

## **Risking Environmental Justice: Culture, Conservation, and Governance at Calakmul, Mexico**

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In rural Latin America, environmental programs must balance conservation with demands for economic development. In the past two decades, policy makers have addressed these conditions through a combination of sustainable development programs and biosphere reserves—a protected area status that allows some human activity (Brandon, Redford, and Sanderson 1998; Wells and Brandon 1992). In this chapter, I use the case of Mexico's largest protected area for tropical ecosystems, the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, to show how these well-intentioned aims generate ambiguous social consequences.<sup>1</sup> At Calakmul,<sup>2</sup> national conservation policies were reconfigured at the local level to re-create both populist and authoritarian styles of governance. This contradiction further heightened local debates regarding what kinds of government activity were appropriate in Calakmul, debates that emphasized the government's role in providing access to farmland. In response to these tensions, Calakmul's people used their class position as *campesinos* (subsistence farmers, see below) and their role as determiners of the region's ecology to navigate contradictions within conservation and these same government-farmer relations. As I show below, the end results of these processes were equally problematic. Calakmul's people now live with more government intervention, both desired (in the form of greater local representation) and undesired (in the form of an expanding military presence). Conservation policies that once acknowledged local people's role in Calakmul's environmental future now focus on the presence of nonlocal ecotourists.

Research in environmental justice addresses situations like Calakmul's by highlighting how distinct social groups share unevenly in the burden of environmental degradation and protection (Miller, Hallstein, and Quass 1996). For example, international conservationists travelled by plane and rental car to Calakmul, where they hoped to change the swidden agriculture practiced in the region. This stereotype, however,

may obscure more complex questions of environmental and social justice. Calakmul's people resisted some aspects of conservation, but not others. They operated simultaneously within multiple political frameworks and contrary norms for relating. I explore this variability by describing conservation programs and policies at Calakmul, as well as local responses to these programs and policies. In my conclusions, I use this material to suggest localized definitions of environmental justice at Calakmul. Because of the government's central role in land distribution, I concentrate on how local ideas emphasized a community of justice between government agents and *campesinos* and the regulation of that relationship through patron-client ties.

I base my evidence on fourteen months of participant observation conducted at Calakmul during 1994 and 1995 with brief subsequent trips in 1996, 1999, and 2001. I spent most of that time living in two *ejidos* (communally managed farm communities) located within the Reserve buffer zone. There I documented the effects of aid projects on village political structures and household economies. I also made weekly trips to the town of Zoh Laguna, headquarters of the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve and of the Xpujil Regional Council. The Council is a *campesino* organization, and, during my research, the group allied itself to the Reserve while spearheading a pervasive program of small-scale, sustainable development. While I learned about the Reserve and Council's operations by attending meetings and conducting interviews, I also followed the connections between these organizations and regional *ejidos*. Reserve and Council staffers regularly visited *ejidos* as they oversaw conservation development programs. The Council also held monthly assemblies attended by hundreds of delegates from its forty-three-member *ejidos*. As I explain below, Reserve and Council officers sought to transform national environmental policies into locally acceptable programs that empowered Calakmul's *campesino* community. The officers' intentions, however, never appeared straightforward. Corruption accusations swirled around both administrations. This association between corruption and conservation indicates the importance people ascribed to the goods at risk in Calakmul's political game, as well as the contradictory quality of conservation's message. In these paragraphs, I describe how these discrepancies accompanied conservation's arrival to Calakmul and were never entirely clarified.

#### Declaration of the **Calakmul Biosphere Reserve**

Calakmul sits in the southeast corner of Campeche state, where Mexico borders Belize and Guatemala. In this section, I describe the political

scene preceding the Reserve's declaration, which contributed to conservation's local formulation. In the early 1990s, government authorities associated with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) imposed conservation development at Calakmul using a rhetoric of neopopulist politics. Development programs were aimed at appeasing Calakmul's people, then known for their support of Mexico's opposition, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). In creating a base of PRI support, government agents never set aside conservation objectives. Instead, they characterized Calakmul as an impoverished agricultural frontier, rich in natural resources, in order to rationalize both conservation and development initiatives (see also Li 1999).

Centered on the Mayan archaeological site of the same name, Calakmul, the Reserve was formed by presidential decree in 1989. Mexican and international archaeologists and environmentalists had lobbied for the Reserve throughout the 1980s (Folan n.d.). Some conservationists, however, admit privately that the declaration finally came about only after Mexico's sullied 1988 presidential elections. Entering office under accusations of election fraud, Carlos Salinas de Gortari turned to environmental protection as a way to gain support for his administration.<sup>3</sup> This decision alienated Calakmul's people, who suddenly found themselves living near a reserve.

