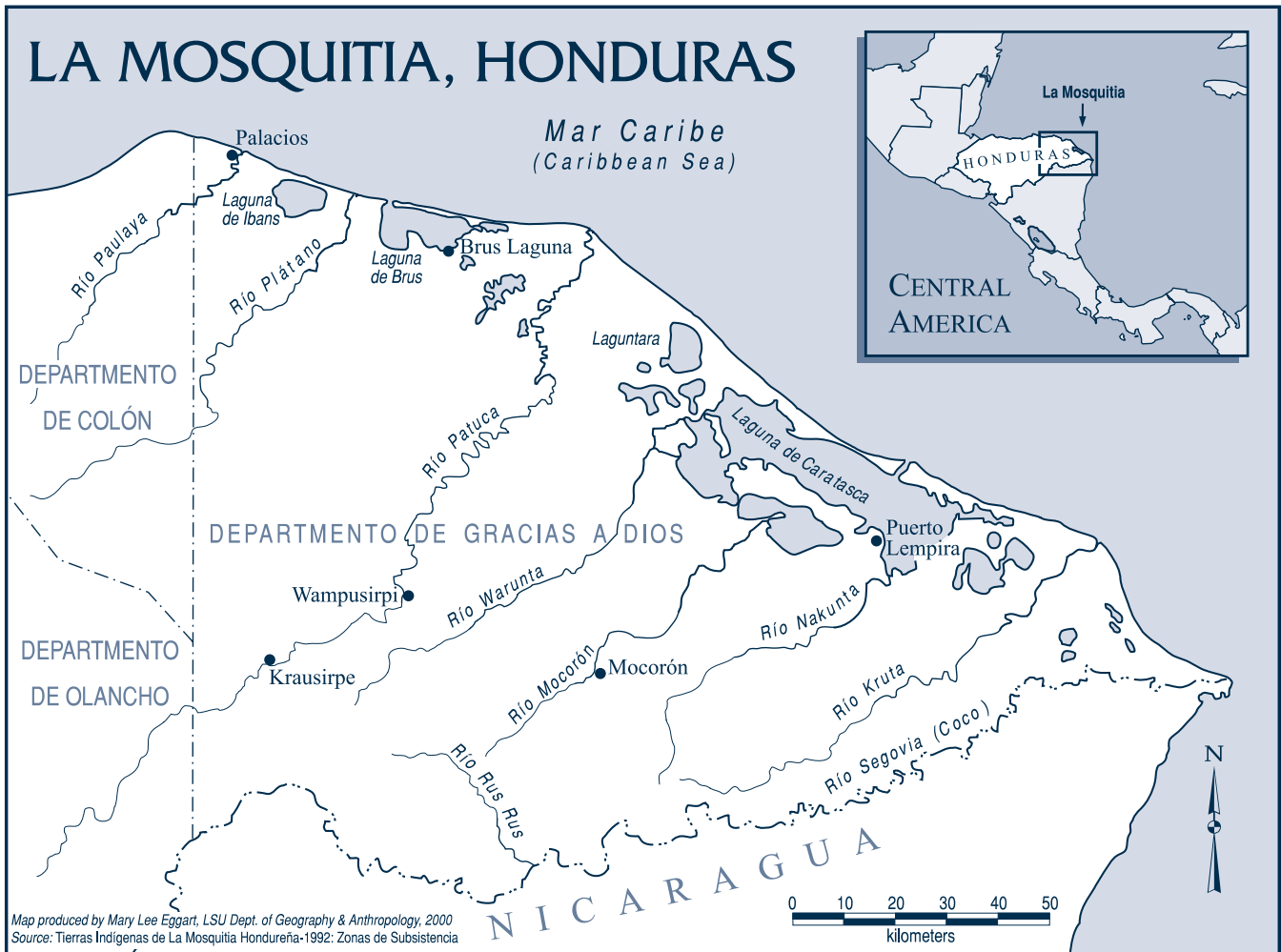


Figure 3.

threat to the Mosquitia's fragile ecology, it was also a menace to the social, political, and economic integrity of the local population.

