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Community forest concessionaires: resisting green grabs and producing political subjects in Guatemala

Jennifer A. Devine

In 2005, Guatemalan community forest concessionaires achieved a remarkable legislative victory that reversed a green land grab in the Maya Biosphere. The fight over this space, the Mirador Basin, provides valuable contributions to analyses of global land grabs, grassroots politics and power relations underpinning environmental governance. First, the fight for the Mirador Basin illustrates how green land grabs create new natures, rather than simply enclosing existing green spaces. Second, it contributes to recent scholarship detailing land-grabbing practices of resistance, acquiescence and incorporation ‘from below’ by describing how Maya Biosphere community forest concessionaires were able to reverse a green grab. Lastly, I argue this successful reversal largely rests on the articulation and mobilization of a new rights-bearing subject – the forest concessionaire. Struggles for land in the Maya Biosphere illustrate that practices and relations of green governance do not always create disciplined, neo-liberal, green subjects. Rather, community forestry has provided a political platform turning reserve residents into influential actors participating in the re-territorialization of power in contemporary Guatemala.

Keywords: green land grabs; community forestry; Guatemala; Maya Biosphere; land dispossession

Around the world, a global land grab is taking place. Citizens, scholars and activists first identified land grabbing as large land purchases in the Global South by foreign states and investors for food production that dispossess local residents of land rights (Borras and Franco 2010; Borras et al. 2011; Deininger 2011). Recent evidence insists that motives behind land grabbing span far beyond food security, and that land grabbing is indeed a global process (van der Ploeg, Franco, and Borras 2015). Alongside industrial agriculture, today, land speculation, bio-fuel cultivation, climate change mitigation, resource extraction and conservation enclosures are driving and defining the global land grab (Franco et al. 2013; Zoomers 2010). More often than not, global firms partner with local investors, non-profits and the local state, among other players, to forge hybrid, multi-sector relations of governance enabling and executing land grabs (Edelman, Oya, and Borras 2013). At the same time, complex, transnational, multi-sector alliances also define agrarian justice movements opposing global land grabbing around the world (Borras 2016).

‘Green grabbing’ is a subset of land grabbing practices and refers to the appropriation of land and resources from people living in or around ‘green’ areas by corporate entities for conservation purposes (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012). Conservation and sustainable
development discourses justify green grabs, which distinguishes them from other types of land grabs (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012). Yet, like other forms, local residents experience green grabs as acts of enclosure, appropriation and land dispossession. State agencies, non-profit groups, philanthropists and global conservation organizations engage in green grabbing by creating nature preserves (Zoomers 2010), leasing or purchasing green spaces (Vidal 2008), creating REDD+ (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation) and carbon sequestration programs (Franco et al. 2013) and ecotourism development (Gardner 2012; Ojeda 2012).

Multiple expressions of green land grabbing come together in complex ways in Guatemala’s Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR). Communities living in the MBR experienced the creation of the protected area in 1990 as an act of land dispossession and lost usufruct rights (Cortave 2003). With the support of international and Petén-based conservation organizations, reserve residents formed the Association of Petén’s Forest Communities (ACOFOP) in 1997 to advocate for their land rights and the creation of community forest concessions. Today, more than 14,000 residents directly benefit, and 70,000 people indirectly benefit, from 10 community forestry concessions (Taylor 2012). The community concessions and two industrial concessions make up the ‘multiple-use zone’ of the MBR. ACOFOP supports individual concessions administratively and technically, liaises among and legally represents the community concessions, and executes development and projects in concession villages. The Forest Stewardship Council certifies the environmental sustainability of community forestry through their ‘SmartWood’ certification program. While debate remains regarding the efficacy of community forestry, a consensus exists that areas managed in forest concessions in the multiple-use zone have suffered less deforestation than the reserve’s national parks have.1

Hundreds of Maya archaeology sites dot the Maya Biosphere’s community forestry and conservation landscapes. These sites include the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Natural and Cultural World Heritage site of Tikal, as well as other remarkable sites such as Piedras Negras, Yaxhá, Rio Azul, Uaxactún and El Mirador. The Mirador archaeology site is unique because of its immense size, Pre-Classic antiquity, exquisite art, immense pyramids and imperial history. Mirador archeologists and conservationists are working to obtain UNESCO World Heritage designation for the site. In 2002, Mirador advocates successfully lobbied Guatemalan President Portillo to declare an area they call the ‘Mirador Basin’ a ‘Special Archeological Zone’, which reduced the concession lands of Carmelita and Uaxactún (an archeology site and village pronounced wah-shock-TOON). Following three years of a protracted legal and public relations campaign led by forest concessionaires, Guatemala’s highest court overturned the legal establishment of the Mirador Basin, reinstated concessionaire land rights and validated the integrity of the community forestry process.

