

INDIGENOUS LANDSCAPES

A STUDY IN
ETHNOCARTOGRAPHY

MAC CHAPIN

BILL THRELKELD

CENTER FOR THE SUPPORT OF
NATIVE LANDS

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FOREWORD

“A map,” we are told by general dictionaries and the glossaries of cartography textbooks, “is a representation of the surface of the earth, or any part of it, drawn on a flat surface, and the positions of countries, kingdoms, states, mountains, rivers, etc.; as, a map of Europe, or a map of Illinois.” And indeed for most of us, maps are little more than this. We use road maps to find our way about and atlases to locate far-away places we read about in the news. In short, they serve the rather limited – and generally benign – purpose of helping us orient ourselves geographically.

Yet maps are much more than this. They have a surprising number of practical uses, not the least of which is as an instrument of power. States, nations, and empires are not natural features of the landscape; they are human constructs that have been imposed over the centuries as a means of converting chunks of the earth’s surface into real estate. “As much as guns and warships,” we are reminded by the geographer J. Harley, “maps have been the weapons of imperialism.” The partitioning of Africa by European mapmakers in the late 19th century is a classic example of this. And the division of South America into Portuguese and Spanish “possessions” at the turn of the 15th century was similarly the result of a distant treaty and a few strokes of the cartographer’s stylus. Neither of these takeovers involved the participation or even the knowledge of the local populations whose fates they so profoundly affected.

Governments and elites continue today to exercise the power of maps to legitimize their claims over land and resources. Maps have been enlisted by multinational companies to gain concessions over commodities such as oil, minerals, and timber. Protected areas are likewise created by sketching lines on maps. The primary victims of maps have been indigenous peoples. Lacking maps of their territories, they have had great difficulty defending their rights in the face of these maps.

This situation has changed during the last few years as indigenous peoples throughout the world have increasingly been using maps to serve their own purposes. Armed with their own maps, they are having greater success in blocking attempts to annex their lands and pillage their resources. Various community mapping, participatory mapping, and, more recently, ethnocartography, the methodologies employed differ somewhat in form and scope, yet they are generally aimed at similar objectives.

Territorial defense is one of the primary goals; yet the mapping also serves to strengthen local organizations, develop tools for planning, and provide a basis for education programs. Cartography in the hands of indigenous peoples is empowering. As Mac Chapin has noted, “This is about their objectives. Mapping is a mechanism indigenous people can adopt to meet their own ends. In the process of doing it themselves, things happen.”

The particular methodology described in *Indigenous Landscapes* has a number of special features. It can be used to map relatively large territories in ethnically complex regions. It provides a straightforward framework that indigenous peoples can use to construct their own maps of their territories, on their own terms. The method is simple in concept and can be tailored to a wide variety of cultural and political settings. It employs a low-tech approach, working almost entirely with paper and pencil. This collaboration between cartographers and indigenous surveyors produces accurate, detailed maps.

This book will be a key reference for anyone undertaking mapping projects to clarify indigenous rights to govern their lands, waters, and other resources. In telling the detailed stories of Native Lands’ mapping experiences, the authors provide a refreshingly candid examination of the difficulties they encountered as they strove to develop a mapping strategy that is feasible and technically sound, and, at the same time, engages the extensive knowledge and skills of indigenous communities. To this, they add a systematic discussion and numerous illustrative examples of how mapping projects are best designed and carried out. The case studies are compelling. The methodology that emerges is useful, adaptable, and powerful.

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CENTER FOR THE SUPPORT OF NATIVE LANDS

The Center for the Support of Native Lands is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the protection of biological and cultural diversity in Latin America, with a focus on Central America and southern Mexico. It does this by assisting indigenous peoples to develop and carry out their agendas for the preservation of the region's natural and cultural heritage. Through a combined program of applied research, training, and the facilitation of conferences, workshops, and technical exchanges, Native Lands works to:

- ❖ strengthen the organizational and technical capacity of indigenous peoples to protect their lands, sustainably manage and conserve their natural resources, and strengthen their cultures;
- ❖ encourage communication and the formation of collaborative relationships among indigenous peoples, governments, and conservation and economic development organizations for the comanagement of the region's natural areas and preservation of indigenous cultures;
- ❖ link indigenous peoples with the technical, legal, and financial resources they need to carry out these programs; and
- ❖ assist in the creation of policies that foster self-determination among indigenous peoples throughout the region.

Native Lands is based in Arlington, Virginia, with a regional office in San José, Costa Rica. At its inception in 1987, Native Lands operated a small grants fund for indigenous projects dealing in conservation and the sustainable management of natural resources, and the strengthening of indigenous culture. In more recent years, Native Lands has focused on two program areas: participatory mapping research in Central America and other parts of the world, with indigenous peoples and conservationists; and the organization of workshops, exchanges, and conferences with indigenous groups, conservationists, and government agencies throughout the Central America region and in southern Mexico.

Native Lands is supported by private foundations and individual contributions. All donations are tax deductible. For further information on Native Lands, inquiries can be made to:

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