In September 1991, large-scale logging appeared on the near horizon. The Stone Container Corporation — based in Chicago, Illinois, where it manufactures paper bags and cardboard boxes — gained concessionary rights to clear-cut (for wood chips) a vast stretch of forest running from the Mocerón and Rus Rus Rivers to the Patuca River, covering most of the central third of the Mosquitia. The tract formed a substantial part of the

approximately one million hectares covered in the agreement signed by Honduran President Rafael Callejas. This transaction to pulp approximately one-quarter of the nation's remaining forests was carried out secretly, under circumstances that were certainly shady and most likely illegal. When news leaked to the press, there was instant and vigorous opposition from environmental groups and local timber interests. A campaign of protest built rapidly and came to a head in early 1992.

While alarm over these developments reverberated throughout the

Mosquitia, opposition there was, at best, diffuse and muted. There was no region-wide awareness of the immediacy of the threats, and there was no sense of how the vaguely felt danger might be dispelled or counteracted. Information was partial and scattered. Villagers generally knew what was happening in their own immediate areas, often in considerable detail: they could name the loggers cutting trees nearby; they had regular contact with peasant families recently arrived from the interior provinces; and they could hear the incessant drone of chain saws clearing forest for cattle ranches on the flanks of adjacent hills.

Yet the indigenous residents did not realize how these isolated acts of intrusion were spreading throughout their territory like beads of mercury that would eventually coalesce to form larger, coherent patterns of destruction. Without a region-wide consciousness, they felt no particular responsibility for what was occurring beyond the boundaries of their own communities. When cattle ranchers armed with guns moved in and took land from villagers on the other side of the Mosquitia, the attitude was frequently: “That’s their problem; let them deal with it.” For the moment, each village stood alone, waiting its turn.

MOPAWI and Native Lands decided that something — we weren’t certain what — had to be done to break down the isolation and focus people

on the growing threats so they could mount a regional response.⁴ We first thought of holding a congress of some sort to stimulate broad-based discussion on the land issue. But we were afraid that this would end up like many similar meetings, generating voluminous talk that would rapidly dissipate into the air, like smoke. Something more tangible was needed, something that would simultaneously involve the people of the region, produce useful data, and summarize the land and natural resource situation of the Mosquitia.

As we were turning over some of these ideas, Native Lands was working with the National Geographic Society on the final stages of a map entitled *The Coexistence of Indigenous Peoples and the Natural Environment in Central America*. This map showed the areas of corre-



Figure 4.

MOPAWI
(Moskitia Pawisa –
Development of the Mosquitia)

MOPAWI is a Honduran non-profit organization that works with the indigenous groups of the Mosquitia in the areas of sustainable agriculture and agroforestry, community forestry development, intercultural bilingual education, marine/coastal resource management, preventive health care, institutional strengthening of local organizations, credit and micro-enterprise research and documentation, environmental education, ecotourism development, political advocacy and lobbying, and emergency and rehabilitation assistance. Founded in 1985, MOPAWI now has a staff of 72 working in 19 different offices. It is considered a nonindigenous “support” organization, although the majority of its staff are indigenous and live in the region.

⁴ Native Lands had been supporting MOPAWI’s Land Legalization Program since 1988.

MASTA (Moskitia Asla Takanka – Unity of the Mosquitia)

MASTA emerged in the late 1970s as the sole indigenous organization in the Mosquitia. For many years it was poorly organized and without direction. It received legal status as a non-profit organization in 1987 and since the early 1990s, in the wake of the mapping project, has focused on issues of land protection and conservation of natural resources. To accommodate increasing complexities in the organizational composition of the Mosquitia, MASTA grew from its status as a federation to become a confederation. Shortly after the mapping project was completed, seven Miskito federations, all of them defined by regions, were formed; and MASTA took on the role of lead organization in the region.

spondence between areas occupied by indigenous peoples and rainforests along Central America's Caribbean coastal plain. Rather than utilizing the common cartographic technique of representing indigenous communities with tiny dots, it attempted to show the territories occupied by indigenous peoples for subsistence. In the context of the Mosquitia — which government officials often described as a vast, uninhabited wilderness — we decided to take this process one step closer to the ground and map in detail the extent of indigenous land use patterns in the region.

