
RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

ENVIRONMENTALISM IN GUATEMALA: When Fish Have Ears

Susan A. Berger
Fordham University

Environmentalism in Guatemala has emerged in conjunction with trends toward regional democratization and international economic globalization. These origins have helped form and continue to shape the organizational structure, membership, and policy orientation of the movement as well as its strategies and tactics for policy implementation. The ecology movement became closely associated with party politics during the democratization of the 1980s and eventually established an almost symbiotic relationship with the administration of the Partido Democracia Cristiana under Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo (1986–1990). But this early alliance with the Democracia Cristiana eventually weakened the movement's ability to make independent policy decisions and to protect itself from attacks by opposing parties. The relationship between the environmental movement and the state also reinforced the movement's dependence on international financing. These party and international connections have limited the organizational scope of the movement, with the result being that the ecological movement in Guatemala today remains small and urban-based and lacks a strong grassroots foundation.

The Guatemalan environmental movement grew out of the anti-authoritarian and anti-technocentric movements of the 1970s and early 1980s. From 1955 to 1986, the military-dominated politics in Guatemala supported a policy of state development designed to exploit the country's

natural resources for export. The effects of the authoritarian state's technocentric policies on the ecology were manifold. Expansion of the agro-export and cattle industries, mining, and oil drilling have all contributed to a rate of deforestation ranging from 1,080 to 1,620 square kilometers per year. Thus in the last thirty years, some 65 percent of Guatemala's original forests have been destroyed (EPOCA 1990, 2). Moreover, pesticides applied to traditional and nontraditional export crops have escalated significantly over the last twenty years, polluting waters, irrigation ditches, and cattle pastures.¹ The oil industry pollutes through spills but also produces polluting wastes.² Due to the contaminants released in exploiting petroleum, numerous types of marine life are said to be extinct or near extinction in Guatemala today.³ Toxic wastes produced by companies operating in Guatemala or imported from advanced industrialized nations have also worsened air and water contamination.⁴ The majority of Guatemalan river basins are now contaminated.⁵ More than 130 species of wildlife are threatened or endangered due to deforestation, increased air and water pollution, and the illegal but lucrative export of endangered species.⁶

Technocentrism has not only led to environmental degradation but has increased socioeconomic inequalities and popular discontent with governmental policies. Land was further concentrated in the hands of a few, leaving 27 percent of the population landless. In addition, the average size small farm declined from 1.70 to 0.79 hectares over the last thirty years. In contrast, between 1956 and 1980, land devoted to cotton increased by 2,140 percent, land for growing sugar by 406 percent, and that for coffee by 56 percent. Between 1960 and 1978, grazing land in Guatemala expanded by 2,125 percent. At the same time, production of large-scale agro-exports received 80 percent of all agricultural credit (EPOCA

1. Pesticide use on cotton crops, for instance, has risen from a range of eight to forty times per year to a current estimate of 176 pounds of insecticides used annually for every hectare of cotton. Pesticide use in nontraditional crops has also expanded. Farmers in Patzún claim to have increased pesticide applications from once per month to three times per week. In addition, where they once used a capful of poison, they now use a cup (AVANCSO and PACCA 1992, 4).

2. "Environment and Development in Latin America," Confidential Report, *Latin American Newsletters*, no. 2, p. 9.

3. "Contaminantes," *Siglo Veintiuno*, 11 Aug. 1992, p. 14.

4. Proposal for an ecological policy submitted to nineteen Latin American presidents meeting in the first Latin American Summit, held in Mexico in 1991, by writers Gabriel García Márquez, Homero Aridjis, and others. Reprinted in *Envío* 10, no. 124 (Nov. 1991), p. 11. See also Silvia Tejada, "Desechos, fantasmas y vendepatrias," *Siglo Veintiuno*, 13 Aug. 1992, p. 11. Decree 68-86, Ley de Protección y Mejoramiento del Medio Ambiente, passed in 1986, outlawed the dumping of toxic wastes in Guatemala (see Articles 6 and 7). Toxic wastes continued to be dumped, however. See Ceri-Gua, *Guatemala: On the Way to Becoming a Desert*, no. 5 (May 1993), 8.

5. *Ibid.*, 6.

6. *Ibid.*

1990, 5). Ill-planned and poorly executed land colonization projects have further increased environmental destruction and social inequities. Today, Guatemala has the most unequal land tenure in Latin America, with less than 2 percent of the landowners controlling 65 percent of the farmland. Over half a million land-poor peasants work seasonally on export plantations for wages averaging around \$1.75 a day (U.S.).