The fight for the Mirador Basin provides valuable contributions to analyses of green grabs, grassroots politics and power relations underpinning environmental governance. First, I detail how Mirador Basin advocates employ contested scientific data to delineate a geographic space they call the Mirador Basin in order to show how green grabs create

1From 2000 to 2013, deforestation in the area of the reserve home to forest concessions was 0.4 percent, versus 1.0 percent in the national parks (Hodgdon et al. 2015). These deforestation rates, however, mask acute differences in deforestation rates between different parks. Lamentably, the two largest national parks in the west have suffered some of the highest rates of deforestation in the world since their creation, while others have close to zero deforestation (Hodgdon et al. 2015).
new natures and green spaces, rather than simply enclosing existing places. Next, the paper contributes to recent scholarship analyzing practices of resistance, acquiescence and incorporation ‘from below’ in land grabs (Hall et al. 2015) by describing how grassroots actors were able to reverse a green grab driven by powerful global and national actors. Lastly, I argue that this successful reversal hinged on the articulation and mobilization of a newly forged, politicized, rights-bearing subject – the community forest concessionaire. In contrast to many readings of subject formation and political contestation in the eco-govern-mentality literature, I argue that environmental governance in the Maya Biosphere has not produced disciplined, neo-liberal, green subjects. Rather, the precarious politics of green governance in northern Guatemala have enabled residents to constitute a new political subject – the community forest concessionaire – that is participating in the re-territorialization of contemporary power relations in northern Guatemala by appropriating conservation efforts to achieve unforeseen ends.

This analysis is based on nearly two years of field investigation in Guatemala from 2009 to 2011, including 16 months of ethnographic research in the Maya Biosphere villages of Carmelita and Uaxactún in the department of Petén. In each village, I conducted more than 40 oral histories and interviews, and participated in or observed more than 50 community events, such as city council meetings and festivals. Outside the villages in Petén’s department capital and Guatemala City, I interviewed an additional 45 key informants working in conservation, observed government and non-profit regional planning meetings, and undertook archival research. Since then, I have returned to the Petén three times for two-week trips (July 2013, August 2014, December 2015) to gather interviews, data and experiences that also inform this analysis.

Guatemalan land grabs, green governance and the production of subjects

Maya Biosphere residents’ successful establishment and defense of their land rights through community forestry is even more remarkable when situated within the broader context of contemporary agrarian land struggles in Guatemala. Guatemala has one of the most unequal land tenure systems in the world, and an estimated half of the population of 16 million practices subsistence agriculture (Gauster and Isakson 2007, 1521; Zander and Dürr 2011). Land tenure inequality today is deeply rooted in Guatemala’s colonial history of racialized exploitation of the Maya, and 36 years of genocidal warfare that ended in 1996 (Jonas 2000). Demands for land animated revolutionaries during the civil war, yet the Peace Accords failed to produce meaningful agrarian reform (Jonas 2000). Instead, World Bank and Guatemalan state officials implemented neo-liberal ‘market-assisted land reform’ based on the belief that privately titling land to peasants and the poor would resolve Guatemala’s acute land inequality and poverty (Gauster and Isakson 2007; Ybarra 2009).

Rather than increasing land tenure and reducing poverty for Guatemalan families, World Bank-financed market reform has had the opposite effect and reconcentrated lands in the hands of the Guatemalan elites and transnational capital (Alonso-Fradejas 2012; Grandia 2012). From 1996 to 2009, the Guatemalan land fund (FONTIERRAS) purchased lands from private owners and sold them at competitive interest rates to landless families, but transferred just 18 percent of the total 1137 applications received (Gauster and Isakson 2007, 1524) and redistributed just 4 percent of Guatemala’s arable land to less than 18 percent of landless families (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 514). For those receiving land, poverty and debt combine with poor land quality sold to force many to sell their land,
resulting in ‘voluntary’ or ‘legalized dispossession’ (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 519; Zander and Dürr 2011).