Gradually the technical details of a land-use mapping project began to take shape in conversations between Andrew Leake, the Advisor to MOPAWI's Land Legalization Program, and Peter Herlihy, a cultural geographer from Southeastern Louisiana State University who had experience in the region. Leake had been working with MOPAWI since 1987 to define a Mosquitia-wide strategy for the legalization and protection of indigenous lands. He had been helping the Miskito, Garifuna, Pech, and Tawahka peoples organize themselves and make petitions to the Honduran government, which, through the Instituto Nacional Agrario (INA), had been attempting to placate some of the increasingly vocal Indian groups with promises of land. INA drew up a plan to grant legal rights to pieces of land to those communities that carried out a census and drafted a map of the lands

they claimed (Herlihy and Leake 1997, 709–10). In the context of this program, Leake and Herlihy had worked with the Federación Indígena Tawahka de Honduras (FITH) to draft a proposal to set aside the Tawahka region along the Upper Patuca River as a protected area (Herlihy and Leake 1990, 1991, 1992). Native Lands supported this work and was involved in the process, along with some other activities; but there was a sense among all of us that these were bits and pieces that, while important individually, didn't add up to a coherent whole.

At that time Herlihy had been doing some fine-grained land use mapping of the Tawahka area and had just initiated similar work among the indigenous groups inside the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve.⁵ Consequently, he had spent a good deal of time in both areas along the fringes of the Mosquitia, walking the boundaries of indigenous subsistence ranges and gathering information through questionnaires and village meetings. He was available from June through August of 1992 and was anxious to help organize a more ambitious mapping project that would encompass the entire Mosquitia. The methodology developed for this purpose was an adaptation to a larger scale of Herlihy's work among the Tawahka along the Patuca and the Miskito in the Río Plátano region.

The idea of holding a congress on land rights in the Mosquitia lingered; but as

⁵ Herlihy had also compiled information for the Mosquitia in the National Geographic Society map of Central America.

the mapping project took shape, it came to dominate everyone's thoughts. During this talking stage, MOPAWI and Native Lands both saw two primary purposes for the mapping. First, by anchoring participants from different cultural groups in a technical task that would help them focus on the common issue of land, we hoped to avoid ethnic rivalries, which are abundant in the Mosquitia, and get directly at the issues. Second, we hoped that the project would produce tangible, potentially useful information in the struggle to protect indigenous lands from the predations of outsiders and push forward with the process of legalizing indigenous tenure in the region. No one was clear at the time on what the specific impacts of the mapping would be; nor were we aware of the range of political uses to which maps, in the hands of indigenous peoples, could be put. The main thing we sought was to bring people together and provide the conditions for them to initiate rational, informed discussion of the problems confronting the region. A map would assist them in visualizing the Mosquitia as a region and serve as a basis for developing strategies to involve communities in the protection of their resource base.

MOPAWI joined with the Miskito federation MASTA (see box on page 14) to run the project, although in reality MOPAWI managed virtually the entire process from start to finish. It handled the funds, designed the project,

provided the facilities for the workshops, and supplied the lead Coordinator, Leake. This centralized control facilitated decision making and assured that the project team was a cohesive unit — a situation that was in sharp contrast to the way things developed in Panama, as will be seen in Chapter 3.

THE DARIÉN



Anthony Stocks

The Panama mapping project, carried out the following year, was motivated by similar considerations and was influenced by the project experience just concluding in Honduras. The Darién, with a total surface area of 16,802 km² and a population of approximately 22,000 people, is Panama's most sparsely populated and least-known province.⁶ It contains the largest intact stand of rainforest in the country, and until 30 years ago was inhabited almost exclusively by three indigenous peoples — the Emberá, the

Figure 5. *Emberá community of Mortí on the banks of the Chucunaque River, Darién Province.*

⁶ The Darién may be defined in one of two ways: as a geographical-ecological region of slightly more than 37,000 km² located between the Río Bayano in eastern Panama and the Río Atrato in northwestern Colombia (Torres de Araúz 1975, 12–15; Candanedo 1997, 2–3); or as a political province in the Republic of Panama with an area of 16,802 km². In this study we refer to the Province of Darién in Panama.