Popular discontent mounted against these policies, manifesting itself in unionization drives, illegal colonization of land, demands for better wages and services, and support for leftist insurgents. The state responded in the late 1970s and early 1980s with a brutal counterinsurgency program. Using scorched-earth tactics, the government destroyed more than 440 rural villages and killed 100,000 to 150,000 Guatemalans, leaving more than 100,000 children orphans, 150,000 Guatemalans living in refugee camps in Mexico, and an estimated one million more displaced internally.⁷ According to the Environmental Project on Central America (EPOCA), the scorched-earth policies of the military devastated “both ends of the human-land connection” and destroyed “the cultural fabric which holds communities in a sustainable relationship with their resources.”⁸ Finally, as one part of the war against drugs, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency has regularly sprayed defoliants such as glyphosphate, paraquat, and dioxin over the northern provinces in Guatemala.⁹

Amidst these political and environmental circumstances, a small group of environmental advocates emerged. Most of these activists were young, upper-class *ladinos*,¹⁰ college-educated professionals who advocated protecting biodiversity in an expanded democracy. The rallying cry of “Democratization” rather than revolution impelled the emerging movement, allowing for early integration of environmental issues into the national redefinition that was underway. The heavily political stakes involved in introducing these issues into the national agenda soon made themselves known. The example of Mario Dary is all too illustrative. Considered to be the father of Guatemala’s environmental movement, Dary was a professor of chemical engineering at the Universidad de San Carlos in Guatemala City. He became rector of the university in June 1981 and was assassinated six months later by unknown assailants. During his lifetime, Dary tried to convince Guatemalan military governments to husband the country’s natural resources and to establish protected areas, although with little success. He pioneered the concept of integrated eco-

7. *Ibid.*, 5.

8. *Ibid.*, 8.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ladino* is the term used in Guatemala to refer to nonindigenous persons. Guatemalan society has traditionally been polarized between rural peasants, migrants, or underemployed indigenous workers as opposed to urban workers who are absentee landowners or working-class or professional *ladinos*. *Ladinos* have consequently controlled the political system and the economic wealth of the country.

logical reserves, trying to show the government by example how it might preserve national natural resources.¹¹ In a lecture entitled "The Quetzal, The Guatemalan National Bird as a Symbol of Conservation," delivered two months before his death, Dary denounced the government's conservationist policies as inadequate, inappropriate, and misdirected (see Maslow 1986, 201–6).

Despite the heroic efforts of environmentalists like Mario Dary, the movement made little headway in securing environmental legislation or building a mass ecology movement prior to the mid-1980s. Administration of natural resources was handled by a variety of underfinanced government agencies with ill-defined and overlapping jurisdictions. Their main interests were not conserving national resources but exploiting them. Early environmentalists who tried to work with the government to help define a conservationist plan were underpaid, overworked, politically impotent at best, and repressed at worst.

Political space expanded in the mid-1980s, however, as the discredited and fractionalized military began to lay the groundwork for returning power to civilians. A new constitution was written in the spring of 1985, and presidential and congressional elections were held in November of that same year. Environmentalist Jorge Cabrera is credited with almost singlehandedly adding three articles to the Constitution of 1985 as the basis for future environmental legislation in Guatemala. Articles 125, 126, and 127 on exploitation of nonrenewable natural resources, forestation, and water demanded sustainable use of those resources and the passage of further legislation on conservation.¹²

Because Guatemalan environmentalists' roots were firmly planted in the anti-authoritarian and anti-technocentric movements of previous decades, most believed in 1985 that they should work for and within the emerging democratic system for a program of social ecology. Guatemalan environmentalists were strategically located at the time to push for including the environment on the policy agenda. They enjoyed many political and personal ties to the incoming civilian Christian Democrat government of Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo. Jorge Cabrera was the brother of Alfonso Cabrera, the new head of the Congreso Nacional. Ecologist Marco Cerezo Blandón, future director of the Fundación para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservación, was the son of President Cerezo Arévalo, and many other environmentalists had participated in the pro-democracy movement. At the same time, the ecology movement remained a small group of urban-based ladinos. Lacking rural grassroots support, it was dominated by a cluster of architects, lawyers, and scientists who defined their roles nar-

11. Interview with Andreas Lehnhoff, Executive Director, Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza, 17 Nov. 1994, in Guatemala City.

12. Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, *Constitución Política de la República de Guatemala*, 31 May 1985, p. 24.

rowly as writing, securing passage for, and implementing environmental legislation.

During much of the Cerezo Arévalo administration's time in office, it was difficult to tell where the environmental movement ended and the government began. Environmentalists who wrote the new legislation were co-opted into the government to interpret and administer the new laws. Yet this symbiotic relationship between the government and the movement during the formative years of environmentalism in Guatemala ultimately weakened the movement and stunted its ability to establish a firm rural grassroots base.

Between 1986 and 1990, however, environmentalists succeeded in helping write and lobby for the passage of two environmental laws that, while granting the executive branch the financial card, established an administrative system requiring participation by a number of state agencies and nongovernmental organizations. The *Ley de Protección y Mejoramiento del Medio Ambiente* (Decree 68-86) was passed in December 1986, and the *Ley de Areas Protegidas* (Decree 4-89) in January 1989.