Calakmul's people say they only learned of the Reserve's existence a year after its declaration, when scientists arrived to inventory the region's resources. It was at this time that they also learned that *ejidos* with lands inside the Reserve might be relocated. These threats proved an especially sore point in *campesino-government* relations at the time. *Campesinos* complained that the Reserve was an added insult in an area long neglected by government authorities. The area's history of colonization helps explain their discontent.

Calakmul is home to 24,000 migrant farmers who colonized the area's extensive forests over the past thirty years. As with similar frontiers in the state of Chiapas (Arizpe, Paz, and Velazquez 1996; Harvey 1998b), some families arrived through government-sponsored relocation programs that aimed to relieve pressure on agrarian lands in northern Mexico. Others learned of land availability through word of mouth and squatted on national lands until their situation was legalized in the form of *ejidal* grants.

*Campesinos* who arrived at Calakmul before the 1990s complained that local conditions did little to improve their quality of life. Calakmul houses a seasonal tropical forest that undergoes marked dry periods. Droughts occur one out of every four years and often cause food shortages. Until the early 1990s, difficult living conditions forced many people

out of Calakmul, and population turnover in the region's *ejidos* was high (Boege and Murguía 1989). People asserted that government agents were unresponsive to these hardships. State and municipal authorities, located at least four hours away by bus, seldom visited the region. Calakmul received agricultural programs but had few schools or health clinics. Slighted by governing authorities, the people allied themselves with the opposition PRD. The ruling PRI, in the words of one farm leader, "had no influence here."

In order to counter anti-PRI sentiment, organizers with the government's National Solidarity Program, *Programa Nacional de Solidaridad* (PRONASOL) worked in the early 1990s to build a *campesino* organization (the Xpujil Regional Council) capable of administering PRONASOL development funds. Through astute political maneuvers, PRONASOL organizers utilized anti-PRI and anti-conservation sentiment to intensify government-farmer relations at Calakmul. Campeche's 1991 gubernatorial election served as a platform for this renegotiation. In return for supporting the PRI candidate, the residents of Calakmul—through the PRONASOL-funded Regional Council—would receive increased development funds. They would also find relief from relocation threats. One of the Regional Council's first board members described this votes-for-development deal:

We wanted to form a group that could sell its product with the aid of technical advice. But then came the problem of the Reserve and that, in 1990, we learned some people were inside it. When the first investigators came, birders and all those people who go into the forest, we realized there were *campesinos* inside the Reserve. SEDUE (Secretaría de Desarrollo Urbano y Ecología, Secretariat of Urban Development and Ecology [federal environment and development authority] said they had to leave, and they began to hold meetings with villages. In that time .. ecologist[s] ... went to the village of Colon for a meeting, and there the people told them that if they weren't smart, they were going to be lynched. The [Regional] Council talked with the government. [We said] it wasn't right, that if the *ejidal* decrees were from before the Reserve's, you cannot place one decree on top of another. The governor said, "I promise to bring the President here, but you all are going to work out this problem with him, that you don't want to move and that you want to care for the Reserve."

Calakmul's people did vote for the PRI candidate, after which Salinas made a personal visit to the region. In a speech to hundreds of *campesinos*, he promised development programs that would contribute toward

a "productive ecology." He furthermore charged area residents with 'caring for the Reserve.' In practice, this caring entailed considerable financial support for the Regional Council. In the mid-1990s, the budget of this (technically) nongovernmental organization rivaled that of any government office in southeastern Campeche.

### A Regional Environmental Agenda

If it ended here, this story would be a familiar one of pork-barrel politicking (Molinár Horcasitas and Weldon 1994). The implementation of the 1991 deal, however, strengthened *campesinos'* position within environmental policy-making and, more generally, within government-farmer relations. The PRONASOL organizer who became the Reserve's first director, Deocundo Acopa, steered this empowerment. Acopa asserted that Campeche's farmers "owned" the Reserve and should benefit from its presence. Under his direction, Reserve and Council administrations became virtually indistinguishable. Without denying the electoral implications of his work, Calakmul's director saw himself as using conservation development to train *campesino* leaders, while empowering Calakmul's *campesino* sector. Here I examine PRONASOL's expansiveness to show how notions of equity and redistributive justice played out in the context of governing institutions characterized by a blending of populism and authoritarianism.

PRONASOL was its most developed when Calakmul's Reserve director, the Regional Council, and nongovernmental groups working in southeast Campeche met with state environmental officers to review the region's conservation initiatives in February 1995. Acopa began by explaining the importance of having the Regional Council coordinate nongovernmental activities. He argued that independently operating nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) could become embroiled in rivalries in which groups duplicate programs, become territorial, and generally operate within a "feudal" atmosphere. After this introduction, technical staff employed by the Reserve, Council, and NGOs presented their programs, stressing a common focus on projects that met developmental needs as expressed by Calakmul's people.

