

## **Palm Oil Plantations Threaten the Rainforests and People of Guatemala**

Written by Edwin Barnhart, Director of Maya Exploration Center  
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*A palm oil plantation near Sayaxche, Peten, Guatemala. Photo by Larry Luxner/Tico Times*

There has been a lot of talk on social media this year about palm oil plantations in the Peten, so we've decided to make MEC's position clear - we oppose palm oil farms in Guatemala, or any rain forest for that matter. It's been suggested that replacing deforested areas with palm oil plantations is good for the rainforest, but that is patently false. After researching the history and current state of the palm oil industry, we would like to explain our perspective with the following position piece.

Industrial mono-crop plantations in tropical zones have never been good for the people, plants and animals who live there. Be it bananas, sugarcane, coffee, or now oil palms, biodiversity always nosedives, the rich always profit, and the locals always suffer. Maybe not immediately, but they inevitably do.

Indonesia still produces the majority of the world's palm oil - about 80% - and the environmental impact there is disastrous. Animal habitats have been destroyed on a massive scale, biodiversity has been severely impacted and the people working the plantations live in abject poverty. The damage to the land is virtually irreversible and efforts to do anything about it are token at best.

Some argue that it allows local farmers to achieve economic stability, but that's not the reality. Initially planting the palms takes a lot of capital and labor. Farmers typically receive loans from oil palm companies to get started in exchange for future profit sharing. Then it takes 4-5 years for the trees to start producing nuts. They will continue to produce nuts for about a total of 25 years on average.

But what happens then? The palms have grown to 50 ft + tall and produce nothing. They can continue to live for up to 200 years. They are planted so closely together that their roots weave together like a basket under the ground – like a one-meter deep basket across the entire plantation. To remove them and start over is beyond the capacity of what a farmer can do. At that point it takes industrial machinery. That means that one generation profits and the next inherits useless, unfarmable land.

### The RSPO and “Greenwashing”

The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was established in 2004 with the goal of setting sustainability guidelines and certifying oil palm companies who follow them. But data collection over the last 15 years makes it apparent that the plan is not working. The amount of oil palm plantations continues to grow and the stated “principles” of the RSPO are about ensuring profits, not protecting forests and people.

The RSPO was created in response to the industry's record of environmental destruction and social upheaval. Unfortunately, it's little more than what's been termed “greenwashing”. A closer look at what RSPO really is explains why. The RSPO is a group of some 4000 members who represent all the links along the palm industry supply chain. They certify that palm oil producers are complying with their criteria for Certified Sustainable Palm Oil, or CSPO. Many major companies that use palm oil in their products have committed to only using CSPO. That sounds good, but take a closer look.

The RSPO standards and decisions are made by their Board of Governors, which is comprised of representatives from seven sectors of the palm oil related community. There are 16 seats on the board and no decision can be made without a majority vote. Their 8 principles for certification were adopted by majority vote and re-evaluated every 5 years. Again, sounds good. But look at how the board is structured:

- 4 seats – palm oil growers
- 2 seats – palm oil producers and traders
- 2 seats – consumer goods manufacturers
- 2 seats – retailers
- 2 seats – bankers and investors
- 2 seats - environmental/nature conservationist
- 2 seats – social development NGOs

With only 4 seats representing the protection of the environment and the rights of people adversely affected, those voices never win a majority vote. The RSPO Board is rigged to favor those who profit from palm oil, not those who suffer at its hands. It's a clear case of the foxes being in control of the hen house.

Looking at the RSPO's 8 principles brings another classic analogy to mind – a sheep in wolf's clothing. The principles include all sorts of nice words like transparency, commitment and responsible, but in reality, they are vague and intentionally open to interpretation. Again, a close look reveals their hollow promises. The 8 principles are:



*From greempalm.org*

### 1. Commitment to transparency

So they promise to show everyone what they are doing. That should be the case with any potentially destructive industry receiving assistance from the government. Stabbing in the front instead of the back is still stabbing.

### 2. Compliance with applicable laws and regulations

Not breaking the law is something we all must do, corporation and individual alike. This is not holding the palm oil companies to a higher standard, it's just encouraging them not to be criminals! And what's legal and what's right are not always the same thing, especially when rich corporations can buy favorable legislation – which is extra affordable in developing nations.