Both laws were based on the concept of sustainable development, specifying that "the state of natural resources and the environment in general in Guatemala have risen to such critical levels of deterioration that it is directly affecting the quality of life of the inhabitants and ecosystems of the country, obliging us to take immediate action in order to guarantee a favorable environment for the future."¹³ Decree 68-86 required a systematic and comprehensive approach to natural resource use, forbade dumping of toxic wastes, called for environmentally sensitive technology, and committed the state to ecological education.¹⁴ Decree 4-89 established the legal framework for a system of protected areas to preserve the diversity of the Guatemalan ecosystem and encourage ecotourism.¹⁵

Both decrees created councils to administer the laws. The two councils were defined as dependencies of the executive branch without ministerial powers, to be composed of representatives from the public and private sectors. The *Comisión Nacional del Medio Ambiente* (CON-AMA), created by Decree 68-86, consists of a coordinator appointed by the president and a technical council made up of representatives of various entities: the ministers of Desarrollo Urbano y Rural, Educación, Salud Pública, and Defensa; the *Comité Coordinador de Asociaciones Agrícolas, Industriales y Financieras* (CACIF), the influential private-sector association; the *Asociaciones de Periodistas de Guatemala*; and public and private universities.

13. *Ley de Protección y Mejoramiento del Medio Ambiente* (Guatemala City: n.p., 1988), 4.

14. *Ibid.*, 6-7.

15. *Ley de Areas Protegidas* (Guatemala City: n.p., 1989).

The Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas (CONAP), established to administer Decree 4-89, is composed of an array of representatives, including the Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo (INGUAT); the newly established CONAMA; the Dirección General de Bosques y Vidas Silvestre (DIGEBOS), which grants lumber contracts; the Instituto Nacional de Transformación Agraria (INTA), the state agency that allocates land titles; the Centro de Estudios Conservacionistas (CECON/USAC); CACIF; the Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza (a nongovernmental environmental group); and Amigos del Bosque, the oldest nongovernmental conservation organization in Guatemala.

On paper, both CONAMA and CONAP have extensive powers. CONAMA is charged with approving the environmental safety of development projects, ordering environmental cleanups, supervising Guatemalan participation in international agreements, and invoking sanctions.¹⁶ CONAP administers a potentially extensive and diverse territory made up of lands categorized as protected areas. But neither CONAMA nor CONAP have yet to wield anything like their powers on paper. The root of the problem is that these agencies by definition must depend on the presidency, and most CONAMA and CONAP representatives are presidential appointees. Consequently, a president interested in ecological issues for personal or political reasons can empower CONAMA and CONAP by staffing them with knowledgeable and respected environmentalists. Cerezo Arévalo did just that until a series of coup attempts weakened his ability to maneuver. He originally appointed Jorge Cabrera as coordinator of CONAMA and Andreas Lehnhoff as the director of CONAP. Architects by profession, both men were respected advocates of conservation. But the subsequent governments of Jorge Serrano Elías (1990–1993) and Ramiro de León Carpio (1993–1996), in contrast, have allowed CONAMA and CONAP to languish by naming a succession of political appointees, many of whom know little about environmental issues.¹⁷

Another undermining factor is that both CONAMA and CONAP depend to various extents on presidential discretion for their financial support. Both agencies have consistently been given minuscule budgets and staffs, making it impossible for the agencies to implement environmental laws properly. The lack of state financial support is no doubt related to the fact that the Guatemalan state is cash-poor, but it also reflects the politicized nature of agency funding in Guatemala on the whole. In response to inadequate government funding, CONAP and CONAMA have had to become creative. First, both have turned to international funding sources, although with varied success. CONAP has prob-

16. *Ibid.*, 17–20.

17. Interview with Milton Cabrera, Executive Secretary of CONAP, 17 Nov. 1994, Guatemala City.

ably been more successful in this area due to the “salability” of its “product”—protected areas. For instance, in the early months of operation, when CONAP received no state appropriations, new director Andreas Lehnhoff sought a twenty-five-thousand-dollar grant from the Nature Conservancy to help CONAP set up operations and hire a small staff of technicians. Only then was Lehnhoff able to obtain civil-service status for seventy-five CONAP positions. Next, he negotiated with USAID to fund the Maya Biosphere Reserve project, an area of immense environmental and historical importance. Although Lehnhoff succeeded, USAID support for the project created unforeseen difficulties. The 10.5 million dollars allocated by USAID, accompanied by twenty-two U.S. consultants, overwhelmed the small and floundering agency, which still lacked the administrative, legal, social, and economic structures to support such a monumental project.¹⁸

CONAP has also attempted to deal with inadequate state funding by assigning the administration of specific projects to private and public-sector organizations and agencies represented on the CONAP council. For example, the private-sector nonprofit *Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza* administers the protected reserve of the Sierra de las Minas, a biodiversified region of more than 53,000 acres, while INGUAT manages nine bio-topographies with the assistance of CECON/USAC. Administrative decentralization has not always resolved the problem it sought to address, however. Nonprofit organizations have been more successful in fund-raising to meet their management obligations than public-sector agencies. According to Juan Pablo Vidaurre, section chief of the INGUAT planning department, INGUAT has only enough financial resources and personnel to be a minor presence on four of the reserves under its administration. The *Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza*, in contrast, routinely obtains substantial contributions from domestic capitalists, multinational organizations, and international nonprofit organizations (see *Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza* 1991). This success is due at least in part to a strategy created by its founder, Magalí Rey Rosa de Asturias. When establishing the organization in the 1980s, she argued that for the *Defensores* to operate effectively in the polarized Guatemalan reality, it would need the political and financial support of the Guatemalan elite. Consequently, Rey Rosa de Asturias set up a board of directors for the *Defensores* composed of individuals with close ties to the private sector and a fund-raising arm that reaches deeply into the Guatemalan elite. As a result, *Defensores* has become a well-known and respected entity within the Guatemalan elite and international funding circles.