The variety of programs highlights how Calakmul's local conservation practitioners viewed development as serving conservation aims and vice versa. Technical staff described water management programs that included damming seasonal streams and constructing ponds. A global information systems (GIS) project aimed to delineate *ejidal* boundaries. An environmental educator had built an educational center, complete with botanical garden and zoo, in which she hosted local schoolteachers and

children. Organic agriculture programs aimed to enrich soil which would end the need for field rotation. The agroforestry program addressed forest management from numerous perspectives. The Regional Council operated four nurseries that supplied saplings to Council members. *Campesinos* planted hardwoods and fruit trees in their house gardens and farm parcels. Technical staff gave advice for caring for the trees and combating arboreal diseases. While the Council board explored markets for less valuable woods, foresters evaluated rates of secondary growth to assess the economic potential of pioneer species.

In the Council's flagship program, *campesinos* voluntarily established protected areas on *ejidal* lands. These reserves aimed at some use particular to an *ejido's* resources. *Ejidors* with archaeological ruins and wildlife populations hoped to capture part of the tourism market. While Council staff emphasized the reserves' practical value, policy makers saw the *ejidal* reserves as a proselytizing tool. They hoped the reserves would provide a foundation for relating to the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, as Calakmul's people continued to oppose protected areas, despite widespread support for sustainable development projects (see below and Haenn 1999a).

As technical staff reported one after another, director Acopa interjected the philosophy behind each program. The water programs, he explained, aimed at stressing that "if people want water, they have to care for it." People did not have to participate in Council projects, but if they did, the projects would allow them "to see for themselves that the forest is being destroyed." Acopa believed people would protect only those species they found economically valuable. Acopa thus described the sum total of the projects as supporting biodiversity by demonstrating the value of a variety of forest products (Acopa and Boege 1998). Acopa was a consummate cultural broker. In his conservation philosophy, he easily combined the neopopulist and neoliberal rhetoric of the Salinas administration with growing support in conservation circles for community-based management (Dresser 1991; Haenn 2000; Western and Wright 1994).

At the meeting's close, a state representative described Calakmul as a national example. Calakmul's conservation community was creating "new and rational ways to take advantage of the environment." Most important, he noted, these programs were "based on the people, with the people, and for the people." Although presenters listed among their funders the MacArthur Foundation, the World Bank, Canada's Eastern Ontario Model Forest, and various federal agencies, the programs' grass-roots tint was noticeable. In its management role, the democratic Regional Council provided the appearance of a local environmental movement.

### New Environmental Populism

Originally formed to administer PRONASOL funds, the Regional Council grew far beyond this mandate. By 1995 the Council was a quasi-governmental group with whose power everyone in Calakmul had to reckon. The source of this power was the group's alliance with the Reserve, an alliance that underpinned receipt of conservation development funds. In Mexico organizations like the Council form part of a complicated drama in which nongovernmental groups variously (sometimes simultaneously) strive for political independence and governmental support for small-scale producers (Harvey 1998a; Otero 1999; Stanford 1994). At Calakmul, the Council became a site for the creative blending of hegemonic and nonhegemonic discourses (cf. Stephen 1997), as Council members attempted to reconfigure government policies. Elsewhere I describe this blending in respect to conservation ideologies (Haenn 1999a). Here, I consider how the Council served as a place where people replicated and attempted to work through tensions between ideals of social hierarchy and equality. As people worked through these tensions in the context of authoritarian and populist governing styles, they also had to deal with contrasting ideals of development, including differences among locally desired development and the aims of various funding agencies.

By 1995 more than half of the villages located in Calakmul's buffer zone belonged to the Regional Council. To join, an *ejido* simply requested acceptance at one of the Council's monthly assemblies. *Ejidors* then accessed projects by petitioning the assembly. Acopa encouraged individual *ejidos* to conduct annual assessments of their development needs. Ideally, petitions would reflect these assessments. Given the top-down nature of the Council's funding; however, these assessments never influenced development expenditures. Instead, the assessments provided Acopa and the Council's board with material to pressure funders for changed development priorities. In the meantime, *ejidal* petitions reflected available funding with its overwhelming emphasis on environmental issues.

Council assembly meetings were day-long affairs in which hundreds of elected representatives promoted their personal interests, those of their *ejidos*, and their visions of a social order in which *campesinos* would dominate. These representatives oversaw the work of a board, voted from within the assembly's ranks. While men voted for their own delegates, women also voted for representatives from organized women's groups. As such, women comprised one third of Council delegates, and the Council provided the only place in Calakmul where women held

formal power. Because a single *ejido* could have as many as four representatives (in addition to hangers-on), assembly attendance ranged from one to three hundred people. This size made Council assemblies the most representative *campesino* forum in Calakmul.