3. Commitment to long-term economic and financial viability

This “principle” is overtly industry friendly. A palm oil producer certified on this criterion is basically promising to keep making money for a long time.

4. Use of appropriate best practices by growers and millers

The term “best practices” is a classic cloak for those who know their activities have negative impacts. Its applied to situations when the actor knows what they are doing hurts, but they have no intention of stopping. Nowhere does RSPO further define “best practices”.

5. Environmental responsibility and observation of natural resources and biodiversity

Those are nice words, but how is replacing rainforests with a monoculture cash crop is conserving biodiversity and natural resources? If a palm oil plantation occupies a place that otherwise left alone would be rainforest, how is that environmentally responsible?

6. Responsible consideration of employees and of individuals and communities affected by growers and mills

This is another vague principle that entirely depends on one’s definition of “responsible consideration”. And who makes that judgement call? The RSPO Board of Governors is mostly people who seek to profit from palm oil. Hence, the bar is low. It’s things like buying instead of taking peasant’s land, paying not less than a country’s minimum wage, and maybe even building a school or two. But the local people rarely get to decide what “consideration” should look like. And to the RSPO, they are the uneducated poor, incapable of understanding the big picture, so why should they be involved in decision making?

7. Responsible development of new planting

This one is the key principle to the RSPO’s “greenwashing”. Responsible development is explained as keeping the continued destruction of the rainforest to a minimum. To achieve this, RSPO recommends that palm oil plantations only be placed where *someone else* cut the forest down already. Cattle pastures, logging operations and tropical farms are the target areas. They push the false narrative that anyone who cut the rainforest in the past is bad and that stopping them by putting in palm oil trees is good. More on what’s wrong with this in an upcoming section.

8. Commitment to continuous improvement in key areas of activity

In other words, a promise to keep working on their promises. The trouble is that their foundational promises actually promise very little beyond assuring that they will never stop expanding the industry.

So, when really delving into what the RSPO is and what their CSPO label represents, one can see that its mostly just smoke and mirrors. Sure, it’s better than nothing, but far

off from solving the problems caused by the industry. The palm oil industry has continued to rapidly grow – from about 15 million cubic tons per year at the inception of the RSPO in 2004 to 72 million cubic tons in 2019. Who in their right minds would call that rate of expansion “sustainable”? And that’s the core problem with the RSPO. By “sustainability”, they mean the continuation of profits, not what the environment and local people can endure.

Now let’s drill down on RSPO Principle 7 – responsible development of new planting. By this, the RSPO advocates planting new palm oil plantations only on land that has already been deforested. Places where illegal logging took place, or cattle pastures, or places where other monocrops like bananas or sugar cane were once grown. They say putting trees back in those areas is a form of reforestation. But no, in the long-term palm oil plantations are worse than any of those other land use strategies. If every human on the planet disappeared right now, every tropical cattle pasture would be back to natural rainforest in less than 100 years. But not the palm oil plantations – they would still be there and stronger than ever. Their roots would be like a meter-deep woven basket and their tops would form a 50 ft tall canopy blocking out all other species of rainforest tree, like an impenetrable shield against forest diversity.

Virtually everyone agrees that the loss of over 50% of the planet’s rainforest in less than 50 years is regrettable. What people may not know is that 80% of that was due to agricultural expansion. In a perfect world we would replant the rainforest and reverse the damage. Many argue that’s too hard, that it would cost too much money, that human needs outweigh the value of trees. They think that “saving the rainforest” is a hippy pipedream and not “the way the real world works”. And yet, there are a number of successful reforestation projects happening right now – a topic we will return to in a moment.

But before that – let’s make this point completely clear. A cleared area of rainforest – be it for cattle or bananas, be it by “job creators” or drug traffickers, is a place that dedicated people with simple tools can reforest. But once a palm oil plantation goes in that same place and reaches its full height and 25-year production limit, it is literally embedded into the earth. A small community could burn it to the ground, but still its root mass would remain where healthy soil once was. Only heavy machinery can pull it out and even then the hole must be filled with new soil. No “smallholders”, as simple farmers are called by RSPO, can do this on their own. They must either pay for it or sell their land to the palm oil corporation – who are more than happy to buy it. Either way, what are the chances a rainforest replanting project will happen there?