This success, however, has forced the organization to take a more

18. Interview with Andreas Lehnhoff, Executive Director of *Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza*, 17 Nov. 1994, Guatemala City. See also EPOCA (1990, 12).

conservative conservationist position than its founder—whose philosophy is basically that of “deep ecology” or ecocentricity—would ideally like.¹⁹ While continuing its management of the Sierra de las Minas, the Defensores foundation has slowly moved away from direct-action conservation projects and toward environmental education. In fact, according to one Defensores administrator, the main focus of the organization currently is to educate school children and the indigenous population on the importance of resource conservation.²⁰ Unfortunately, such a focus corresponds closely with the erroneous private-sector argument heard throughout Guatemala that ecological destruction is largely the result of “ignorant peasants” who continue to practice slash-and-burn techniques²¹ rather than a consequence of technocentric state and private-sector policies.

CONAP and CONAMA have also been weakened by resistance from powerful segments of the private sector and the military to environmentalism and by the civilian state’s inability to protect the agencies and ensure implementation of the laws. Private-sector and army opposition to environmentalism arose out of concerns with profit. Neither sector wants interference with its involvement in illegal trade in lumber and exotic animals, land use for cattle, or exploitation of precious minerals. Various methods have been used to intimidate CONAP and CONAMA workers. One CONAP official stationed in the Petén explained, “We have . . . had to face G-2 army officers in loaded lumber trucks who threatened to make mincemeat of us if we tried to stop them or denounce them. The army fuels local residents’ fears that we are taking away their livelihood. ‘These are your lands,’ they tell them; ‘no one can take them away from you.’ That’s a call for defiance of the rule of law” (Perera 1993, 253). Key environmentalists in Guatemala routinely receive death threats.

Still, under the Cerezo Arévalo government, environmentalists achieved some important victories over the private sector. For example, in the spring of 1989, Exxon was denied permission to drill exploratory wells within the newly protected park boundaries of El Ceibal, an area of two thousand hectares containing an important forest and wildlife reserve and the remnants of a classical Maya site. The dispute pitted CONAMA and the Ministerio de Cultura (joined by Germany’s Green Party and the Audubon Society) against the Ministerio de Energía y Minas and Exxon, which projected that the drilling could lead to a hundred million dollars in oil revenues.

19. Deep ecology is ecocentric in claiming a respect for nature in its own right and asserting the importance of the global ecosystem, of which humans are only one part.

20. Interview with Carlos Rodríguez of the Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza, Guatemala City, 31 Aug. 1992.

21. A study by Mac Chapin, director of Cultural Survival’s Central American Program, refutes the argument by mapping the relationship between forests and indigenous populations in Central America. This exercise shows that “the densest, healthiest tropical forests remaining in Central America coincide with the most intact Indian communities.” See *Action for Cultural Survival* 16, no. 2 (July–Aug. 1992):1.

Despite the laws' weaknesses, the passages of Decrees 68-86 and 4-89 substantially opened up political space for discussing the environment. As a result, new environmental organizations have proliferated in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Currently, Guatemala's environmental organizations can be divided into six categories: scientific societies; conservationist societies; ecological communities; neighborhood or private-sector organizations; social ecology groups; and educational or symbolic organizations.

The scientific societies were formed by scientists interested in studying nature and the environment and understanding Guatemala's ecological problems. These societies, such as the Centro de Estudios Conservacionistas (CECON) of the Universidad de San Carlos, prepare studies that are often used by environmentalists in negotiations with the government or international funding agencies. In effect, they serve as a data base for ecological information. To this end, CECON established a data center in 1989 to compile materials on conservation. In Guatemala, unlike some other Latin American countries, scientific societies have also participated directly in helping to implement environmental laws.

Conservationist associations generally focus on regional conservation needs. Most environmental organizations in Guatemala are conservation societies that are project-specific and regionally focused. They may concentrate on conserving a specific area, such as the Sierra de las Minas, or on saving a specific plant or animal species from extinction, such as the giant grebe of Lake Atitlán. Participation in implementing laws establishing areas protected by CONAP has reinforced the regional specialization of some organizations, such as the Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza, which originally had a more general ecological focus. Conservation societies in Guatemala include groups advocating a range of ecological reforms.