Wounaan, and the Kuna — and Darienitas, Afro-Americans descended from slaves. In 1983, the government of Panama granted the Emberá and Wounaan peoples legal rights to a territory, called the Comarca Emberá Drua (Comarca Emberá Territory).⁷ This territory is divided into two “areas” — Cémaco, with 280,000 hectares, and Sambú, with 120,000 hectares — that together comprise 25 percent of Darién Province (see Figure 6).

In recent years the Darién has become a stage for escalating conflict in which the native inhabitants face invasion by large numbers of loggers, cattle ranchers, and landless peasant farmers from the overpopulated interior provinces of western Panama. Since the opening up of the region in the mid-1970s through construction of the Bayano Hydroelectric Dam and the extension of the Pan-American Highway as far as the town of Yaviza, the influx of outsiders has steadily increased (see Wali 1973, 1989, 1995; Heckadon Moreno 1982). Both the forests and the subsistence base of the local people have been dis-

appearing at an alarming rate. In the early 1990s, however, an even bigger menace emerged with the imminent construction of the final stretch of the Highway from Yaviza in Panama to Lomas las Aisladas in Colombia, a distance of just over 100 kilometers. This would link the North and South American continents by road for the first time in history and open the region up to a massive flow of human traffic.⁸

As in the Mosquitia, the Darién was populated by a jumble of communities that had no collective picture of the region. They were fragmented politically. The Kuna groups were petitioning the government for comarca status for their territories. The Comarca Emberá Drua was a legal entity on paper, but had never been surveyed and demarcated; and moreover it seemed — although solid information was lacking — that more Emberá and Wounaan lived outside the two areas of the Comarca than within.⁹ The Kuna had virtually no contact with the Emberá and the Wounaan.¹⁰ There had been armed confrontations between the Kuna and

7 Comarca is a Panamanian legal concept designating a semiautonomous indigenous reserve. The Kuna of the San Blas region were granted their comarca, the Comarca of San Blas (also called Kuna Yala), in 1938. More recently the Kuna in the region of Madungandí, on the Pacific slope of eastern Panama, were granted their comarca, as were the Ngöbe of the Bocas del Toro region in western Panama (See Herlihy 1989, 1995).

8 By the year 2000, the threat had shifted somewhat as a new kind of intrusion gathered momentum. Guerrilla and paramilitary groups stepped up their activities along the border, crossing over from Colombia into the Darién region of Panama. It has reached such a level of chaos that all plans for construction of the Highway have been put on hold. Virtually all Panamanian government activity in the region has been suspended.

9 In the census carried out during the mapping project, it was discovered that out of a total Emberá-Wounaan population of 13,202 in the province of Darién, only about 6,000 live within the two areas of the Comarca Emberá Drua.

10 The Emberá and the Wounaan are closely related groups that speak separate languages yet live interspersed throughout the same area and intermarry. In the Darién, the 10,797 Emberá outnumber the 2,405 Wounaan four to one; the two groups have joined together for a not altogether comfortable alliance in the Congreso General Emberá-Wounaan. The Kuna population of the Darién, located in the regions of Wargandí (in the Upper Chucunaque River Basin) and Takarkun Yala (including Púcuru and Paya, two villages near the Colombian border), totals 1,531. The Kuna and the Emberá have traditionally been enemies, and even today, with a common cause to defend indigenous rights, relations are often less than amiable.