Acopa and the Council's board built on this representativeness to further enhance the group's power. Populism and *caciquismo* (local bossism), rather than standing as polar opposites, shaded into each other as the government agent mandated popular oversight of regional conservation and development. In addition to the Council's coordinating role, Acopa required that all nongovernmental groups (including university researchers) receive public, that is, Council assembly, approval for their programs. This approval was never denied, and *campesino* input had little effect on program design. Still, the process reminded powerful outsiders of the similarly influential position held by Calakmul's inhabitants.

Meanwhile, government agents repeatedly acknowledged the Council's authority. They used the assembly to disseminate information on topics ranging from fire control techniques to future development planning. In one assembly, the state governor and Canadian ambassador to Mexico signed a binational pact that delivered aid to Calakmul. The fanfare surrounding the event reiterated a government-campesino alliance forged previously in the votes-for-development deal. Speaking to the assembly, one federal agent asserted that: "We chose to work here because of the Reserve director and the support of the state government. But, none of that matters without your support. If [conservation] doesn't work here, it won't work anywhere." By asserting that successful conservation required both a commanding government presence and popular support, federal agents contributed to the Council's role in repainting tensions between hierarchy and populism reflective of the region's relationship to federal authorities. Not coincidentally, these tensions were similarly characteristic of political life in Calakmul's *ejidos*. An important difference at the *ejidal* level was the tenor with which people acknowledged that these tensions invariably play out in contests surrounding control of land.

### Old *Ejidal* Politics

Within Calakmul's *ejidos*, this conservation agenda had a mixed reception. People struggled to put off unwanted government interference while they also took advantage of conservation's development aspects. In exploring this mixed reception, I noted how conservation had become caught up in *ejidal* politics at all levels of governance. At a regional level, Salinas' call to "care for the Reserve" echoed the usufruct rights associ-

ated with *ejidal* donations. At the *ejidal* level, conservation programs touched on people's worries about defending their access to land. Before exploring how Council programs reinforced these fears, I first turn to the broader basis for *campesino* resistance to conservation.

In opposing conservation, Calakmul's people called on a social contract with federal agents, one in which government authorities should facilitate access to farmland and agricultural inputs. This position, with its roots in Mexico's revolution of 1910, will sound familiar to researchers of Mexico's agrarian reform. The enduring relevance of this contract finds its most potent expression in the *Zapatista* uprising in Chiapas, a movement instigated partly to resist conservation programs in that state (Collier 1994; Harvey 1998a, 1998b; Nigh 2001). At Calakmul, people opposed environmentalism, arguing that such policies countered this social contract. Protected areas take land out of the agricultural base. Restrictions on hunting and felling and burning forests threaten subsistence. Part of the *Zapatista* platform protests changes made in Article 27 of Mexico's constitution, changes that officially ended distribution of farmland and that encourage privatization of existing *ejidal* lands. At Calakmul, concerns about land insecurity have focused on the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve. Privatization has been a slow and uneven process at Calakmul (Klepeis and Vance 2000), where government agents have countered national policies by creating two new communities composed of families relocated from the Reserve. With public support and government actions leaning toward land redistribution, people who participated in sustainable development programs did so while resisting conservation in the form of protected areas.

Jeronimo provides an example of how this selective approach to conservation found roots in ideals of land distribution. Jeronimo joined every Council project offered in his *ejido*. He spoke with me about his *ejido's* reserve and the need to protect forests to counter global environmental change. However, responding to government mandates that farmers build firebreaks during the burning season, Jeronimo became angry, protesting that:

What we are going to care for is the [Calakmul Biosphere] Reserve, and we are not going to care for the forest, because the government gave it to us. If the government prohibits something on the land it gives, why give it in the first place?

Although willing to appear conservationist in order to appeal to outside interests (cf. Tsing 1999), Jeronimo was unwilling to alter his farming practices. His stance suggests that, in addition to threats to land and

livelihood, *campesino* resistance also countered the unpredictability of ambivalent government policies.

More than social contracts, ideals of land distribution contributed to social identities at Calakmul. Thus far, I have used the word *campesino* as a gloss for *farmer*. Local descriptions of *campesino* pointed to the word's use as a class marker that describes an identity built partly on farm work and partly on people's unique relationship to government authority. A *campesino*, one man said, "lives by his hands, eats because of his pure strength. When there is no money, a *campesino* looks for work to buy food, soap. This is how the years pass." One of the most important markers of a *campesino* was that he or she did not receive a regular salary. Dependent on agriculture and occasional wage labor, they were also dependent on government authorities who provide access to land and welfare aid. This relationship, however, was never easy. While governing authorities could facilitate subsistence, they were also described as extortionists who were predatory toward *campesino* interests. Government structures acted as an antagonistic source of *campesino* identity. Thus, a man drunk on the proceeds of a government subsidy check harangued a soldier conducting a routine search on a local bus. He lectured that "Article 27 says a *campesino* has the right to decide his life for himself. Nobody can manipulate him." Being a *campesino*, this situation suggests, entailed negotiating ideals of dignity in autonomy and the reality of an interdependence built on *campesinos'* humiliation and exploitation. In this way, conservation's double-edged sword was familiar to *campesinos* accustomed to equivocal government actions.