A similarly broad ideological spectrum has developed around what are known as ecological communities. One dimension is made up of primarily peasant organizations that have grown up within indigenous communities out of a synthesis of longstanding Maya beliefs about the environment and the consciousness-raising work of Christian base communities. These communities are closely associated with concepts of spiritual ecology. The ecological communities movement has been slow to develop in Guatemala for several reasons: the urban and ladino orientation of the more established environmental movement, economic hardships in the countryside, and the political repression of recent decades. The last few years, however, have witnessed an increase in these types of movements, partly in conjunction with the growth of indigenous rights organizations. For example, the community of Hacienda Vieja in Chimaltenango practices a labor-intensive method of soil conservation founded on traditional techniques. Also in Chimaltenango, the Coordinadora Cakchiquel para el Desarrollo Integrado (COCADI) has developed insecticides based on native plants, experimented with sequential crop rota-

tion that decreases insect infestation, and promoted integrated farming at the community level (see AVANCSO and PACCA 1992, 6–7).

Within the same ideological framework, some urban neighborhood organizations have also taken up environmental issues. These are generally *barrio* associations formed to identify neighborhood problems, enhance awareness of them, and explore possible solutions.

The advances made by ecological communities and neighborhood organizations throw into sharp relief the cosmetic and supposedly politically correct efforts of urban private-sector organizations. These middle-class groups are primarily concerned with issues pertaining to quality of life. For example, FUNTEC's program entitled "Conciencia Ecológica," collects recyclables from essentially middle- and upper-sector families who elect to participate.

In contrast to the organizations discussed thus far, social ecologists adopt a materialist critique of capitalism. They argue that the structure of capitalist development in Guatemala has caused the "gradual worsening of living conditions, the marginalization and impoverishment of large sectors of the population and the growing deterioration of the physical and natural environment" (García 1992, 157). Few environmental organizations in Guatemala publicly blame development *per se* for the environmental devastation faced by the country. Probably the most vocal organization in this context is the Fundación para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservación (FUNDAECO). Attacked by the military and its conservative political allies, FUNDAECO has been driven to mobilize opposition to the military's technocentric policies by focusing on their ecological costs.

The last type of ecological organization in Guatemala is the educational category, or what María Pilar García has called "symbolic-cultural organizations." These organizations "alert society to the existence of problems whose solution requires decoding dominant models and searching for alternative meanings and orientations for social action in the cultural sphere" (García 1992, 159). In Guatemala, symbolic-cultural associations generally highlight environmental education. Almost all environmental groups spend some resources on education, but several have defined their main task as restructuring cultural biases to help save the environment. The problem courted by programs aimed at cultural spheres is their political impotence in the face of class divisions and powerful interest groups. Also, the use of cultural emphases serves to redirect the focus of environmental issues away from the political forces that govern them.

Many of the ecology organizations in Guatemala of any category or ideological framework have connections to postindustrial societies. The original leaders of some associations came from the United States or Europe. Also, many Guatemalan directors were educated in postindustrial societies during the 1960s and 1970s, at the height of the development of social movements in those societies. Some have hired foreign

advisers to serve on their staffs. In addition, most ecological organizations receive a substantial percentage of their income from international funding sources. In a practical sense, therefore, leaders of the Guatemalan environmental movement are trying to adapt postmodernist movements to a less-developed and politically volatile country.

While Cerezo Arévalo undoubtedly deserves credit for backing Decrees 68-86 and 4-89, his government became increasingly unable to provide more than symbolic support for environmentalism after a coup attempt in May 1989. The second in less than a year, this event seriously curtailed the president's executive prerogatives. By the summer of 1989, Cerezo Arévalo could do little about runaway logging on various reserves, the expansion of cattle ranches in the northern Petén, polluting industries, and the environmental devastation caused by the Chixoy Hydroelectric Project.²² The president's main goal became completing the remaining year and a half of his term in office. Once again, the environment took a back seat to political stability. Nonetheless, toward the end of his term, Cerezo Arévalo told a reporter that he wished to be remembered as the "Green President" (Perera 1993, 292).

In January 1991, the Partido Democracia Cristiana was voted out of power and replaced by the conservative government led by President Jorge Serrano Elías. An evangelical Protestant, he had served as an adviser to Efraín Ríos Montt, the general in charge during the bloody years of the early 1980s. President Serrano Elías adopted a neoliberal economic strategy emphasizing privatization, government efficiency, and technocratic development. Predictably, the environment was pushed to the bottom of this political agenda. Moreover, the new government readily equated environmentalism with the Partido Democracia Cristiana and thus with the political opposition. President Serrano Elías, an outsider to party politics in Guatemala, was especially keen on curtailing Democracia Cristiana power and democratic decentralization. The new government therefore endeavored to weaken the environmental movement.