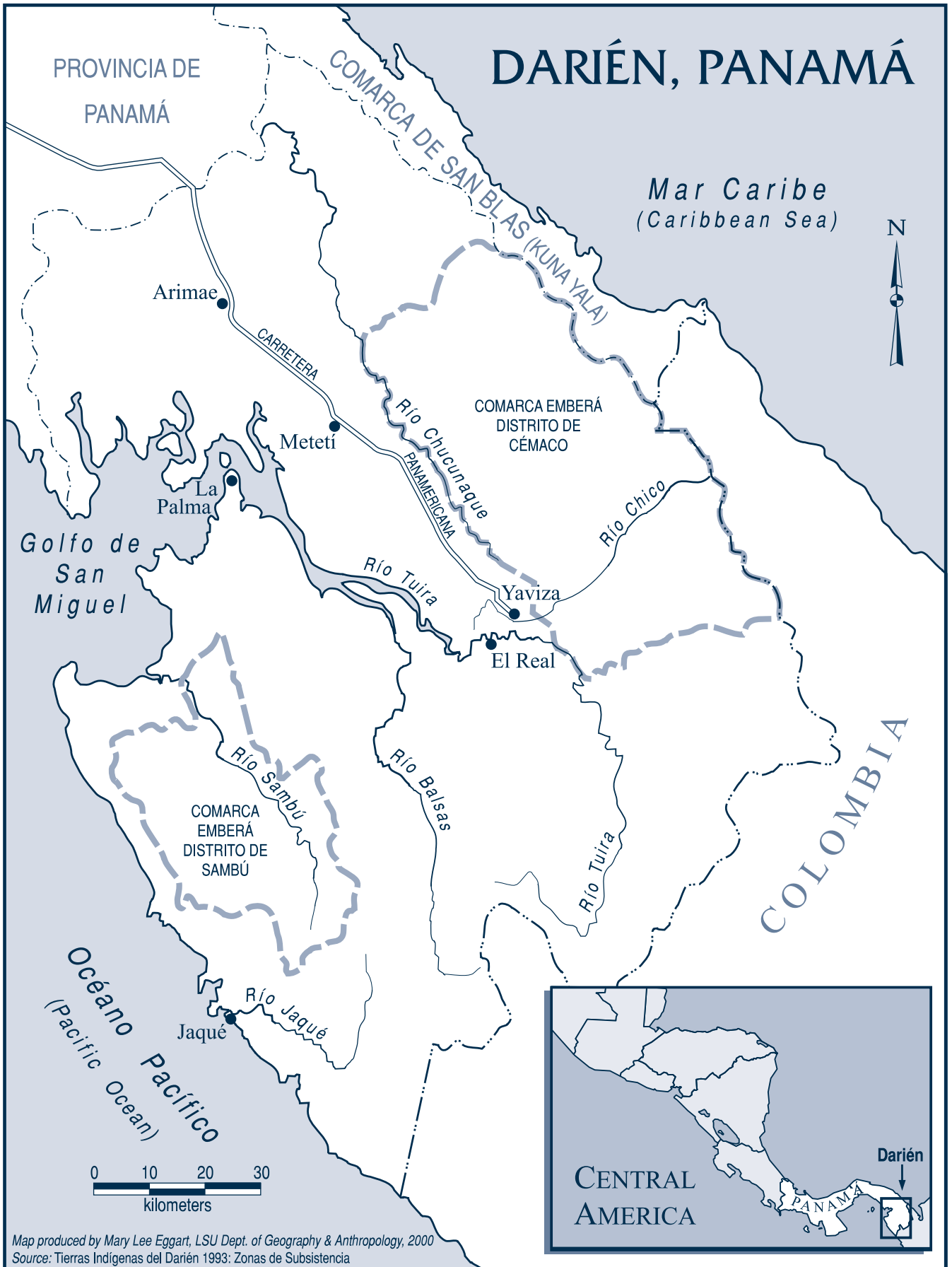


Figure 6.

non-Indian colonists in the Bayano (Madungandi) region along the highway to the north, and tensions were mounting rapidly. Rumors and accusations of illegal timber concessions and surreptitious contracts were flying in all directions; the Bishop of the Catholic Church in the Darién, Rómulo Emiliani, was attacking the indigenous leadership as corrupt, while the Indians accused the Bishop of being controlling and paternalistic. The Asociación Nacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza (ANCON), a conservationist NGO, was concentrating its energies and resources on protection of the Darién National Park, but in its concern overlooked the Indian communities inside the park. It had been unable (some say unwilling) to incorporate indigenous views and needs in its conservationist framework, provoking strong criticism from Indian leaders.¹¹ There was a vacuum of reliable information, and any level-headed consensus about what might be done to stem immigration into the region and bring a halt to destruction of the forest was lacking. As in Honduras, there was an urgent need to focus regionally on land and natural resources.

