

# Tierra y Libertad, Antes y Ahora

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: For our final paper in HIS 165: Latin American Social Revolutions, our professor challenged us to synthesize what we had learned and write an original interpretation of a revolution we had studied through the lens of a topic such as gender, age, race, etc. Being interested in the natural world, I chose to investigate the relationship between environment and revolution. For example, how did the agrarian reforms undertaken during many revolutions impact the environment? Or, how do environmental histories create conditions favorable to revolution in the first place? In my paper, I focus on the indigenous revolutionary movement known as the EZLN and their relationship with the environment. The EZLN operates out of the Lacandón Rainforest in Mexico, an amazingly biodiverse ecosystem that is unfortunately fragmented and fragile after decades of human mistreatment. For this and other reasons, the EZLN provides an ideal case study to examine the links between revolutions and the environments in which they occur.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: What is the environmental legacy of revolution? As an entomology major in an honors college course on Latin American social revolutions, Kyle consistently approached historical questions from a new angle. With this simple yet elusive question Kyle's research explores the legacy of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), who took their name from the 1910 Mexican Revolution movement for Tierra y Libertad led by Emiliano Zapata in the state of Morelos. Despite being an acclaimed movement for indigenous autonomy and agrarian reform, the modern-day Zapatistas in Chiapas have been surprisingly quiet on questions of environmental stewardship.*

*In an ambitious three-part essay, Kyle considered multiple angles on the EZLN's relationship to the environment and, as always, remained attentive to the silences within the documents. This creatively conceived and beautifully executed essay exemplifies his outside the box thinking.*

—Marian Schlotterbeck, Department of History

## Introduction

Over the past several decades, much has been written on the conflict in the Lacandón Rainforest in Chiapas, Mexico, which is one of the largest and most biodiverse in the country. According to a news report published in *El País* in 2019, it is home to a quarter of all mammal species and almost half of all bird species in Mexico. In addition, it is one of the last jaguar habitats in North America.<sup>1</sup> The indigenous Lacandón Maya have also lived there for centuries, and more recently other groups have immigrated to the forest. Notably, the Lacandón is the central territory of the EZLN, an armed indigenous resistance movement who rebelled against the government in 1994. As Bill Weinberg notes in his 2003 NACLA Report, they have again come to the fore, this time in land and conservation conflicts, because many unauthorized communities living in the jungle are Zapatista<sup>2</sup>. Now, the focus is on the EZLN's ecological and environmental positions. This situation offers an opportunity to examine the environmental legacy of a revolution, a perspective that is not often explored. Both past and present, the EZLN's complex relationship with the environment has been shaped predominately by the immediate needs of their communities. This relationship is crucial to understand because as a major regional organization, the EZLN

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<sup>1</sup> Diego Rabasa, "La selva Lacandona se queda sin oxígeno," *El País*, October 26, 2019, [https://elpais.com/sociedad/2019/10/24/actualidad/1571871871\\_610045.html?ssm=FB\\_CM](https://elpais.com/sociedad/2019/10/24/actualidad/1571871871_610045.html?ssm=FB_CM).

<sup>2</sup> Zapatista is the adjective for EZLN; Bill Weinberg, "Mexico: Lacandon Selva Conflict Grows," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 36:6 (2003): 26, DOI: 10.1080/10714839.2003.11724544.

plays an important role in determining the future of the Lacandón.