The symbiotic relationship between the Cerezo Arévalo government and environmentalists along with the structure of the environmental legislation, which granted the executive branch ultimate authority, made it simple for the Serrano Elías government to disable environmentalism. First, the government shut its doors to discussions of environmental policy and environmentalists working within CONAP and CONAMA. Jorge Cabrera and Andreas Lehnhoff resigned their posts in protest, as did other environmentalists working for CONAMA and CONAP. Many of these former government employees subsequently obtained jobs in na-

22. The Chixoy Hydroelectric Project was a dam built on the Río Negro during the Lucas García government. The costly and ill-constructed dam reeked of corruption and caused enormous environmental damage.

tional or international environmental or development organizations. To replace the departing group, a new crop of environmental administrators were brought into the Serrano Elías government. Some in this new circle were themselves committed environmentalists, such as Antonio Ferraté, the new director of CONAMA. An engineer by training, Ferraté has a brother who cofounded CONAMA. On taking office, Ferraté spoke out against making any compromise with the lumber industry (a solution that Cabrera had come to support out of necessity) and took a hard-line conservationist stance on other issues. But Ferraté and other environmentalists soon discovered that they had absolutely no real power to make environmental policy or to implement the laws already in existence. As a consequence, CONAMA and CONAP increasingly turned a blind eye to the illicit contraband operations of the army and other government agencies in the protected areas. One environmentalist working for CONAP disclaimed, "I have the ears of a fish" (Perera 1993, 266).

Increasingly, environmentalists declined to work for the government, and key positions on CONAMA and CONAP were filled by political appointees with little knowledge of environmental issues.²³ Both agencies became sources of political graft, and corruption charges were periodically leveled against individuals in each. For example, in July 1992, a regional director for CONAP accused then-director Milton Saravia of selling ten million feet of mahogany and cedar from the Maya Biosphere Reserve to a Mexican company, Maderas Tropicales Dimensionales. Others claimed that a Guatemalan Air Force plane dubbed "Noah's Ark" takes off every week from Santa Elena military base in Petén loaded with wild animals, with the knowledge of CONAP officials.²⁴

The Serrano Elías government also cut back government funding to state environmental agencies. The stripped budgets of both agencies barely covered staff salaries. At the same time, international funding support for Guatemalan projects began to soften.²⁵ Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), often staffed by former CONAP and CONAMA employees, began to do much of what was considered to be government work: administering protected regions, conducting environmental education, reviewing and reforming legislation, raising funds, and other functions. According to environmentalists, the NGOs were unprepared to play the roles they were being thrust into: they had neither the resources nor the equipment nor the personnel.²⁶

23. Interview with Cabrera, Executive Secretary of CONAP, Guatemala City, 17 Nov. 1994.

24. Ceri-Gua, *Guatemala: On the Way to Becoming a Desert*, no. 5 (May 1993), 6.

25. International funding agencies became a bit more circumscribed in funding Guatemalan state environmental projects for many reasons, including changing international circumstances in Eastern Europe but also because of Guatemalan government corruption, the rise of human rights abuses, and the temporary withdrawal of U.S. military assistance.

26. Interview with Noé Ventura, President of Amigos del Bosque, Guatemala City, 14 Nov. 1994.

The Serrano Elías government feared that ecologists leaving the government for the private sector and the NGOs would form a base of political opposition to the conservative regime. It thus used intimidation and repression to weaken and divide the environmental movement in Guatemala. The media were used to try to convince Guatemalans to distrust all environmentalists and environmental organizations. In December 1992, Omar Cano, a journalist investigating the looting of the Mayan Biosphere as well as Treasury Police agents and CONAP officials were beaten and tortured in the military garrison at La Libertad, Petén.

One of the key targets of state intimidation was FUNDAECO, whose executive director is Marco Cerezo Blandón, son of former President Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo. Rumors were spread that FUNDAECO was planning to confiscate lands from local landowners in the department of Izabal. Local committee leaders with whom FUNDAECO was working were also informed that FUNDAECO was stealing their lands. The organization received threats, and Cerezo Blandón was targeted in an assassination attempt. FUNDAECO's directors were accused of corrupt dealings, and the organization's financial assets were frozen.²⁷

While FUNDAECO rode out the storm and ultimately won case after case in the courts, the attacks on it and other environmental organizations spread fear throughout the Guatemalan ecology movement. Environmental organizations quietly isolated themselves in regional work on specific projects, attempting little contact with each other or the government. Environmental unity had been broken, at least temporarily.

In 1993 President Serrano Elías led an *autogolpe* by shutting down the congress, the judiciary, and the office of human rights. He argued that hard times required tough action and that the corrupt congressional and judicial branches had made it impossible for the government to operate efficiently. The *autogolpe* failed nevertheless to gain the support of essential private- and public-sector groups, forcing Serrano Elías into exile. Former human-rights ombudsman Ramiro de León Carpio was selected by the Congreso Nacional to complete Serrano Elías's presidential term. He had achieved a reputation in Guatemala during the Cerezo Arévalo and Serrano Elías administrations as a lawyer who pursued human rights violations with perseverance and moderate force.