In short, replanting the rainforest is hard on deforested land, but its exponentially harder on land where a palm oil plantation goes. Many news articles over the last few years have claimed that Guatemala’s palm oil companies are responsible and “sustainable” because they’ve been certified by RSPO, but as explained above that’s simply greenwashing over an advancing environmental and social-economic disaster.

When the RSPO calls planting plantations in previously deforested areas “sustainable” they mean profitable, not beneficial to the local people or ecology.

### The History and Perceived Value of the Palm Oil Industry

The main species of palm oil tree used by the industry is the *Elaeis Guineensis*, originally from West Africa. Humans have been using it since at least Egyptian times – a barrel of it was found in Tutankhamun’s tomb. Large scale plantations were not a thing until the industrial revolution reached its full stride in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. All those machines needed lubricant and the British discovered that palm oil did the job nicely. They set up the first plantations outside of Africa in Southeast Asia where large tracks of tropical forest were firmly under the thumb of the British Empire. Malaysia emerged as the world’s leader in palm oil production, creating the first commercial scale production sites in 1917. As the world found more and more uses for palm oil, demand increased. By 1990 Malaysia alone was producing 11 million metric tons of palm oil per year.

Ironically, concerns over public health and climate change were major factors in the expansion of the palm oil industry in recent decades. In the 1960’s scientists linked the high saturated fat content in butter to heart disease. Food producers responded by switching to vegetable oil-based products like margarine. Then in the 1990’s those vegetable oil products, termed partially hydrogenated, were discovered to create trans-fats that were even worse than the saturated fats that they were designed to replace. Scrambling for an alternative, British food giant Unilever found only one oil that could be refined to their specifications and not produce trans-fats – palm oil.

In 1995 Unilever made a herculean effort to switch all their production plants to palm oil. Not only was palm oil determined to be a healthier option for consumption, it was dramatically cheaper to grow and refine as compared to other oils. Environmentalists were also initially pleased because palm oil plantations produce nine times more oil per acre than any other kind of oil crop – which, at least theoretically, meant a smaller footprint. As of 2019, palm oil is only 6.6% of oil producing crops on the planet but it produces 38.7% of the world’s vegetable oil supply. Companies lined up to make the switch and the demand for palm oil went through the roof.

But by the early 2000’s, despite its good PR, the palm oil industry’s potential for environmental destruction became clear. Borneo and Sumatra saw their orangutan, tiger, and rhino populations pushed to the brink of extinction and their indigenous people living in abject poverty. In response, the industry created the RSPO. For a while that was supported by environmentalists as a good solution, but now 16 years later we see it for what it is – greenwashing. Even by 2015, the Environmental Investigation Agency had determined that the RSPO was “woefully substandard” and habitually disguising violations.

The search for alternatives to fossil fuels has also been a factor increasing the palm oil industry. Europe and the US began pushing biofuels as a good alternative in the early 2000's. In 2007 President Bush announced a big push for America to shift towards biofuels, specifically palm oil. In response, Indonesia ramped up their operations. Concessions in Borneo, already in crisis, tripled between 2007 and 2014. The RSPO certified that they were "sustainable" so the international community did nothing to stop it. Concurrently, many new operations opened up in Central and South America. But even by 2009, just two years into Bush's initiative, the EPA determined that the increase in tropical forest burning more than offset any environmental benefit that biofuels could provide. The agricultural industry fought back, claiming the EPA alarmist and anti-business. Under the current US administration, the EPA has been all but silent regarding palm oil plantations.

The argument in favor of palm oil is strong. It's the healthiest of the vegetable oil options, it takes less land in terms of yield per acre, and it's the cheapest to produce. It also provides jobs. Over 80 million Indonesians depend on the industry for employment. The chorus singing that the world "needs" palm oil is large, loud and well-funded.