## **Part One: Environmental Roots of the Rebellion**

The relationship between the EZLN and the environment begins with the environmental history of Chiapas. In many ways, the Zapatistas rebelled against the ecological marginalization of the Chiapanecan poor because addressing marginalization was one of their most pressing needs. According to Philip Howard in “The History of Ecological Marginalization in Chiapas,” an important cause of this marginalization is unequal land distribution, which began in colonial times. Spanish elites seized most of the good farmland and forced indigenas either into labor or into exile. This system of land ownership persisted throughout the 19th and 20th centuries; in 1910 large landowners or latifundistas (1% of the Chiapanecan population) owned 81% of the land, and even after the Mexican Revolution created ejidos and comunidades agrarias, most of the land remained in private hands.<sup>3</sup> This forced many indigenas and campesinos onto poor agricultural land at the edge of the Lacandón. In the 20th century, migration to the region (often encouraged by the government) was high, leading to annual population growth rates of up to 4% in some communities<sup>4</sup>. The marginal quality of the land on the frontier meant it became barren after a few harvests, so settlers steadily cut further into the jungle for more land<sup>5</sup>. As James D. Nations writes in “The Ecology of the Zapatista Revolt,” this did not concern the government until they realized that these communities competed with logging companies for timber. So, in 1972 they gave ownership of the Lacandón Rainforest to the Lacandón Maya (who then signed an agreement with loggers) and forcibly removed many settlers<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Howard, “The History of Ecological Marginalization in Chiapas,” *Environmental History* 3, no. 3 (1998): 360-361.

<sup>4</sup> Howard, “Ecological Marginalization,” 362.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 363-364

<sup>6</sup> James D. Nations, “The Ecology of the Zapatista Revolt,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (1994): 3.

A similar situation occurred in 1978, when the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve was established to protect approximately 300,000 hectares of primary forest. According to Weinberg's 2003 report, because this action turned established communities into illegal squatters overnight, the government again forced relocation<sup>7</sup>. The reforms undertaken by the administration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari in the 1980s and 1990s also hurt the campesinos. Subcomandante Marcos, as quoted in "The History of Ecological Marginalization in Chiapas," remarks that "what most radicalized our companions were the changes to Article 27," referring to the reform of the Constitution that, among other things, essentially put ejido lands on the market<sup>8</sup>. Altogether, the environmental and agricultural history of Chiapas directly and consistently harmed rural Chiapanecans. Addressing these issues was what the people needed; thus the Zapatistas took up arms.

## **Part Two: Zapatistas Speak on the Environment**

Since 1994, the Zapatistas have generated an immense body of writing that covers many issues, including the environment. The environment is mentioned less frequently than other topics, primarily when the basic needs of the people are affected by environmental issues. For example, one of the first major EZLN documents, "La Declaración de la Selva Lacandona," released on January 2, 1994, makes no mention of the environment other than highlighting that the poor people of Chiapas have no land<sup>9</sup>. However, the "Ley Agraria Revolucionaria," published earlier in the group's internal newspaper in December 1993, addresses the environment somewhat more. It calls for the protection of the local ecology, but it does not contain concrete proposals: "se preservarán

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<sup>7</sup> Weinberg, "Lacandon Selva Conflict," 26.

<sup>8</sup> Howard, "Ecological Marginalization," 369, 373.

<sup>9</sup> EZLN, "La Declaración de la Selva Lacandona," in EZLN: documentos y comunicados, ed. Carlos Monsiváis and Elena Poniatowska (México, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1994), 33.

las zonas selváticas vírgenes y los bosques y se harán campañas de reforestación [...] [los recursos naturales] son propiedad colectiva del pueblo y se cuidarán.” This lack of specificity contrasts with their detailed proposals for agrarian reform in the same document<sup>10</sup>. Finally, their January 27th communique “Chiapas: el Sureste en dos vientos, una tormenta y una profecía,” contains one of their most direct indictments of environmental exploitation. In it, the Zapatistas decry the environmental exploitation of the Lacandón by corporations. However, they justify logging of the forest by campesinos, noting that “el campesino tumba para vivir, la bestia [la corporación] tumba para saquear.”<sup>11</sup> The document also praises the biodiversity of the region, but ultimately states that “la mayor riqueza de la entidad son los 3.5 millones de chiapanecos.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, the people are the Zapatista’s highest priority. In addition, this states that alteration of a fragile environment like the Lacandón is permissible so long as the people who live there are the ones benefiting, not the exploitative corporations and government. In these documents, the environment is referenced primarily as a resource to support the people, not necessarily something to defend for its own sake. The EZLN recognizes the need to preserve their environment, but what that means is shaped by the immediate needs of their people.