In pressing for more consistent government policies, *campesinos* invoked the social contract outlined in the original Article 27, and attempted to force government agents to live up to promises of patronage (see below). Along these lines, Juan echoed Jeronimo, although the two men did not know each other, and Juan lived two hours driving distance from Jeronimo's *ejido*. Juan did not participate in any Council activities, but he still saw the need for such programs:

Well, the government should come and explain exactly why it doesn't want [us to fell forest]. If the government gave us land, it gave us land to work. Then after giving us the land to work, it doesn't want us to fell. Then what it should do is give us other lands, give us the support to be able to live from one or two hectares, with mechanized agriculture or something else.

While Juan and Jeronimo drew on national-level *ejidal* politics to formulate anticonservation positions, their positions in Calakmul's conservation arena reflected localized *ejidal* politics. In Juan's *ejido*, Council

projects were controlled by a village faction of which Juan was not a member. Council projects were part of a deeper division in which the *ejido's* two blocs divided between themselves the various programs that were then entering the community. Because of this division, Juan saw little need to feign support for conservation. Contrastingly, Jeronimo rarely uttered a word against conservation. Instead, he actively cultivated Council projects. Jeronimo, along with a handful of other men, controlled Council projects in his *ejido*. In addition to agricultural inputs, they benefitted from the day wages, foodstuffs, and household supplies that programs offered only the most active participants. By dominating projects, individuals also might develop opportunities for more illicit gain. Project accounting at the *ejidal* level was not transparent. Council staff disregarded people who complained about a neighbor's handling of project materials; it regarded these issues as a matter of internal *ejidal* politics and, thus, beyond Council jurisdiction. The Council's goals of grass-roots empowerment met serious obstacles in the factional politics and unaccountable leadership often typical of Mexico's *ejidos* (DeWalt and Rees 1994; Galletti 1998).

At the same time, Council programs actually reinforced *ejidal* inequalities by organizing project implementation in a way that mirrored the *ejido's* governing structure. For each project, farmers voted a management group consisting of a *presidente* (president), *tesorero* (treasurer), *secretaria* (secretary), and a *consejo de vigilancia* (oversight council). The *ejidal* governing structure was similarly comprised of two committees, each containing a president, secretary, and treasurer (roughly, one committee is charged with managing internal *ejidal* affairs and another with managing the *ejido's* external affairs). In addition to these, a third committee, similarly designated the *consejo de vigilancia*, acted as a check on the others to see that officeholders fulfill their obligations. Although outsiders saw this organization as evidence for an environmentalism rooted in the local culture, they overlooked the extent to which Calakmul's people themselves saw this structure as problematic.

"In *ejidos* there are always problems," people told me. In saying so, they indicated their personal experience of Mexico's variable and complex *ejidal* sector (Cornelius and Myhre 1998; Snyder and Torres 1998). Many of Calakmul's migrants fled impossible economic and political situations (Haenn 1999b) only to find that Calakmul's *ejidos* similarly presented "population pressures, boundary disputes, competition for *ejidal* rights, . . . entrenchment of certain leaders in *ejidal* office, factional power struggles, intrigues with outside political and economic interests, corruption and favoritism, agitation and demagoguery, violence and assassination" (Ronfeldt 1973: 216). Cognizant of their vulnerable position,

*campesinos* jockeyed to use the new sustainable economy to reconfigure *ejidal* relationships to their benefit. At the same time, they struggled with the environmental ideas that brought about this particular political game. In the following sections I explore *campesino* thoughts about conservationists' hidden agendas along with *campesinos'* attempts to move political relations at Calakmul beyond their base in environmentalism.

### *iQue Hace Esta Persona En Mi Casa?*

By the end of 1995, the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve was six years old, and the Regional Council was at its zenith. Conservation goals had been broadcast in Council and *ejidal* assemblies. Yet, at a conference with Mexican and international environmental groups, a former Council board member asked of the environmentalists, "*iQue P ace esta persona en mi casa?*": "What are these people doing in my house?" People were suspicious that the programs were not what they seemed. The notion of setting aside land that nobody would touch remained alien to Calakmul's people, who viewed the landscape as a place of work (see Haenn 1999c; Murphy 1998; Schwartz 1999). Faced with such incomprehensible actions, *campesinos* began to surmise that environmentalists harbored malevolent motives (cf. Brydon 1996).