The argument against is much harder to make, especially to those enjoying the western world's high standard of living. The stance that the world needs its rainforest more than oil products doesn't win from a purely economic perspective. Palm oil is indeed "healthier" than other oils, but that doesn't mean it's healthy. In fact, in 2017 the American Heart Association recommended eliminating it from your diet because it increases LDL cholesterol and the risk of heart disease. The statement that the industry provides millions of jobs in the developing world is also true, but what's omitted is that the wages are so low that it's keeping people in, not lifting them out of poverty. Sadly, the industry spends big money on PR on things like TV commercials with famous and respected people touting the virtues of palm oil and how it helps the poor. Undereducated and desperate for a better life, many of them believe it. By the time they figure out that it's a lie, it's too late.

Many people and even some companies in the western world have decided to boycott palm oil products, but Europe and America combined only make up 14% of the global consumption. Over 50% is in Asia, so even the strongest of Western rejections can't stem the tide. But if countries where the industry is going the fastest, like Guatemala, can be supported in prioritizing rainforest recovery over palm oil, that's at least a step in the right direction. We at MEC would see Guatemala's Peten rainforest and the Maya people who live in it shielded from the inevitable destruction that the palm oil industry will bring.



## Reforestation Projects

Reforestation projects are being done in many countries around the world. Some have been more successful than others, and there have been acknowledged problems along the way, but in balance they have been proven possible. For example, China's Green for Grain Program. Since the 1990's China has been encouraging its people to replace croplands with forests. They provide the saplings and poor people in rural areas are rewarded with cash and food to plant them. At first the trees were all of the same type, but now they are changing to a variety that better promotes forest biodiversity. In India, a 2016 effort saw an event where 800,000 people planted 50 million trees in just 24 hours. In 2017, Brazil began an ambitious program to plant 73 million trees in the Amazon in just 6 years. Those are just a few examples of the large-scale reforestation projects in progress today.

There are also good examples of very small groups of people making significant reforestation efforts. For example, Sebastiao Salgado in Minas Gerais, Brazil, with the help of a few local volunteers, restored his 7-hectare property from completely deforested back into rainforest in 20 years (1994-2014). He is now sharing his methods and model through [www.institutoterra.org](http://www.institutoterra.org) and encourages his neighbors in Brazil to follow his lead.



*Salgado's Land in Minas Gerais, Brazil before and after reforestation*

Another example with which MEC is directly involved is El Panchan in Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico. When Palenque was designated a national park in the 1980's, Moises Morales was gifted a 5-hectare plot just outside of the park boundary. At the time, it was a completely deforested cattle pasture. Over time, Moises planted saplings from nearby patches of forest. On his birthday, he would ask his friends and family come



help him for the day. Sometimes local elementary school students would have a field trip to help him plant. By the time the crew of the Palenque Mapping Project was living in El Panchan in 1999, the land was back to natural forest. A tree counting project in the year 2000 documented over 3000 trees on Moises' property. In that case, an old man and a handful of children with no financial support reforested 5 hectares in less than 20 years. It can be done.

Sadly, Palenque also serves as a negative example of what can be done. Along the highway leading to Palenque from Villahermosa, palm oil plantations are increasing at an alarming rate. A Costa Rican company named Palma Tica arrived in the early 2000's and set up a processing mill. They encouraged local cattle ranchers and farmers to plant oil palms with the promise of free saplings, loans, and future profits. At first only a few landowners took them up on it, but once they started making money their neighbors followed suit. Now there are kilometers of trunk to trunk palm oil plantations along the road to Palenque. At the moment that seems like a good thing – locals have found a new source of income and employment. But as explained above, when all the trees stop producing in just a few years from now, the profits will dry up and the landowners will be able to do nothing else with the land unless heavy machinery rips each 50 ft tall tree out by its deep roots. Making the land around Palenque cattle pasture was a mistake, but planting palm oil trees was a disaster.

### Palm Oil Plantations in Guatemala

Now let's focus in on the inspiration for this piece – the palm oil industry situation in Guatemala. Palm oil farms began there in the late 1980's on Guatemala's Pacific slope. Then in the 1990's they expanded into the lowland parts of the Departments of Izabal and Alta Verapaz. By the 2000's palm oil plantations were everywhere around the Sayaxche region in the south of the Department of Peten and expanding north. Today, it's on the doorstep of Peten's Maya Biosphere Reserve.