In 1992, Native Lands began talking with Emberá-Wounaan leadership about a range of possible activities in the Darién. Since the Honduran mapping project was off to a promising start at that time, something similar was discussed as a possibility here. We

mentioned that Herlihy — who had done fieldwork among the Emberá for his doctoral thesis (1986) and knew the Darién well — had expressed interest in working on a second mapping project. Arrangements were made for an Emberá leader to journey to Tegucigalpa to get a firsthand look during the September 1992 Congress at which the final Mosquitia maps were unveiled. Although discussion of various options remained open throughout this period, mapping emerged as the favorite. It was proving itself to be of value in Honduras, and if Herlihy were available and willing to handle the cartography, Native Lands wanted to take advantage of his skills and experience.

Our initial problem was the absence in Panama of any organization resembling MOPAWI. No local NGO was working in the Darién, and most of the groups that had done some work or could work there were unacceptable to the indigenous inhabitants. There were several indigenous legal assistance organizations, but they were involved in other activities and were in no position to take on a complicated research project like mapping. The Emberá-Wounaan Congress was not permanently staffed with an office, and it lacked the capacity to administer projects.

We explored the situation with Bishop Emiliani, who was energetically involved in social and, increasingly, environmental causes in the

¹¹ In 1992, ANCON joined with Bishop Emiliani to draft a document titled "La Declaración de El Real," which called for a stop to illegal logging, the development of plans for sustainable use of the region's resources, and more-humane treatment of the local inhabitants. The indigenous peoples were not consulted when the document was drafted. When they were asked to sign it after the fact, they unanimously rejected it.

region. The Catholic Church has considerable infrastructure and personnel in the Darién, and clout at the national level. In the eyes of the Indians, however, the Church pushed its considerable weight around too much in the Darién, and there was bad blood between the two groups. In short, the Indians were not interested in this route.

At the same time, we were discussing possible projects in the Darién with Charlotte Elton, the Research Coordinator of the Centro de Educación y Acción Social Panameño (CEASPA), a highly regarded think tank that works with disadvantaged minorities and specializes in popular education and studies of social, economic, and political issues. We felt CEASPA (see box this page) could bring a number of assets to whatever it was we ended up doing in the Darién. It had experience in designing and implementing research projects; it regularly published and disseminated its findings; it had considerable experience and skill with group dynamics; and it was well connected politically in ways that the Indians were not. The liabilities did not seem serious. While it lacked the staff to administer a project of this scope, CEASPA knew where to find the human resources to bridge the gaps. CEASPA had worked with the Kuna before (largely through the Catholic Church), but had only casual

dealings with the Emberá and the Wounaan. Most important, the leadership of the Emberá-Wounaan Congress felt, however tentatively, that it could work with CEASPA. Perhaps the best way to characterize their attitude is by saying that they had no strong objections to CEASPA.

After a series of meetings among the Emberá-Wounaan Congress, CEASPA, Herlihy, and Native Lands, it was agreed to move forward with the project.¹² We began designing the work plan, in somewhat disjointed fashion with all the different actors, and we gradually put together the project team. We fleshed out the project and calculated the budget. Unfortunately, neither CEASPA nor the indigenous congress emerged as the institution in charge, and overall project coordination was not defined clearly at the start. The project was characterized by its lack of institutional definition, with several disparate pieces that never came together to form a coherent management structure. There was no central hub. Put simply, nobody was in charge. As we moved through the project, this institutional fuzziness would evolve into outright confusion and, during the final stage of the project, naked conflict. This was in sharp contrast to the situation in Honduras, which maintained an even keel to a large extent because MOPAWI was firmly in charge throughout the process.

