

Water as Conflict Zone in the Tri-National Landscape of Belize, Guatemala and Mexico
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In July 2012, thirty Guatemalans were found gold panning on the Ceibo Chico Creek in the Chiquibul National Park near San Ignacio, Belize. [Slide 1: map] Belizean NGO Friends for Conservation and Development (FCD) apprehended the men, many of whom looked to be in their teens and early twenties. After footage identifying the Guatemalan men was captured, FCD let them go with a warning of fines and the possibility of arrest for entering into Belizean territory without state permission as well as illegal entry into a protected area. Continued entry into the forest reserve following this event and concerns over protecting the water and natural resources in the forest prompted the Belize National Defense Forces to open a military outpost near the Ceibo Chico Creek. With the creation of the outpost, FCD found itself on a diplomatic tightrope with Guatemalan institutions to manage concerns over water source destruction, logging, and farming. But conflict would continue. Though the outpost was created to discourage Guatemalan incursions to the Chiquibul, it led to an escalation of violence. In April 2014, Belizean Defense Forces killed a 26 year old Guatemalan man in the Chiquibul after a group of Guatemalans were found illegally extracting gold and other natural resources.

In May 2017, the body of yet another man identified as Guatemalan was found in the Chiquibul. [slide 2: headlines] News reports identified the man as a gold panner. I sat in the headquarters of FCD two months after this incident, seeking initial interviews for a collaborative project on transnational conservation in Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico. Miguel¹, who works for FCD, tells me about the militarization of the border, the way that these issues need to be delicately handled. I ask him, what is the biggest threat facing the Chiquibul and he names gold

¹ Pseudonym.

panning. He is worried about water. He tells me that just a few years ago, you could drink water straight from the faucet, and now all water in Belize has to be purified. Gold panning is disrupting the earth around Ceibo Chico Creek, and that is having harmful impacts on water quality in the entire country. But it's not Belizeans doing the damage. Instead, the search for alluvial gold is luring marginalized Guatemalans, often described as "desperate," across the border into a national protected area. FCD has been working for five years to raise awareness of the potential water crisis, but there is minimal traction. [black slide]

There cannot be more dead Guatemalans in the forest, Miguel explains. This could lead to the heightening of decades-long conflict on these borders. Diplomatic relations between the two countries have been deteriorating over recent escalation of a nearly 200-year-old territorial dispute, in which Guatemala claims large parts (or all) of Belize as its territory. Despite the recent Belizean militarization of this part of the border, Miguel explains that Belizeans don't do war. This is a common national stereotype repeated to us by many people: Belizeans are calm, laid back, conflict-avoidant, and not particularly hard working. This idea is framed always against a Guatemalan Other: those whose recent histories were ravaged by civil war and state-led genocide, whose lives are colored by extreme precarity, who, if they live in the poor border communities, will trek for three days into the Chiquibul forest and engage in the backbreaking task of panning gold. The history of Guatemala's thirty-six year war, which ended in 1996, also creates an imagined threat of war with Guatemala for Belizean nongovernmental actors, which would lead to the total destruction of Belize if it occurred. This threat of war, whether real or imagined, plays an important role in the need for scientific diplomacy. The threat that concerns Miguel with water, however, is tangible, and needs to be remedied. The impacts of these

incursions on water quality puts endangered flora and fauna in danger. This water and this conflict moves back and forth across the shared border, through the landscapes, histories, and nationalist visions of both countries.

[PAUSE]

This paper comes from a larger project focused on the futures of the Maya Forest, the largest remaining tract of forest in Central America, which spans Northern Guatemala, Belize, and Southern Mexico. [slide 4: Maya Forest map; briefly explain image] The project uses collaborative multi-sited ethnography, conducted by me and Dr. Micha Rahder, to examine the influence of increasing regional violence and political instability on environmental knowledge and action at a transnational scale. We conducted initial fieldwork in summer 2017, splitting travel across the three countries and gathering interviews with both state and NGO representatives working in conservation in all three countries. Forest conservation in this region requires complex negotiations across scales: national interests, local land use, trade agreements, and the cross-border movements of people (documented and undocumented). These scales must somehow come together with scientific understandings of the landscape, such as the needs of wide-ranging species or regional climate model projections. While a few tri-national projects exist, such as one sponsored by German international development programs, most environmental projects in the region stop at the borders. [black slide]

In this paper, we focus on how the presence or absence of water in borderland spaces of the Maya Forest shape the possibilities for transnational conflict, collaboration, and multispecies life. In conservation practice, as in much scholarship on environmental degradation, there is a strict division between marine and terrestrial areas. Terrestrial waterways in the Maya Forest -

rivers, swamps, small *aguadas* [ponds, watering holes]- are often neglected in practice, or tacked on to forest conservation programming as a kind of afterthought. In Guatemala's Maya Biosphere Reserve, which covers the largest portion of the Maya Forest, water protection is often assumed to be an outcome of forest protection, such that the former receives little to no specific programming, research, or policy attention. Similarly, in Belize, protection of rivers was most often described to us as a question of ensuring a certain forest buffer along their banks - protecting trees was protecting water. Yet despite its secondary status, water in the Maya Forest - including its lack - would frequently flow into the center of conversations around borders, conflict, and multispecies relations.