Proponents of Guatemala's rapidly growing palm oil industry say that same thing said all around the developing world – it's good for the country's economy, the poor get paid work, infrastructure development benefits everyone, they support local education and training, etc., etc... But the experience for Guatemala's dispossessed indigenous communities is also similar to what's happened in other parts of the world. They lose ownership of their land in return for low paying part-time jobs and the environment around their homes is destroyed. But for the Maya of Guatemala, it may even be worse.

Remembering Guatemala's recent horrific history of genocide against the Maya is of vital importance. That only ended in the 1990's, which means many living people still remember their own personal experiences surviving that brutal extermination. They remain skeptical and scared of the government, with good reason. When large corporations treat them unfairly, they don't expect the law to help them. And indeed, when they have spoken out, nothing happened. More on that shortly.

The palm oil industry in Guatemala is dominated by seven major companies, most of which are described as “family owned businesses”. Yes, they are family owned but what’s omitted is that those families are millionaires and billionaires who hold great power in Guatemala. From outside the country that might seem good – Guatemalans in control of Guatemala. But for the Maya, the situation feels like their historical oppressors once again finding a way to take their land and dominate their lives. It’s hard to argue against that. What’s more, despite the huge profits it generates for its already very wealthy owners, the palm oil industry pays virtually no taxes because the government says they promote the country’s economy.

Palm oil plantations are currently growing fastest in the region around Sayaxche along the Rio Pasión. For the companies, it’s a great location – access to free water, a large military presence and roads to the coast where they can ship their products out to the world. But for the local people, the effects are heart breaking and getting worse. Repsa was the first company to start major operations in 2002. Then Tikindustries arrived in 2006. Now multiple major companies have some foothold in the Sayaxche region. And every time they expand their land holdings, poor farmers lose their land. Those displaced people are forced to move into the cities or elsewhere. Sometimes entire communities are displaced.

The process of converting land into palm oil plantations starts with land acquisition. Sayaxche is great for that. The people are poor, uneducated Maya, many of whom resettled in Sayaxche after fleeing violence in the highlands. Many have no proper title to their land and their rights are not clear cut. Faced with corporate lawyers who threaten investigation and litigation, many sell to get at least something instead of just having their land seized for nothing. Again, Maya in Guatemala have good reason to fear that governmental authorities are not going to favor them in a court case.

Other locals were convinced to sell their land through rumors about future plans for a hydroelectric dam. Told back in the early 2000’s that the land around the Rio Pasión was going to be flooded and that they should sell before it was lost, they did. And now the palm oil companies control direct access to the free water from the river.

A small group of farmers had enough resources and financial stability to maintain their land ownership and become palm oil farmers themselves. These little independent farms are called “smallholders”. They generally take out loans from the big producers to get started. The investment and establishment phase take about 4-5 years. Once the fruit can be harvested, they can sell it to the local mill to be processed. The companies own all the mills and thus the price per ton is set by them, loosely tied to world market prices. If a smallholder is lucky and works hard, they can repay their loans in about 8 years. That gives them another 10-15 years of productive trees and profits – that is if the company keeps buying from them.

As noted earlier, the industry has been in the Sayaxche area since 2002, so they are now 18 years in. Soon the first plantations will cease producing oil. What will happen then? The big companies might use the heavy machinery to rip out old crops so they can plant anew. But the smallholders can't do that. They can either pay the company to clear it for them, and by doing so go into much greater debt than they did the first time around, or they can sell. One thing they cannot do is use the land for anything else – it's completely dominated by a deeply rooted, 50 ft tall monoculture palm plantation. The most likely scenario is that they sell their farm to the company and join the rest of the landless disaffected Maya in the growing cities of the region.