In brief, Calakmul's people concluded that there must be something of wealth in the forest that environmentalists wanted to keep for themselves. People viewed some outsiders as stealing recognizable forms of wealth. For example, Canadian interests in conservation were seen as a land grab, as one man avowed that "Canada owns [the] Calakmul [Biosphere Reserve]." Outsiders might as likely translate forest goods into items whose market value is unknown in Mexico. One group of biologists was thought to be stealing bats, even though people could not imagine what commercial use the animals would have. The biologists' tendency to work clandestinely in the forests at night provided some clues. A rumor circulated that they were drug traffickers; when the biologists announced their intentions by painting a batman sign on their car, however, the rumor ceased.

Along these lines, people saw urban-based, nongovernmental groups not as champions of environmental protection, but as self-interested actors. Another former board member of the Regional Council complained: "That's why the money ecologists have for conservation doesn't arrive here. It all goes to rock concerts, exotic meals, and travel." Critiques of conservation thus doubled as critiques of Mexican and international class structures. *Campesinos* often said that people who receive regular salaries are wary of losing that income. Because of this, salaried workers

would do what they must to maintain financial security, even if it meant making hypocrites of themselves or enforcing regulations detrimental to farm activities. On this basis, people were indignant, though unsurprised, at reports that environmentalists illegally hunted wildlife. As conservation became caught up in class conflict, tools for resisting conservation similarly employed class statements. In addition to issues of land reform, Calakmul's people drew on class-based discourses and strategies made available by PRD activists and the *Zapatista* movement. These strategies effectively gained additional government aid for Calakmul. They did not, however, counter conservation's role in Calakmul's political organization or the more oppressive aspects of conservation policy.

### Reconfiguring Conservation

As the Regional Council grew, its critics objected that not everyone benefited from the new sustainable economy. Council board members aroused suspicions of corruption as they began to live lifestyles beyond the means of their salaries. Impatient with a hegemonic Regional Council, hundreds of farmers blocked a federal highway during the busy Easter weekend of 1995. They exacted tolls from passing drivers, charging foreigners more than Mexicans. Tractor trailer drivers refused to pay and found themselves unable to traverse one of only two roads connecting the Yucatan peninsula to the rest of Mexico. Strikers requested the governor's personal presence to address their complaints. By challenging the Regional Council, the strike and its aftermath would reshape government structures at Calakmul.

Protestors' grievances centered on government subsidies that, for the most part, were unrelated to the conservation-development schema. Strikers criticized the government's program for children's scholarships, which, at that time, was in arrears on its payments. Representatives of individual *ejidos* presented petitions for issues particular to their communities. These problems included long-standing requests for either a school, electrification, or legalization of land tenure.

Rumors circulated that the strike had been aided by PRD and *Zapatista* organizers. This *Zapatista* connection merits brief attention. Following the 1994 uprising, Calakmul received an influx of migrants fleeing violence in Chiapas. These refugees provided a personal connection to the rebellion's issues and discourses. Farmers and government agents alike drew parallels between Chiapas and Calakmul, and the Easter protest raised awareness of the possibility of armed resistance to conservation in Calakmul. Following the protest, for example, one of its participants complained about regulations that ban cutting older growth forest:

I don't understand them [conservationists], because if a fellow does not have land already felled, how is he going to feed his family? That's why the farmer becomes rebellious, like in Chiapas, where they don't allow even a small part of the forest to be felled.

I asked this man if he were a PRD supporter, and he responded with an ironic tone: "No, I've always voted PRI, although they steal from me." Public disassociation from the PRD may be advisable in Calakmul, where PRD organizers have been jailed for their activities. This particular man went on to work with PRI government agents to address his community's development needs. Still, the PRD and *Zapatistas* offered Calakmul's people alternative avenues for understanding conservation and for framing responses to it.

A *Zapatista* presence and threats of violence in Calakmul assured the governor's interest. On his arrival, protestors engaged the governor in theatrical displays of poverty. They fed him a plate of unsalted beans and requested he drink a glass of the filthy water typical of regional water sources during that drought season. The governor conceded to few demands, but he assigned a team of bureaucrats to meet with community leaders. Numerous problems cited by demonstrators began to receive attention. Calakmul's Reserve director reflected that the PRI's pork-barrel tactics had returned to haunt the party as Calakmul's people demanded increasingly higher prices for their allegiance.

Conservation issues were on the sidelines of these events, and, as such, the political reorganization that followed the protest might have detached conservation from Calakmul's political arena. After the Easter protest, no fewer than three new farm organizations arose to challenge the Regional Council. Unallied with the Reserve, these groups made little pretense of harboring conservationist sentiments in order to access government funds. Government reaction to the protest, however, reinforced the environmental connection.