### **Part Three: Zapatista Environmental Practice**

In recent years, the EZLN and its supporters have come into conflict with environmentalists in the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve. As noted in Bray and Klepeis’s article “Deforestation, Forest Transitions, and Institutions for Sustainability in Southeastern Mexico, 1900–2000,” the reserve was established in 1978 and has

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<sup>10</sup> EZLN, “Ley Agraria Revolucionaria,” in EZLN: documentos y comunicados, ed. Carlos Monsiváis and Elena Poniatowska (México, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1994), 44.

<sup>11</sup> EZLN, “Chiapas: el Sureste en dos vientos, una tormenta y una profecía,” in EZLN: documentos y comunicados, ed. Carlos Monsiváis and Elena Poniatowska (México, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1994), 51.

<sup>12</sup> EZLN, “Dos vientos,” 52.

so far mostly succeeded in preserving habitat<sup>13</sup>. However, it was created without the knowledge of the preexisting communities, making them illegal squatters overnight. The government evicted some communities, yet many remain due to the turmoil of 1994 and underpatrolling of the reserve, as reported in a 2002 article from *The Miami Herald*<sup>14</sup>.

According to Weinberg's 2003 report, these Zapatista or Zapatista-allied communities have different perspectives on living in the forest. Some communities, like Nuevo San Gregorio, plan to sustainably use the land they have and clear no more. Others want to continue clearing trees as their communities expand, eventually transforming the jungle into a patchwork of settlements, agriculture, rangeland, and forest<sup>15</sup>. As of 2003, the Mexican government threatened further relocation of these communities, and the EZLN voiced their staunch opposition. They hold that the threats conceal a hidden motive. As quoted in Weinberg's report, the EZLN states that "environmental, bioprospecting, eco-tourism, and birth control (eventually, sterilization of indigenous women) programs are acting as the spearhead for a far-reaching strategic and military project." They specifically claim the government wants to remove settlers so it can exploit the land for itself<sup>16</sup>. There is evidence for this; at the time of the report, the Mexican government was preparing for intense development in nearby regions for the Plan Puebla-Panamá (now the Mesoamerican Project), which would severely damage the environment<sup>17</sup>.

The opposition of the EZLN to the relocation of their communities and other restrictions in the name of environmental protection is consistent with their people-oriented relationship

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<sup>13</sup> David Bray and Peter Klepeis, "Deforestation, Forest Transitions, and Institutions for Sustainability in Southeastern Mexico, 1900-2000," *Environment and History* 11, no. 2 (2005): 210.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Stevenson, "Unusual battle lines form around jungle," *The Miami Herald*, July 14th, 2002, <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/mexico/lacandon.es.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Stevenson, "Unusual battle lines."

<sup>16</sup> Weinberg, "Lacandon Selva Conflict," 27.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

with the environment. These measures would unfairly harm their communities and possibly allow the environment to be exploited by outside groups, instead of by those who live there. Unfortunately, as any further deforestation would severely impact the ecosystem, this pits them against environmentalists and conservation biologists, who oppose both the actions of the EZLN's communities in the heart of the jungle and the broader exploitative plans of the Mexican government in the region<sup>18</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

The EZLN, past and present, has a complex relationship with the environment that is largely shaped by the needs of rural indígenas and campesinos. They organized and rebelled in 1994 against ecological marginalization in Chiapas, one of the most pressing problems rural Chiapanecans face. In their writings, the EZLN do not address the environment as frequently as other issues, but when they do, they portray it primarily as a resource for their people to use. And with regards to the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve, the EZLN has recently opposed environmental action which would conflict with the existence of their communities. In each of these cases, the EZLN is concerned with the environment to the extent that it impacts the rights and livelihoods of those they fight for. This approach to the environment reaffirms the strong commitment the EZLN has to its people, embodied by their phrase "aquí manda el pueblo y el gobierno obedece." Yet due to the threatened state of the Lacandón, this perspective potentially raises doubts about the EZLN's ability to work towards long-term protection of the jungle.

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<sup>18</sup> Weinberg, "Lacandon Selva Conflict," 30.

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