But for all those people who lost their land, and the city folk who desperately seek employment, the palm oil industry provides jobs, right? Sort of, but not what one might think. The bulk of employment occurs during harvest season, which is only 2-3 months of the year. There are thousands of jobs in June through September, but only a fraction of that for the rest of the year. And while the companies do hire locally, they prefer to hire migrant workers. They send recruiters into the Guatemalan highlands who return with cattle trucks full of eager workers. They house them in temporary work camps for 2-3 months of long hours and low pay, and then dismiss them by September. Many are illiterate, deliberately picked so they don't request written contracts. Felipe Molina, the owner of Guatemala's largest palm oil producer Grupo Olmeca, was once quoted as saying "people of this intellectual level are easier to influence".

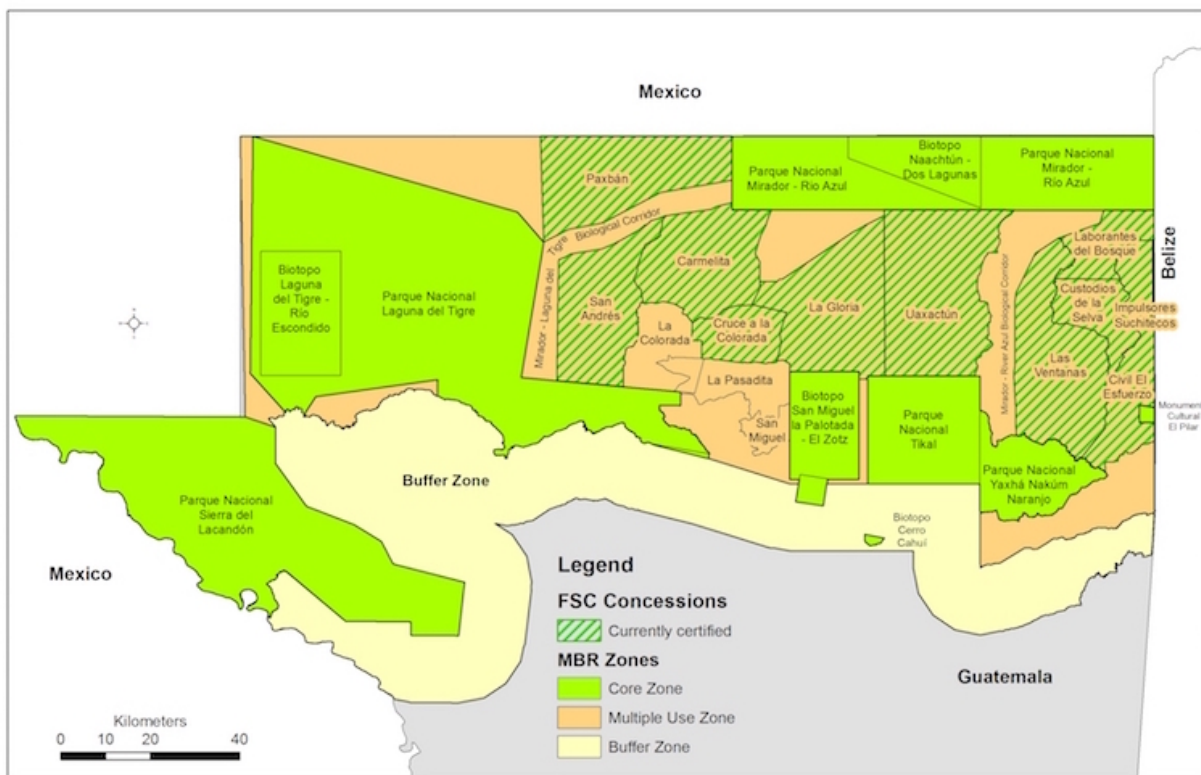
One of the year-round jobs is applying insecticide to the plantations. The workers are given virtually no personal protection equipment (PPE) and often fall sick after prolonged exposure. The insecticides also run off into the Rio Pasion, polluting the water and killing thousands of fish. In 2012, 10,000 residents of Sayaxche blocked the roads for six days to demand an investigation of the pollution, horrible working conditions and general corruption. This resulted in a few inspections and a "dialog table" between local labor leaders and the companies, but in the end nothing changed. Luis Velazquez, a paid consultant for the palm oil industry and former Minister of Economy for Guatemala was quoted as saying, "These groups lie all the time. For example, they say we produce biodiesel – we don't". Still today, eight years later, no one swims or fishes in the Rio Pasion near Sayaxche for fear of contamination.