Before the protest, the Council and Reserve director had considered pressuring state authorities for the creation of a *municipio*, akin to a U.S. county, to encompass the Reserve and its buffer zone. After the Easter protest, people saw the *municipio* as a way to quell potential rebellion. Declared in 1996, lawmakers heralded Calakmul as the country's first "ecological" *municipio*, a place where environmental regulations and conservation development programming weighed significantly. The creation of the *municipio* increased the local administrative budget from 441,527 pesos in 1996 to 9 million pesos in 1997 (*Diario de Yucatan*, January 2, 1997). A Reserve director (distinct from the person mentioned above) became the *municipio's* first president.

Since 1995, Calakmul has seen an increasing state presence, though the region's reputation for political rebellion and grass-roots activism has lessened. Following the Easter protest, the Regional Council began to decline, and today has only a handful of members. Regional development now focuses on ecotourism (see *Diario de Yucatan*, September 10, 1999), an industry that benefits mainly local and urban elites who finance its infrastructure. Rumors of guerilla activity in Calakmul persist. As in other parts of southern Mexico, the military has a growing presence in Calakmul. Military authorities include in their mandate protection of natural resources, alongside "the fight against drug trafficking and illegal arms shipments" (*Diario de Yucatan*, January 13, 2000). Overall, Calakmul serves as a powerful example of how conservation can be used to extend state power and incorporate undercapitalized regions into larger economic structures (Escobar 1996).

Nonetheless, Calakmul's people feel pride in their *municipio*. Government agents are more locally available, and the presence of local people in *municipio* offices allows for personalized interactions with officeholders. At the same time, an increased government presence raises the specter of greater interference in farm practices and *ejidal* life. Today, Calakmul's people continue to negotiate a series of contradictions characteristic of their relationship to government authority: autonomy and dependence, the need for government aid and fear of predatory government actions, and the desire for a dignified place in the Mexican nation-state and the ambivalent quality of government policies that appeal to divergent interests.

#### Discussion

Within this contradictory setting, sustainable development briefly worked as a *metafix* (see Lele in Dobson 1998), a set of ideas and programs capable of appealing to conflicting interest groups. What relationship, then, did this sustainable development agenda have to notions of justice? Members of the international environmental community, who view poverty and environmental degradation as mutually causative, often see sustainable development as a more solid form of justice (Dobson 1998). Contrastingly, *cam pesino* opposition to conservation and continued pressuring for certain kinds of government activities suggest that they viewed sustainable development not as a definitive form of justice, but as a single event within a larger process. This difference raises broader questions about the existence of localized ideas of environmental justice at Calakmul. Here, I make some suggestions for these ideas, while assessing the challenge that Calakmul poses for such delineation.



The above list of contradictions points to my own notion of how just environmental and social structures at Calakmul might appear. An autonomous, empowered *cam pesino* sector would influence transparent government policies that benefit the farm sector. Many of Calakmul's people pressure for this kind of setting. Teasing out variable local ideas of justice, however, can be quite difficult. The political maneuvering of the mid-1990s entailed games within games, and individual motivations were never transparent. Often, it is only in retrospect that such dense political scenes can be assessed, when results of the games materialize. With this hindsight, commentators on the events I describe suggest that these games were simply about extending PRI control. Descriptions of events as they happened show how such statements can overdetermine government actions while denying *cam pesino* agency (cf. Moore 1999). In addition to resisting conservation, *cam pesinos* took advantage of contradictory government actions. Because of this, Calakmul shows how, in addition to expressions of abstract norms, researchers must examine actions and processes as sources of ideas about justice.

A primary question within these local ideas is *justice for whom?* Given that social justice entails the distribution of particular goods to a particular group of people, whom do Calakmul's people see as belonging to a local community of justice? *Campesinos'* active role in the votes-for-development deal of 1991 and Easter strike of 1995 suggests that Calakmul's people worked to create a community of justice between themselves and government agents. Government-farmer relations at Calakmul supported Adolfo Gilly's (1998) assertion that governance in Mexico entails ongoing negotiations of authority, often built on instances of revolt. Furthermore, the personalized quality of these negotiations suggest that Calakmul's people viewed an ideal community as operating within what has been called "an ethic of care," or the notion that obligations arise out of relationships (Gilligan 1982). Thus, absent from this community were nongovernmental environmentalists. Both national and international environmental agents remained suspect because they had not established sustained relationships of give-and-take with Calakmul's people. Also absent from this community was the physical environment, an entity that many environmentalists view as deserving or requiring a place within discussions of justice. The reasons for this omission are too lengthy to explore here, but rest on local ideas of the environment as a separate social world, linked to human society through people's labor.

