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Niels Barmeyer

Local Effects of Global Forest Conservation Policy: On Zatopec Resistance against a Protected Natural Area

Forest conservation is a controversial issue for the indigenous Zapotec of the Southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, with whom I have been working for the past three years. Officials from the Mexican Ministry for the Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT) and contracted surveyors have visited their villages, seeking to set up “Protected Natural Areas” (*Áreas Naturales Protegidas*). This initiative includes a variety of schemes, ranging from ecological surveys to payment for ecosystem services. However, there is a growing sentiment among the people living in the affected region that the main beneficiaries of such schemes are outsiders: the surveyors and evaluators who are being paid for their studies; the state, which is receiving money via the carbon market for each hectare declared a conservation area; big businesses seeking to make natural resources accessible to the market; and, last but not least, local go-betweens and corrupt officials skimming off the funds intended for the communities. To the people on the ground, the motives for the sudden interest in their territories are often unclear; furthermore, prospecting activities evoke memories of past interventions by the state or by private enterprises, such as mining or logging companies, which deprived the people of their resources and often also repressed them.

Protected Natural Areas have been heavily promoted since the United Nations adopted the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation in 2002, which called for signatory countries to designate at least ten percent of their territory as such (CBD 2002, 7). Among conservation organizations and policy makers, these areas are widely regarded as instruments for counteracting the effects of climate change and CO₂ emissions. In 2000, with global environmental policy allocating ever more importance and money to biodiversity and carbon sinks, Mexico adjusted its legal and institutional framework to increase its conservation zones. Ten years later, the National Commission for Protected Natural Areas (CONANP) managed some 25 million hectares, about 13 percent of Mexican territory (Schmidt 2010, 19).

To make conservation attractive to developing countries, World Bank policymakers employ the same market mechanisms that have provided raw material for industrialized economies for centuries. In Mexico, the first of such payments was made in 2003

and paralleled the expansion of protected areas. They required that local populations refrain from exploiting natural resources in their territory, a ban that often included the outlawing of agricultural activities. Significantly, the payments turn the forest and the water it contains into products to be traded on the global market, which runs contrary to the indigenous population's traditions.

The commoditization of resources such as rainwater or the trees of the forest, which were customarily utilized by all community members, fits with the recent privatization of communal lands in Mexico.¹ Along with the policy of reducing the number of smallholders and the importation of cheap mass-produced corn from the United States, this has exacerbated rural poverty and encouraged migration (see Valsecchi 2010). The privatization of land and natural resources, the promotion of personal profit, and the move away from collectivist ideals have severely affected the way people relate to each other and to their environment. Indigenous subsistence farmers often have a history of relative autonomy with regard to land management, but government programs implemented in the context of global conservation efforts undercut such independence. This has led to the undoing of what I call the "stewardship consensus," which is prevalent among indigenous communities living in close relationship with the forest that surrounds them. However, as this essay shows, privatization and the undoing of collective ownership under the pretext of nature conservation do not always proceed smoothly. I suspect that the case presented here is indicative of what is happening elsewhere as a result of global climate policy, and I believe the effects I describe should be taken into account when climate policies are elaborated in the future.

Testimony of an Environmental Dropout: Santiago Lachiguiri

The situation of the Zapotec community of Santiago Lachiguiri in southeastern Oaxaca exemplifies the conflicts that are bound to arise under the current conservation scheme. The contract that certified Lachiguiri as a protected area came into effect in 2003. Seven years later, a general assembly of community members voted to terminate the arrangement, 23 years before its scheduled end. What had gone wrong?

1 For Mexican peasant farmers, the joining of NAFTA in 1992 sealed the abolishment of the *ejido*, a communal form of land ownership that has its origins in the agrarian struggles of the Mexican Revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century (see De Ita 2006).

