

Back in the highland city of San Cristobal de Las Casas, as I prepared to fly home to New York, the skies, which had been crystalline nearly throughout the trip, became soupy with haze. TV reported that a massive forest fire had broken out in Montes Azules. The government blamed slash-and-burn agriculture by the illegal Indian communities. But residents of one such community, Ocho de Febrero, a Zapatista "autonomous municipality," reported to local human rights groups that the fires had been intentionally set by unknown men. They had destroyed homes, cornfields and animals, forcing residents to flee to neighboring communities.

Bill Weinberg
44 Fifth Ave. #172
Brooklyn NY 11217
USA

E-mail: billw@echonyc.com
Website: <http://ww4report.com>

*This article was written March 2003. A much longer version appeared in the Spring 2003 issue of Native Americas: The Hemispheric Journal of Indigenous Issues (Fredericksburg, VA).
<http://www.nativeamericas.com>*

**FOREST USE AND CONSERVATION
IMPLICATIONS OF THE ZAPATISTA
REBELLION IN CHIAPAS, MEXICO**

By Mario González-Espinosa

The Zapatista rebellion

On New Year's Day of 1994, Mexican society and the world were shocked by news coming from San Cristóbal de Las Casas, an old city in central Chiapas, Mexico. A well-organised, clandestine army of Maya peasants had taken the city without violence and, in the main square, proclaimed a declaration of war against the neo-liberal Mexican Government. As representatives of the Indian peoples of Mexico, the *Zapatista Army for National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, or EZLN)* protested against more than five centuries of extreme poverty, the lack of development opportunities, and the age-old social mistreatment and abuse by the rest of society. Unprecedented violent clashes took place in central Chiapas during the following days, until an agreement was reached on a cease-fire and the start of peace talks. Finally, in February 1996, a first important joint announcement was signed among the parties, the *Acuerdos de San Andrés*. Yet, after ten years, the conflict remains at a standstill because of the unwillingness of the Mexican Federal Government to fulfill these *Acuerdos*. Efforts to resume negotiations remain unsuccessful and, for a decade, the *Zapatistas* have kept themselves completely outside of any official programs and promote their own government structures (*Juntas de Buen Gobierno, JBG*).

Forest abuse and the rebellion

Much has been written on the complex causes of the *Zapatista* rebellion. Yet there is not a single, thorough analysis on how the lack of development of sustainable forestry has contributed to social unrest, particularly in the highlands. The *EZLN* was organised in Tojolabal, Tzotzil, Tzeltal, and Chol communities who live in the steep mountains of the central and eastern highlands of Chiapas. The region is known for its vast biological and cultural richness. However, Chiapas is also known as the region with the lowest social and economic development in the country. A struggle to open up more land for cultivation has been identified among the causes of the conflict, in combination with an explosive population growth. Yet most of the territory occupied by the *EZLN* forces is not suitable for agricultural development. The shallow and calcareous soils on steep slopes support degraded forests and produce meager harvests from eroded and infertile fields. The communities have used forest products and services for centuries, through their traditional land-use practices that include slash-and-burn-agriculture. I argue that the interaction between the people and their forests, heavily affected by past forestry, agricultural, and conservation policies, has played an important role in the origin of the conflict.

Over the three decades that preceded the *Zapatista* rebellion, forest resources in Chiapas were generally exploited by timber-oriented concessionaries that did not invest in long-term forestry. The plunder of prime timber motivated an extreme and influential conservation movement that eventually led to the establishment of a series of important federal and state natural protected areas (NPAs), frequently with the support of

international organisations. While efforts to conserve the forest were necessary, it must be said that in most cases the basic needs of local people were not considered. Population growth and the need for additional agricultural land thus led to invasions and settlement along the margins of the NPAs. The protected areas thus form a root cause of conflict, both among communities themselves and with authorities that attempt to forcibly relocate the settlers.

A few years before the *Zapatista* revolt erupted, the state government decreed a controversial halt on permits for the use of forests. As a result, sawmills were dismantled and timber sales to local markets came to a halt. In mountainous areas, where forest management is the prime option for sustainable land-use, people were put in jail or heavily fined if they were caught logging for firewood or other non-commercial timber. This was particularly pressing because it coincided with low market prices for major agricultural products such as maize and coffee. The inadequate, political decree has led to an escalation of the conflicts of interests between forest use and conservation and it has contributed to social resentment and the need for additional land.

Consequences of forest abuse

From 1960 onwards, the overall rate of deforestation in Chiapas has been higher than in the rest of the country; it is one of the highest in the world. Following the rebellion, lack of governance allowed rampant illegal clearing for agriculture, livestock ranching, and human settlement. In the central highlands of Chiapas, selective logging of *Quercus* and other broadleaved species for firewood has impoverished forest stands.

This has substantially decreased the potential yields from traditional agriculture-forest rotations. In addition, conflicts among communities have not made it any easier to reach agreements on the use of remaining forests or on the restoration of degraded and cleared areas. These inter-community conflicts can be extremely violent, sometimes involving religious parties. Only a handful of communities have been able to organise themselves to manage their forest stands and secure financial support for certified forestry or carbon sequestration.

Outlook

When will the *Zapatista* conflict end? Not soon, apparently. Crucial legal, political and planning issues related to forest use are still waiting for solutions or show only sluggish progress. An increasing number of groups ask for technical advice on forest restoration, not an easy question in view of the complex, biological richness of their resource base. There may be some 1,300 native tree species in Chiapas, which makes the urgent ecological restoration of diversity a most challenging task, even if the aim is to use only 100-200 species. On the side of the *Zapatistas*, the emphasis on community-agreed forest use in the context of the *JBG* is encouraging. No single research institute is able to provide the required expertise to guide such initiatives on its own. Restoration projects can successfully request widespread involvement of local people, particularly from women and teenagers, in collecting, producing, and maintaining the required planting materials, provided the projects are scientifically and technically sound, and are based on confidence and respect. When academic institutions can organise themselves and make sincere progress in

this direction, they will probably be better prepared to support social organisations, community assemblies, and Governments with sustainable forestry projects and peace can be finally achieved.

Contact:

Mario González-Espinosa
Departamento de Ecología y Sistemática Terrestres
División de Conservación de la Biodiversidad
El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (ECOSUR)
Apartado Postal 63
29200 San Cristóbal de Las Casas,
Chiapas
México

E-mail: mgonzale@scslc.ecosur.mx

WHY IS THERE VIOLENCE IN SOME FOREST AREAS OF MEXICO?

By Salvador Anta Fonseca

Mexico has achieved important economic and social goals in the last few years; still, it lags behind in political, social and economic terms that manifest themselves principally in rural areas. In the Mexican countryside and especially in the forest areas there are still high levels of poverty, marginalization, and ungovernable places.

The Mexican Government's efforts to strengthen the forestry sector remain limited and insufficient; 8.6 million hectares are managed under commercial forest management permits and another 8.2