Environmentalists at first believed that de León Carpio would be more receptive to their concerns. Early on, however, the new president informed them of his three primary concerns: peace negotiations to end the thirty-year-old civil war; the deteriorating economy, which has left more than 80 percent of the Guatemalan population living in poverty; and democratization. The ecology again was relegated to a low priority in

27. Interview with Marco Cerezo Blandón, Director of FUNDAECO, Guatemala City, 16 Nov. 1994; see also Thomas (1994).

policy making. Consequently, illegal logging continued unabated in protected areas;²⁸ environmentalists endured threats from armed illegal loggers; the government and the private sector kept encouraging transnational corporation proposals for oil and mining initiatives;²⁹ and various *maquilas* and other industries continued to pollute waterways and the air with minimal governmental response.³⁰ In July 1995, Human Rights Ombudsman Jorge García Laguardia accused President de León Carpio and other government officials of violating Guatemalans' right to a healthy environment.³¹ A month later, he blamed the government for the contamination of Petén Itza Lake, decrying it as a violation of the human rights of the population living around the lake.³² About the same time, newspaper editorialist Marta Pilón criticized the government for "lacking the will" to solve environmental problems in Guatemala.³³ Although these recent outcries herald the new prominence gained by environmental issues on the national agenda in just the last decade, their vulnerability to crudely politicized rhetoric and action persists, leaving the political bases for environmental action constantly subject to undermining.

Even environmental organizations in Guatemala disagree over the lessons of the last decade. FUNDAECO maintains that its experiences have demonstrated the need for unity among environmental organizations. Executive Director Cerezo Blandón has argued that if environmental and developmental NGOs are to compete with other interest groups for scarce resources, they must join forces and participate in the political arena. While NGOs should maintain their nonpartisan identity, he says, involvement in state policy making will be needed to create long-term sustainable development. Cerezo Blandón therefore recommends that environmental groups become political lobbyists. FUNDAECO staff further argue that only environmental groups having a close relationship with

28. The former governor of Petén, Carlos Asturias, argued publicly that state authorities were doing little to stem the illegal lumber trade. He maintained, "Between six and seven trucks leave every night [with logs], due to the indifference of the Treasury Police and army." A few illegal loggers were arrested and some wood confiscated during the tenure of the government of Ramiro de León Carpio, although the donation of the wood to local governments led to considerable debate within the environmental community. See "Government Guilty of Environmental Negligence," *Ceri-Gua*, no. 27 (July 1994), p. 4; "Petén: Sacan ilegalmente la madera decomisada," *Siglo Veintiuno*, 20 July 1994, p. 59; and "Continúa deforestación en Baja Verapaz," *Prensa Libre*, 19 July 1994, p. 16.

29. "Foreigners Vie for Mines," *Guatemala News*, 12 Aug. 1994, p. 1.

30. CONAMA agitated during the summer of 1994 to be able to sanction industries polluting rivers and air but had little success. See "CONAMA analiza acciones penales," *Prensa Libre*, 20 July 1994, p. 4; and "CONAMA podría sancionar a industrias que provoquen contaminación ambiental," 20 Aug. 1994, p. 56.

31. "PDH censura públicamente al Presidente y funcionarios por depredación forestal," *Siglo Veintiuno*, 21 July 1994.

32. "PDH acusa al gobierno por la contaminación del lago Petén Itzá," *Siglo Veintiuno*, 1 Aug. 1994.

33. "La contaminación de los ríos tiene solución," *Prensa Libre*, 23 July 1994, p. 12.

the state government will be able to secure enough international funding to develop a critical mass for change. Cerezo Blandón calls for working with and pressuring the government for a significant commitment to the environment.³⁴ FUNDAECO leaders also seem aware of the organization's vulnerability in lacking a grassroots movement. FUNDAECO has already begun to sign bilateral agreements with grassroots groups and to join nongovernmental networks.

Other Guatemalan environmental organizations do not agree with FUNDAECO's analysis. Many argue that the environmental movement made a tactical mistake in aligning itself so closely with the Cerezo Arévalo government. For them *politics* has become a dirty word. They have thus concluded that they should keep their organizations out of the political arena and focus instead on implementing their regionally based individual projects. These organizations are wary of forming a strong unified environmental lobby group and prefer to join together in a loose association of nongovernmental organizations, such as the Federación Conservación de Guatemala, for the primary goal of exchanging information. Most argue that the current socioeconomic and political circumstances in Guatemala are poor for environmental lobbying³⁵ and believe that they can accomplish more by working separately than by uniting.³⁶

Conclusions

The fact that the Guatemalan environmental movement grew up within the pro-democracy struggles of the last three decades initially led it to form a close relationship with the state. The unity between state and movement shaped the manner in which the movement grew, its goals, and its tactics. Many of the initial battles were consequently fought within the state bureaucracy as insiders of that structure. Those years of state and movement accord were heady times for environmentalists, who defined themselves as reshaping state policy on the environment. The focus of the movement was therefore not civil society but the state.