In Guatemala’s northern lowlands home to Petén, legal dispossession feeds into land grabbing by sugarcane and African oil palm producers. Five years following market-led agrarian reform in Petén, studies show between 30 and 46 percent of the program’s purported beneficiaries sold their land, many to African palm and sugar plantations, and cattle ranchers affiliated with organized crime (Grünberg, Grandia, and Milián 2012; Zander and Dürr 2011). Many peasant sellers report being compelled to sell following harassment, intimidation and even physical violence by flex-crop company employees, while others sold due to high indebtedness and low productivity of their lands sold through the FONȚIERRAS program (Alonso-Fradejas 2012). Skyrocketing land prices mean peasants are unable to buy back into the market, and leave them with few options other than working as unskilled, landless laborers, emigrating to the United States, or ‘illegally’ settling in protected areas (Milián and Grandia 2013; Zander and Dürr 2011; Ybarra et al. 2012).

Green land grabs in the name of conservation are a front of agrarian struggle in and outside of the Maya Biosphere, and justify violent land evictions by the military. From 2008 to 2010 alone, President Alvaro Colom’s administration authorized 99 ‘legal’ evictions (Andrés 2011); private and parastatal forces implement countless more (Granovsky-Larsen 2013). The state gave communities established prior to the Maya Biosphere in 1990 legal permission to reside in the reserve under strict legal land tenure and conservation restrictions. The state labeled settlers and refugees arriving to the reserve after 1990 as ‘illegal’ squatters. The Guatemalan National Council on Protected Areas has threatened both groups with evictions, but has focused primarily on communities established ‘illegally’ after the reserve’s creation in 1990. The reclassification of Mirador Basin as a ‘Special Archaeological Zone’ threatened the land rights of ‘legal’ residents engaging in community forestry by reneging their ability to manage approximately 48,040 hectares of land that fall within the Mirador Basin’s boundaries. As such, the battle for the Mirador Basin did not address the problems and concerns facing ‘illegal’ settlers living in the Maya Biosphere’s national parks.

Agrarian struggles in Guatemala and around the world reveal that people, organizations and communities react to land grabs in a multitude of ways, that Ruth Hall et al. (2015) categorize in their collection on the topic as resistance, acquiescence and incorporation. Collection contributors illustrate that rather than resisting or simply resigning, rural and peasant residents often negotiate for the best terms of inclusion when faced with a land grab (Larder 2015). Other times, those ‘from below’ effectively engage legal and juridical apparatuses within the state (Grajales 2015), and exploit scalar inconsistencies in environmental governance to practice resistance or advocate for incorporation (Kandel 2015; Corson et al. 2015). Often, a closer examination of what appears to be passive acquiescence to land grabs reveals a diversity of covert forms of resistance in everyday practices of labor and livelihood (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2015; Moreda 2015). Unpacking the battle for the Mirador Basin illuminates an additional modality of resistance to land grabs and green grabs in particular: reversal.

Maya Biosphere community forest concessionaires’ reversal of the Mirador Basin green grab is even more remarkable in light of the fact that it is one of the few examples

2Flex-crops are crops that have ‘multiple uses (food, feed, fuel, industrial material),’ which proponents argue can be ‘flexibly interchanged’ in response to fluctuations in world demand and prices (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015, 490).
worldwide of multiethnic and non-indigenous people successfully reasserting usufruct rights and customary governance (Grandia 2015, personal communication). Since the early 1990s, many agrarian organizations, like the influential National Indigenous and Campesino Coordinator (CONIC), have reframed their demands for land and agrarian struggles in indigenous terms (Granovsky-Larsen 2013, 331). Identifying similar dynamics in the Q’eqchi’ lowlands, scholar Alonso-Fradejas (2012) explains:

Discourses calling for mobilization against corporate land resources control gabbing are underpinned by the – strategic essentialist – collective identity Q’eqchi’ peoples as R’al Ch’och (‘Sons and Daughters of the Earth’), who live off and care for Mother Earth, who reciprocally cares for them. It is under this shared and powerfully ideologising identity as R’al Ch’och that … Q’eqchi’ people are gathering to defend their access and control over territorial resources … (523)

Across Latin America, indigenous political and territorial rights are a ‘key mobilizing factor’ in opposition to mining, flex-crop and other extractive industries (Urkidi 2011, 557), and Guatemala is emblematic of these hybrid indigenous, environmental, resource and land struggles.