In June of 2015 the United States initiated a lawsuit about labor rights abuses not permitted in their trade agreements with Guatemala. An Arbitral Tribunal was set up, but after first focusing on exposing the whistle blowers, in June of 2018 they concluded that the US failed to demonstrate breaches of labor laws connected to their trade partnerships. Business as usual continues in the Sayaxche region to this day.

## Palm Oil Plantations and the Maya Biosphere Reserve

This brings us to today. The Guatemalan Departments of Alta Verapaz, Izabal and Peten are now full of palm oil plantations. A huge land ownership shift has occurred, with thousands of people losing their property and the seven major palm oil companies becoming the largest land holders. The frontier for those companies lies to the north in the Department of the Peten. That's also where Guatemala's largest area of protected rainforest is – the Maya Biosphere Reserve. Established in 1990 to protect the largest area of American tropical forests remaining north of the Amazon, its 21,602 km<sup>2</sup> and home to a wonderful diversity of flora and fauna. It is also very densely covered in the ruins of the ancient Maya civilization.

The biosphere is divided into several zones of varying protected status. Some zones are 100% protected against any human settlement or extraction of resources. In the southern part of the biosphere the government allows limited economic activities in the form of sustainable harvesting of wood and other tropical products. Local communities were granted concessions for sustainable forestry for a period of 25 years. This year is the end of the first 25 years and the concessions are up for either renewal or cancellation. Those who would see the alteration and/or end of the concessions in favor of new conservation models are actively soliciting the help of the palm oil industry.



*The zones of the Maya Biosphere Reserve*

The concessions model has been a success, but the overall biosphere has not been without its problems. There has been illegal logging, farming, and cattle ranching – all of which produced more deforestation. The problems are especially bad in the western part of the biosphere, Laguna del Tigre, where there are no forestry concessions. A group called the Maya Conservation Partnership (MCP), based in West Palm Beach, Florida, has proposed a new plan to protect the Peten. It's called the Maya Security and Conservation Partnership Program and it calls for a large central part of the Maya Biosphere to be redefined as a Wilderness Area named the "Mirador-Calakmul Basin". It would completely prohibit roads, airstrips and vehicular access, increase law enforcement, and allow privately run eco-tourism within its new borders. On December 19, 2019 the MCP requested \$60 million in funding for their plan from the US Senate through the introduction of Bill S.3131. When and if the bill passes, the MCP will receive another \$60 million in matching support from the Central American Development Bank. There are multiple aspects of their proposal to be concerned about, but the one that pertains to this current piece is how the palm oil industry would be involved.

It's important to take a moment to explain who the Maya Conservation Partnership are. They state at the top of their website that they are "an international consortium of like-minded people who care deeply about Guatemala and Mexico...". At the end of their website the nine partners are listed, five of which are non-profit corporations started by the same person – Dr. Richard Hansen, Director of the El Mirador archaeological project for decades. Of the remaining four partners, Hansen is directly connected to at least three. The Pettit Foundation is controlled by the Furlotti family, and Nancy Furlotti is a board member of Hansen's most active non-profit – FARES (Foundation for Archaeological Research and Environmental Studies). FARES is listed as one of the MCP partners and its address is in his hometown of Rupert, Idaho. APANAC is a Guatemalan non-profit calling itself "friends of the natural and cultural patrimony of Guatemala" and its president is yet another member of FARES board of directors – Francois Berger. Berger's bio on the FARES website says among his many accolades is establishing a successful palm oil business in Guatemala. Then there's Global Conservation, a non-profit dedicated to rainforest protection. Again, Hansen is named as a "Global Conservation Director". Their website boasts that they have raised \$3 million from Guatemalan businesses and families to support the creation of the Mirador-Calakmul Basin Wilderness Area. A closer look at their Advisory Board reveals that 2 of the 3 people listed – Rhett Butler and Eric Dinerstien – have both written articles in favor of "sustainable" palm oil in tropical forests. In 2011, Butler moderated a RSPO hosted debate on the sustainable palm oil. In summation, the MCP is mostly controlled by one man, archaeologist Richard Hansen, and it has definite ties to the palm oil industry.