CEASPA

CEASPA has been in the non-profit sector since 1977 and concentrates its work in three programs — Sustainable Development, Gender and Development, and Democracy and Participation. Its primary goals are to:

- Promote and support national proposals that contribute to economic equality, democratic participation, and environmentally sustainable development.
- Collaborate in the efforts of citizens to organize, participate, and negotiate, especially marginalized and excluded groups seeking to improve their quality of life.
- Support the creation of a modern citizenry, endowed with a democratic political culture, a sense of civic responsibility, and the capacity to create changes through its actions.

¹² There was some discussion about bringing the Darién into the project; but the Indians, while not overtly hostile, were less than enthusiastic about this. However, even if there had been interest in their inclusion, one major problem would have still existed. The Darién communities are not as cohesive and well organized as the Indian communities. It was doubtful that they could function as a working part of the mapping team, and project success depended on close participation and unity to meet a tight budget and schedule.

DISCUSSION

On the surface, the primary stated purpose of the Honduras and Panama projects was to map indigenous subsistence patterns. We set out on a technical exercise aimed at gathering precise information about the range and intensity of indigenous land use that showed the degree of correspondence between indigenous occupation and the existence of natural vegetation. Yet maps, by their very nature, are a good deal more than purely technical documents; we were, in fact, interested in much more than accurate cartographic representations of the two regions.

The projects had four broad objectives that were implicitly understood. These focused on the long-term conditions affecting the inhabitants of the two areas. We strove to:

- ❖ enable the indigenous peoples to gain a voice in conservation and management discussions relating to their lands and waters and the natural resources contained therein;
- ❖ work toward an effective collaborative strategy for conserving the biological and cultural diversity of the lowland tropical forest regions;
- ❖ assist indigenous peoples in their struggle to maintain control of the lands they have occupied for centuries; and

- ❖ influence in positive fashion government policies and international opinion on these issues.

From the very beginning, the potential political value of the maps was apparent to the indigenous peoples whose territories were being mapped. Simply put, they would not have been so enthusiastic about the work had they not seen the maps as important tools in their struggle to maintain control over their lands. They understood that the project itself did not demarcate boundaries and confer titles, but they saw that mapping would provide an informational base upon which these activities might later be carried out. Land use maps were documents they could use to petition their governments for legal title to their territories. Indeed, it was this sense of political purpose that would drive them to expend the necessary energy to lift the work over a number of rather formidable hurdles and steer both enterprises along to successful conclusions.

Yet these objectives were never given open play. Both MOPAWI and CEASPA understood well the political climate in their countries, and they knew how to deal with them effectively. From the outset, they downplayed political agendas and concentrated on the technical charac-

ter of the project to allay government fears and clear away obstacles to the mapping. They also sought out government collaboration. By enlisting the Instituto Geográfico Nacional (IGN) in both countries to provide cartographers for the technical team, and then to print the final maps, they went after an official seal of approval that later proved to be invaluable. By doing this, they assured in one step the technical and political credibility of the project.

Since the completion of the mapping, numerous people have asked us if the indigenous peoples were wise to produce maps that show where their most valuable resources are located. Might not information of this sort allow unscrupulous outsiders to sweep in and pillage them all the more easily?

From the start, this possibility was brought to light and discussed. The indigenous peoples decided unanimously that the positive value of the maps far outweighed any potential negative consequences. In the not-so-distant past, when even the most basic human rights of people living in remote regions were not respected, this attitude would have been unthinkable. Today, however, with the rule of law creeping ever so slowly across Latin America, indigenous peoples have begun to work through the political and judicial systems to gain control of their lands and protect their resources. In this context, where legal remedies and policies of negotiation are in effect, maps have become a key part of their strategies. Long-time victims of map-wielding outsiders, they are now learning about cartography so they can do battle on more-even terms.