Beginning in 1990, state intimidation and repression led to separation of the state from the conservation movement and to divisions within environmentalism. Ecology groups began to focus more on geographically specific projects. Although environmentalism is still largely an elite, urban-based movement in Guatemala, the division and isolation of segments of the movement by location and project have forced it to begin to work with local populations. This approach is causing ecologists to de-

34. Interview with Marco Cerezo Blandón, Director, FUNDAECO, Guatemala City, 16 Nov. 1994.

35. Interview with Noé Ventura, President, Amigos del Bosque, Guatemala City, 14 Nov. 1994.

36. Interview with Cerezo Blandón, Director, FUNDAECO, Guatemala City, 16 Nov. 1994.

mand expansion of regional social and cultural space. At the same time, the movement is still at an intermediary stage in this process, one in which many organizations are actually calling for the expansion of “directed autonomy”—meaning local autonomy directed by the urban-centered environmental core—rather than complete regional autonomy.

Recently, the Guatemalan government has also begun to turn again to environmental NGOs for assistance. For instance, financially strapped CONAP has formed working committees of NGOs and other interested parties to help the agency accomplish some of its practical on-site work.³⁷ If this foray into working together succeeds, a new type of relationship between the Guatemalan state and the conservation movement may be forged.

The environmental movement has also become a linchpin in defining Guatemala’s role in the globalization of the economy. First, the movement depends largely on international funding. Organizations have tried to diversify their funding sources so that they do not depend too much on any single international source (such as USAID). But despite these attempts, environmentalism in Guatemala remains largely vulnerable to the perception of what “ecology” means abroad. Currently, the environment is a fairly easy sell internationally, and Central American governments have discovered that they can get much-needed development funds by working the environmental angle. In October 1994, the seven Central American presidents of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and Belize formed the Sustainable Development Alliance. Alliance representatives argue that it constitutes “an opportunity for Central Americans to both save themselves from ecological disaster and make socio-economic progress through sustainability measures. . . .”³⁸ Regional leaders hope that joining together will encourage international funding agencies to support Central American projects and that the region will be able to move closer to fulfilling the requirements necessary to gain access to the North American Free Trade Alliance (NAFTA).³⁹ These efforts were rewarded at the Americas Summit in Miami in December 1994. There the Alliance of Central American Governments received pledges of credits and loans to support sustainable development of fifteen million dollars from the Inter-American Development Bank, twenty-five million from the World Bank, and fifteen million from Canada.⁴⁰

The private sector in Guatemala has also started playing the environmental card with a vengeance. Shell Corporation has formed La Fun-

37. Interview with Erick Toledo, CONAP technician, Guatemala City, 16 Nov. 1994.

38. Tropical Conservation Newsbureau, “Central American Summit: Presidents Promote Eco-Friendly Development,” *Peacenet*, 15 Sept. 1994.

39. “The Alliance for Sustainable Development: Central American Integration and the Environment,” *Mesoamerica* 14, no. 1 (Jan. 1995):1–3.

40. “Americas Summit: Guatemala Happy with Aid Promises,” *Ceri-Gua*, 13 Dec. 1994, p. 4.

dación Shell Guatemala para la Ecología; and the prestigious hotel conglomerate Camino Real has begun to finance conservation. Meanwhile, ANACAFE (the Asociación Nacional de Café) has argued that coffee cultivation is beneficial to the ecology; McDonald's and other corporations like Cementos Novela have initiated ecological education campaigns. The conservative newspaper *Prensa Libre* has organized a youth ecology corps, and many entrepreneurs have become involved in ecotourism, including former President Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo.⁴¹ Thus the private sector is now eager to use the environmental seal of approval to enhance profits. In these ways, the environment has definitely become an integral part of the neoliberal economic policies and rhetoric of the Guatemalan state and private sector.

Although it is too soon to predict with any certainty, it appears that the new government of Alvaro Arzú Irigoyen (1996–) will follow the neoliberal doctrine as it applies to the environment. As the leader of the conservative Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN), Arzú campaigned on a platform to de-monopolize the economy, expand foreign investment, and reduce tax barriers. One of his first environmental decisions may be whether or not to support de León Carpio's announcement on 7 January (only seven days before he left office) that the government planned to construct a paved highway through the Mayan Biosphere from El Naranjo in the northern Petén to the Mexican border. Supporters of this proposal contend that the highway will enhance ecotourism and economic development in the region. Critics, including CONAMA leaders, argue that the road will endanger the reserve's fragile ecology and increase illegal logging.⁴² Arzú, himself a former director of the Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo, will at some point have to decide whether to stand behind the project or not.

Similarly, the future of the environmental movement is not clear. Despite a split between the state and environmentalism in 1990, the movement continues to have a difficult time in moving away from its urban, elite, and ladino roots. But increasingly, the regionally specific work of various organizations may be leading the movement toward building bridges on the road to constructing a heterogeneous movement.

41. "Ecotourism," *Crónica*, 14 Aug. 1992, p. 30; *Siglo Veintiuno*, 9 Aug. 1992, p. 10; "Guardianes ecológicos reconocen campaña de limpieza de T-MAS," *Prensa Libre*, 24 July 1994, p. 4.

42. "Mayan Biosphere in Danger," *Ceri-Gua Weekly Briefs* (11 Jan. 1996), p. 4.

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