As *cam pesinos* worked to enforce the boundaries of this community of justice, they also strove toward regulating that community and, in particular, the actions of government agents. In this regulation, Calakmul's people resisted the letter of the law while invoking the spirit of Mexico's

constitution. People resisted environmental laws but were not willing to entirely dismiss a legal framework. Instead, they used the social ideals that underpin such frameworks to make moral statements about government-farmer relations. They invoked Article 27 as both an identity marker and a guide for appropriate government behavior. They emphatically insisted on continued land distribution and government aid. At the same time, they suggested that government authorities should better protect *campesinos* from the vagaries of the marketplace, as well as from the malevolent intentions of national and international upper-class representatives.

In order to goad the government into action, *cam pesinos* drew on the law's symbolism to imbue its mandate with emotive content. Symbols and emotions then provided material for mapping ideas of a personalized, procedural justice (in which the outcome is determined by process, rather than regulation, see Collier 1973) onto Mexico's political system. When the Easter protestors fed the governor a meal of dirty water and unsalted beans, they demanded that he recognize poverty as experienced in the particular lives of Calakmul's people. The governor responded in kind by forming a group that could negotiate responses to highly localized needs. Given the final outcome of the strike, however, negotiation through protest provided only a limited way to advance *cam pesino* interests.

With few tools of accountability and the social demands posed by close-knit life in small communities, the *ejido* also lent itself to personalized, procedural forms of justice. Procedural justice at the *ejidal* level, however, presented particular difficulties. Past experiences of agrarian strife left many of Calakmul's people deeply suspicious of their new neighbors (Haenn 2000). Calakmul's newness as a social arena meant that institutions for handling disputes were relatively weak. In this setting, many of Calakmul's *ejidos* housed powerful men who used their strength of character to enforce a (sometimes controversial) social order.

This contradiction at the *ejidal level* resonated regionally in the person of Acopa, whose early success suggested that some of Calakmul's people remained comfortable with features of *cacique* rule. Rather than emphasizing more egalitarian political relations, Calakmul's people seemed to assert a different set of criteria for assessing justice within power relations. Various kinds of power relations could be just, as long as they benefitted the *campesino* sector and were accountable, that is, carried out on transparent terms. Ongoing grievances against the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, thus, noted how conservation entailed secret deals in which environmentalists enriched themselves at *campesinos'* expense. Acopa's authoritarianism came under fire when *campesinos* decided that it was providing a cover for corrupt Council board members, some of whom grew imperious toward their constituents.

Changing attitudes toward authoritarianism provide one more example of how Calakmul in the 1990s was a dynamic frontier setting, characterized by shifting political frameworks and relationships whose transparency was often suspect. Conservation did little to provide coherence to this political scene. Instead, conservation added to the series of contradictions by placing *campesinos* within an ill-defined development trajectory in which farm activities were often viewed a priori as destructive. Conservation development programs underscored the extent to which regional power plays required *campesinos* to gamble their own subsistence on an unknown future. In 1995, policy makers admitted that the programs outlined above remained experimental. Even if the programs were implemented to their fullest, project designers did not know if the projects would generate farm income or protect the environment. *Campesinos* who adopted the programs wholeheartedly risked the lives of their families. Luckily, skepticism about agricultural programs remained the norm, and few people took such chances.

In light of these conclusions, localized environmental justice at Calakmul might go beyond fulfilling promises of land distribution and rectifying government-farmer relations. Environmental justice also requires that *campesinos* no longer risk their subsistence in order to receive aid. Such a reformulation entails movement toward a broader notion of social justice, one characterized by responsive governing authorities and transnational funding agencies. Given the operation of both procedural and regulatory frameworks in Calakmul, defining what constitutes *responsive action* may be difficult. This complication, however, may be overcome by greater attempts at transparency in government practices and the international structures that support biodiversity protection. For example, policy agents might use public forums to solicit public opinion at the earliest stages of policy formulation. In the past, public forums at Calakmul have operated to soften the impact of non-local decision-making. Unfortunately, present governance at Calakmul is ambivalent about *campesino* influence on policy. The *municipio* allows for the election of more locally accountable officials, but these officials reportedly avoid staging large-scale assemblies where *campesinos* might develop a strong, collective voice. Reserve managers largely focus their attention inside Reserve limits. Calakmul's small but growing tourism sector offers menial employment in the service of nonlocal tourists. Among the many interest groups associated with the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, the protected area now rationalizes a military presence, just as it once served as a tool for *campesino* empowerment.

## Notes

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2. The name applies to both the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve and the *municipio*, or county, which currently houses the Reserve and its buffer zone. I use *Calakmul* to speak generally about the *municipio*, while employing *Reserve* to speak about the Biosphere Reserve.
3. See also O'Neill (1996) and Umlas (1998) for the influence of international environmental groups on Mexican policy makers.

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