*Proposed area of the Mirador National Park. From [www.globalconservation.org](http://www.globalconservation.org)*

One of the problems identified by the authors of the Mirador-Calakmul Basin Maya Security and Conservation Partnership Program is that cattle fields are being established in the southern and western portions of the biosphere. They say that those cattle ranches are owned by drug traffickers, branding them “narco-pastures”. They suggest that those narco-pastures be confiscated and planted with palm oil plantations so they can no longer benefit the alleged criminal drug traffickers. But for many reasons, that is a bad idea.

First, how do we know that all of those cattle ranches are owned by drug traffickers? Some of them may well be, but that is for the Guatemalan legal system to decide. In democratic countries people are innocent until proven guilty. Second, the argument that planting palm oil plantations in already deforested areas is somehow eco-friendly is false. Those areas can and should become rainforest again, not cash crops. As explained earlier, planting palms would make eventual reforestation exponentially harder to achieve. Third, giving the palm oil industry the right to plant in deforested areas of Biosphere is a slippery slope. Who’s to say they won’t indirectly support third party deforestation? Similar situations happened in Borneo, where palm oil was

planted along the border of Tanjung Putting National Park. Fires were “accidentally” set again and again just inside the park. Once that happened well... planting palms was necessary to foil whatever plans the bad guys might have for that parcel. Little by little, the industries would find a way to expand like they did around Sayaxche. And fourth, what’s to stop the drug traffickers from simply buying into the palm oil business? According to Alma Polanco of the National Council for Protected Areas of the Peten (CONAP), they already have. Back in the Sayaxche region, the Leones and Zeta drug trafficking cartels have been buying into the palm oil industry for more than a decade.

When pressed on the issue, the leaders of the Maya Conservation Partnership say that they are against palm oil plantations in the proposed Mirador-Calakmul Basin Wilderness Area, but they do support plantation planting as a way of shutting down the narco-pastures. While those areas aren’t in the newly proposed wildlife area, they are in the western and southern parts of Maya Biosphere. The MCP’s main representative, Dr. Richard Hansen, has starred in at least two TV commercials promoting NAISA, one of Guatemala’s major palm oil companies, as good for the region’s people and the environment. That’s exactly what happened in Indonesia. The industry hired trusted local celebrities to star in commercials telling poor people that palm oil is a path to prosperity. It wasn’t.

### Conclusions

So, what should be done instead? That’s a hard question and there are no easy answers. But allowing private industries to control all the land, filling open pastures with palm oil trees and leaving local Maya with little more than part time work is definitely not a good idea. The goal for those deforested areas should be reforestation, not cash crops. And definitely not a monoculture tree crop that will destroy the soil for 200 years.

Who could do the reforestation? How about expanding the expanding concessions model? Those are local communities who have already done a great job protecting existing rainforests and have a deep knowledge of how to maintain the forest in a healthy and truly sustainable way. Who better to know how to plant more than the people who work within it every day?

But who would pay for it? Another hard question. Hansen said in a recent Vice News program – “*An investor who gives 5 million dollars isn’t just going hand it over to campesinos – that’s not the way the world works*”. But the fact that US Senators are willing to promote the use of \$60 million of US taxpayer money for “security and conservation” of the Peten shows that the money is actually there. It’s simply a question of political and social will. Could that \$60 million go instead to paying the people of the Peten to reforest their properties?

The MCP seems to reject this idea. Where's the profit in that? People with money only invest it in things that will generate ROI. That's the way the world works. We here at MEC disagree - the world doesn't have to work that way. The problem of the Peten's shrinking rainforest is vast and complicated, but solutions are possible. And those solutions must be decided with the people of the Peten, not *for* them by foreign entities or huge multinational corporations. This paper has been about one aspect of the problem - palm oil plantations. We hope that we have misunderstood the plans of the MCP and they will come out publicly stating that they are against palm oil plantations in the Maya Biosphere, both inside and outside of their proposed wilderness area. We'll state again as we did at the outset - they are bad for the rainforest and the people of Guatemala. They should be kept from expanding further into the Peten, period.

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