Lachiguiri is governed by customary law rather than by political parties; land issues are decided by a general assembly of titleholders. About eight thousand people inhabit the 26,000 hectares of forest-covered mountains (Schmidt 2010, 18). Most of them are subsistence maize farmers: the staple food is grown in swidden cultivation on *milpas*, in combination with beans and squash.



Figure 1:
Alternative
Forum for Life and
Environmental and
Social Justice.

In the context of my work as an adviser on indigenous rights, I have met with Lachiguiri communal authorities at press conferences, as well as at information and protest meetings, such as the “Alternative Forum for Life and Environmental and Social Justice,” which took place alongside the Cancun Climate Change Conference in December 2010. At these occasions, the authorities publicly denounced the way that, in 2001 and 2002, state officials had compelled their fellow villagers to agree to a Protected Natural Area in Lachiguiri.² The officials elaborated on the financial incentives resulting from payments for ecosystem services and the marketing of natural resources, but never explained the consequences of a conservation zone in detail. In short, the broad-based consultation of the local indigenous population, called for by international legislation, did not take place in Lachiguiri.

2 Testimonies by Lachiguiri’s communal authorities, recorded in July 2010 in Mexico City and in December 2010 in Cancun.

In August 2003, the general assembly of Lachiguiri land titleholders decided to have part of their territory declared a protected area for five years, yet CONANP issued a 30-year certification. With immediate effect, all agricultural activity in the certified zone was outlawed and 120 smallholders from Lachiguiri were barred from planting maize on land that had belonged to their families for generations.

In 2008, new local authorities took office and the villagers were finally able to see the original documents that declared the protected area untouchable for 30 years. Feeling betrayed, a majority of villagers pressed for the cancellation of the protected area, and in May 2010, this decision was officially ratified. Lachiguiri also decided on a new communal statute, according to which its inhabitants had the right to manage their own territory. This document contains clear rules for the conservation of natural resources, such as the forest and water, as well as regulation to prevent the certification of protected areas without the community's prior informed consent. The maintenance of "ancestrally conserved lands" is considered strictly a communal matter (Schmidt 2010, 22); state- or business-run conservation is prohibited, and payment for ecosystem services is received only on an unconditional basis.

The Complex Motivations of Local Actors

When these testimonies are compared with a CONANP-sponsored publication compiled by Mexican anthropologists a few years earlier (Cobo and Bartra 2007), certain details emerge that shed light on the complexities that motivated the people of Lachiguiri first to agree, but eventually to opt out of the conservation scheme. The publication voices the community's mixed opinions on the government's conservation package and includes their concerns about not being able to farm the terrain certified as a Protected Area (Schmidt 2010, 117).

The motivations that outweighed the obvious drawbacks emerge from a closer study of the agrarian conflicts between the villages of Lachiguiri, Guienagati, and Guadalupe. These conflicts culminated in a 1988 massacre, in which nine people were killed in one day (Schmidt 2010, 120–22). As much of the area that was made a conservation zone had been unusable due to that same land struggle, the certification appears to be part of a strategy to resolve the longstanding conflict among neighbors.

The privatization of *ejido* land in the early 1990s had been accompanied by a cutback in subsidies for maize and by a general reduction of government aid for rural communities. According to the 2010 testimonies of the communal authorities, villagers identified the ensuing migration of peasant farmers as the greatest problem facing the region. Both the 2001 study and later testimonies stressed the hope that the certification of the conservation zone would bring state funds to compensate for the defects—a hope soon to be dashed. Income-generating schemes that were part of the conservation package offered incentives only to individual families, and not to the collective as a whole. Thus, out of the 120 smallholders deprived of their lands, only 15 were given assistance in growing peaches, while another 5 were trained in setting up a palm oil plantation. However, the indigenous community of Lachiguiri had always functioned as a collective.

The perceived preferential treatment of some individuals as well as the embezzlement of funds by village authorities brought new conflict to the region. Moreover, as migration to the United States continued unabated while living standards failed to improve, the negative aspects of the conservation zone became more salient in the minds of villagers. In this situation, the rehabilitation of the traditional *milpa* system presented itself as a viable solution, promising the reinstatement of collective control over the community's natural resources.