Maya Biosphere residents’ struggles for land rights inform analyses of Guatemalan agrarian politics by illuminating the role that forest concessionaire identity has played in the success of this multi-ethnic social movement. In contrast to many indigenous-identified land struggles across the country, Maya Biosphere residents do not strategically mobilize indigenous identity and rights in defense of territory. Instead, forest concessionaire identity is rooted in historical memories, folklore and nostalgia for northern Petén as a ‘forest society’ (Schwartz 1990) characterized by a tradition of timber and non-timber forest extraction. This is a partial, yet powerful, representation of a complex diversity of histories and identities defining reserve residents and the Petén. As such, forest concessionaire identity is implicitly, yet problematically, built on previously existing discourses that define ladino (non-indigenous) men as protagonists of the ‘forest society’ to the exclusion of women and indigenous people. The underlying machismo of this narrative and identity manifests in ideas about who embodies a forest concessionaire, and contributes to a lack of gender equality and indigenous representation within community forestry, an exclusion that ACOFOP is working hard to address.

Community forest concessionaire struggles for land also illuminate the relationship between power and subject formation in relations of green governance. These concerns are at the heart of theoretical inquiries into what scholars refer to as environmentality (Agrawal 2005), eco-governmentality (Goldman 2001) and green governmentality (Rutherford 2007). Agrawal (2005) defines environmentality as the ‘the union of environment and Foucauldian governmentality’, an approach to studying ‘environmental politics that takes seriously the conceptual building blocks of power/knowledges, institutions, and subjectivities’ (8, emphasis original). He argues that neo-liberal, decentralized technologies of green governance in Indonesia are ‘linked to the constitution of environmental subjects – people who have come to think and act in new ways in relation to the environmental domain being governed forests’ (2005, 7, emphasis original). Scott (1998) argues that state-led scientific forestry has played a role in governmental power for hundreds of years in Europe; others, however, such as Luke (1999), identify the 1970s as a conjunctural moment when the environment became a privileged arena of biopolitics. Despite their differences, many studies of environmentality emphasize how disciplinary power ‘compels local people to internalize ways of knowing and conduct’ in ways that shape subject formation and identity (Ward 2013, 92).
The eco-governmentality literature’s emphasis on rationalities of rule, what they aim to accomplish, and the subjects they discipline eclipses how practices of subject production and political contestation in relations of green governance are mutually constitutive. Rather than showing how eco-governmentality produces neo-liberal, disciplined subjects, resident struggles to create community forestry concessions and the 2005 fight for the Mirador Basin illustrate how hegemonic relations of green governance can also produce unruly subjects that leverage contradictions in the existing order to transform existing relations and structures. The remainder of this contribution illustrates that the success of this multi-ethnic movement is intimately tied to the articulation and politicization of Maya Biosphere residents as community forest concessionaires – a newly defined, individual and collective, rights-bearing subject.

**Community forestry in the Maya Biosphere**

During the Guatemalan peace process (1985–1996), environmental organizations and Guatemalan conservationists came together and galvanized enough political support to create the Maya Biosphere Reserve in 1990 (Nations 1996). The MBR’s creation followed on the heels of the establishment of a national park system and the Council on National Protected Areas (CONAP) the year before. The MBR spans over two million hectares, and covers more than half of the department of Petén and almost 20 percent of the national territory (see Figure 1). Forty percent of the reserve is a ‘multiple-use zone’ where sustainable

![Figure 1. The Maya Biosphere and Mirador. Source: Map made by Paepin Goff for the author.](image-url)
forestry takes place, 36 percent of the park is a ‘core zone’ make up of national parks where residency and livelihood are prohibited, and 24 percent is a ‘buffer zone’ with few land use restrictions.

In the dozens of small villages that dot the forest landscapes of northern Petén, residents experienced the creation of the MBR as an act of enclosure and land dispossession. For the first five years of the biosphere’s existence, CONAP tried and failed to implement new access restrictions to resources historically used by residents as part of the village commons. Residents could no longer cut leña (firewood), plant milpa (corn) or fell wood for building houses. A tour guide from Carmelita explained to me, ‘It was difficult to go from living free to living on the reserve’. A Uaxactún community leader related, ‘From one night to the morning, we heard we were in a reserve, we didn’t know anything about it, and now there was a new legal and institutional infrastructure’. In reference to the newly penned restrictions on the forest commons, a community leader from Carmelita echoed a similar sentiment: ‘We thought they [state CONAP workers] were crazy, we felt like the owners of the forest’. Often-violent conflicts unfolded as residents from 22 legally recognized communities and dozens of villages of so-called ‘squatters’ protested and demanded a restoration of their land tenure and usufruct rights (Finger-Stich 2003).