Zones of water operate as important corridors between patches of forest which protect wildlife, forest, and livelihoods. In the borderland described above, the presence of protected lands and waters on one side of a border, contrasted with a violently denuded and neglected landscape on the other, have led to increasing militarization and violent conflict, without decreasing harms to the landscape itself. Threats to water in the Chiquibul represent health concerns for the over half a million people that rely on the water system travelling through the bi-national border, and also threatens the continuance of the forest. While we often think of border conflicts over water as being about distribution, water shortage, or how pollution flows from one place to another, water in this region creates sites of contestation, leading to violence on both human and nonhuman life. Even if people are not fighting over water, water becomes a zone of conflict.

This becomes strangely clear by examining another borderland, this one marked by an absence of water. In contrast to the continuous conflict on its northern border with Belize, the

northern-eastern Guatemalan border with Mexico remains relatively calm. In fact, the whole area near the *tres banderas*, or meeting of the three countries, reflects this calm, especially in contrast to the extreme violence and militarization springing up further west along the Guatemala-Mexico border. [slide 5: map with conflict/lack of conflict indicated, point out campeche/tres banderas area] This part of the landscape is massively dry, including much of the Mexican state of Campeche, the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve within it, and the Mirador-Rio Azul National Park on the Guatemalan side. There are no major rivers here, only small ponds and watering holes, many of which are only seasonal. One Mexican conservationist told me he wished that hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico would come towards Campeche as they had done in the past. Concerns over the effects of the drought on animal life and forest health were plentiful. Yet, the drought and limestone that absorbs much of the water and the little rainfall that befell the state was also viewed as a blessing to the preservation of the forest on both sides of the border. [black slide]

Many conservationists in Campeche had little to say about their Southern border as there was no conflict or concerns that really came to mind. But Milagros², a doctor who works in the area, has a story to tell me about this border. She says there is a zone called El Sacrificio where Guatemalans are able to get 72 hour visas to receive medical help in Mexico. Guatemalans cross this border on a daily basis and the Mexican government receives them - a sharp contrast to the conflict on the Western Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico border. When I ask why - she explains that people are not compelled to move to Campeche, because it is dry land. It is not good for building livelihoods. Conservationists on the Guatemalan side tell a similar story - there are

²Pseudonym.

threats to the forest coming from other parts of Mexico in the form of organized crime and drug trafficking gangs, but this part of the border is quiet because there is no water. It is too difficult to survive here, to trek the land, so neither migrants heading north nor criminals claiming territory to the south have yet made incursions. This area did not face the dangers in the Chiquibul. [slight pause]

While lack of water seems to serve as mitigator to human conflict, it poses threats to wildlife in the forest. Olga³, an archeologist working at INAH (Instituto de Antropología y Historia) tells me about the long and arduous days of archeological work- traversing the difficult terrain and two hour journey into the Calakmul Archeological site. She tells me that she is worried about the lack of water in the state of Campeche this year. She is concerned over global climate change and is sure that this is contributing to the extra dryness of 2017. I had just arrived in Xpujil two days before and it rained some part of the day both days. The heat was thick, though. The water droplets almost disappearing as they descended from the clouds into the ground. Though trained as an archeologist, the extra dry weather this year required that Olga and other archeologists learn about the wildlife. “There is a shortage of water,” she says, “for us but even more for small animals.” In order to mediate the severe drought, they had been digging aguadas (waterholes) and leaving small pools and buckets of water for animals throughout the reserve. While this was an important contribution to saving the animals from dying of dehydration, it created an another threat. Olga explains that she has been anxious about the number of animals that have been poached and sold into illegal animal trafficking trades, particularly small yellow parrots. Aguadas have now become sites for hunting, poaching, or

³Pseudonym.

selling animals. This heavily weighs on Olga who is not sure what the best solution is to protect biodiversity.

[Pause]

None of the few trinational projects that exist in the Maya Forest are specifically addressed to water. There are attempts to coordinate forest conservation strategies, and more commonly projects focused specifically on charismatic species like the Scarlet Macaw, white-lipped peccaries, or jaguars. [slide: cute animals] Yet as both humans and non-human animals are drawn to the presence of available water on the landscape, the shape of rivers, dry zones, and seasonal or human-made aguadas also shape the possibilities for conflict and collaboration. Even as the absence of water can make survival of non-human species more difficult, it lessens the burden of militarized and criminal violence on those same species. Although borderland conflicts in this region are not *about* water, water shapes the possibilities for cross-border collaborations, conflicts, and more-than-human futures in unexpected and complex ways.

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