Customary law in Oaxaca's indigenous communities designates the village assembly as the institution ultimately responsible for finding solutions to such fundamental dilemmas. When this organ of direct democracy eventually decided on the cancellation of the conservation area, any other contracts signed by former village authorities became null and void in the eyes of the local Zapotec. Eventually, the Mexican State, too, had to contend with the reality of legal pluralism in Oaxacan territory, as customary law had been constitutionally recognized in 1998 (see Recondo 2002). This change, of course, suggested new allies, and a host of NGOs in the distant capital were ready to assume this role. Fitting in with these new partners required some adjustments in how the community presented itself in terms of indigenous autonomy and the acceptance of government money, but also provided new hopes and perspectives.

Traditional Food Systems Are Part of the Solution

The method of payment for ecosystem services often fails to convince indigenous communities living in resource-rich environments to pursue conservation policies. In the regions where protection areas are established, SEMARNAT therefore finances “Environment Management Units,” where deer are reared for meat or fruit trees are commercially grown. Just as often, the forest immediately adjacent to the protected areas is commercialized. This initiative includes access roads into “secondary growth zones” and a guarantee that there will be customers for the timber.³ Coupled with widespread corruption at all levels, including in the monitoring of protected areas, this practice can lead to the rapid deterioration of forests adjacent to the conservation zone. This, in turn, results in the worsening of the carbon balance of the whole region and thereby runs contrary to the intentions of the protected area.

Contrary to common portrayals of peasant farmers burning their rainforest, the traditional food system of *milpa* subsistence agriculture appears superior to the intensive crop production practiced in industrialized countries in all aspects, including nutrition, sustainability, and even the carbon balance. For one, the staple food of an entire community is produced on location: emissions are reduced, as the food does not have to be transported for hundreds or thousands of miles to reach the consumer. Local maize variations adapted to the altitude, humidity, and soil are combined with beans and squash to provide nitrogen and moisture for the soil. The maize serves as the main carbohydrate for the producers, while the beans provide the protein; from the squash, primarily the roasted seeds are eaten, which have a high oil and mineral content. One year of cultivation entails an average of seven years of fallow time. As roots from shrubs and trees are still in the ground and the surrounding jungle supplies plenty of seed, the original vegetation quickly grows back and the fallow fields serve as a source of wild vegetables, medicinal plants, and firewood. Finally, the traditional *milpa* works without poisonous pesticides, herbicides, or chemical fertilizers, which damage the soil, depriving it of its ability to act as a carbon sink (and whose production releases large amounts of the greenhouse gas NO₂).

I believe the conservation efforts of the people who have lived with the forest for generations, practicing subsistence agriculture, deserve more attention. With their local know-

3 This connection becomes explicit on the website of Mexico’s National Forest Commission, which includes a list of links to timber companies (http://www.conafor.gob.mx/mercadas_maderas/).

ledge systems, which have developed over centuries, these people are (literally) experts in their field. Unfortunately, this wealth of knowledge has been ignored by governments and policy makers, who have put urban academics in charge of forest conservation.



Figure 2:
Protest at the
United Nations
2010 Cancun
Climate Change
Conference.

The current concept of protected areas appears to promote an environment that is void of people. Sometimes this is achieved insidiously, as when agricultural activities are restricted; at other times, forced evictions occur, as in the Blue Mountain Biosphere Reserve in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas (see IDMC 2008). In relying on governments and private interests to promote and implement forest conservation projects, international organizations run the risk of violating the free, prior, and informed consent of the communities who live in the affected forests. Programs like REDD, even if they are adapted to include human rights safeguards, are designed to allow industrialized countries and big companies to keep emitting CO₂, with the side effect of forcing subsistence-based communities into the market economy. Instead of pressuring developing countries, states and corporations need to take responsibility for their own emissions and cut them at the source.

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