The Guatemalan government did not originally plan to grant resident communities forest concessions – rather, they sought to provide concessions only to private companies (Gretzinger 1998). However, when villagers got wind of the government’s plan, many began to campaign for the creation of a community-based forestry system. At the same time residents built their case, the Guatemalan state demonstrated its inability to curb illicit activities taking place in the reserve, like narco-trafficking, and timber, animal and artifact poaching (Monterroso and Barry 2007). Shortly after, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) granted more than USD 10 million over several years to support conservation efforts in the Maya Biosphere. USAID earmarked much of this money to help establish community concessions that would be monitored and advised by non-profit conservation organizations in their infancy (Nations 1996). Following 30 years of genocidal warfare and military dictatorships, few national non-profit organizations existed in the county, and therefore, global conservation organizations won USAID contracts to ‘accompany’ the concessions in their development. In this sense, while ACOFOP is a grassroots organization, its birth as an organization, as well as the creation of the individual community concessions, emerged alongside local residents’ intimate engagement with some of the world’s largest and most powerful environmental organizations, like The Nature Conservancy and Conservation International. Years of collaborative organizing paid off in 1994 when CONAP granted a pilot community concession of just 7039 hectares to the village of San Miguel. In 2002, CONAP granted the twelfth and final concession of 83,558 hectares to Uaxactún.

Across the biosphere, villagers describe the process of obtaining community forestry concessions in terms of hardship and internal conflict – a political struggle for land rights that lasted over six years in Carmelita and almost 10 years in Uaxactún (Reddy 2002). These two villages share similar foundational histories in the 1920s to extraction camps for the Wrigley’s chewing gum company. Today, Carmelita and Uaxactún’s 300 and 1200 respective residents continue to earn their livelihoods through the extraction of timber and non-timber products, like chicle (chewing gum resin), xate (leafy palm used in flower bouquets) and allspice. Carmelita residents mostly identify as ladino or mestizo (shared Spanish and indigenous heritage) and many have grandparents or great grandparents that come to the village from Mexico. Sixty-five percent of Uaxactún’s residents are
ladino or mestizo, but unlike Carmelita, 35 percent are Maya Q’eqchi’ whose relatives migrated to the village from the Alta Verapaz. In both villages, residents were divided over whether or not community forestry concessions should exist at all, who should manage the civil society organizations responsible for the concessions and how benefits should be distributed. In Uaxactún, additional disagreements between residents and CONAP over the size of the concession delayed contract ratification.

These divides endure today. Nonetheless, concession supporters were able to garner enough internal and external support needed to create what is presently one of the world’s largest communally managed forests, and success stories of community-based natural resource management (Cortave 2003).

ACOFOP emerged from this political process as an umbrella, non-profit organization politically connecting concessionaires across individual concession boundaries in 1997 (Gómez and Mendez 2005). Originally called the Advisory Council of the Forest Communities of Petén, ACOFOP was founded with the ‘objective of negotiating with the state, industrial sectors, and conservationists, the future of the Maya Biosphere’. The non-profit organization’s website describes that ‘the Association of Forest Communities of Petén was born and consolidated’ because the reserve’s creation entailed ‘a restrictive politics of access, little information’ and failed to meet the ‘many basic needs of the reserve’s population not captured in conservation policy’, all of which ‘created a climate of insecurity and confrontation’. Today, ACOFOP represents 23 peasant and indigenous organizations, manages large-scale development projects and participates in creating political policies that impact Petén’s conservation, economic development and security (Taylor 2012).

Despite the achievements and longevity of the process, concessionaires feel that community-based resource management in the Maya Biosphere is currently under threat. ACOFOP’s staff, members and village residents identify outside conservation interests opposed to any sustainable use of forest resources as one of the chief menaces facing the community concessions process. One such interest is the leadership of the Mirador Basin Project that directs archeological research and conservation efforts in and around the Mirador-Rio Azul national park and the immense Pre-Classic Mayan archaeology site of Mirador.

The making of the Mirador Basin

Mirador lead archeologist Dr. David Gill staunchly criticizes the Maya Biosphere’s geography, half-heartedly joking it was ‘designed on the back of a bar napkin in Antigua, Guatemala’ (interview, 22 July 2010). He argues that the extant rectangular boundaries of the existing Mirador Park are ill conceived, and are at odds with the physical and cultural topographies of the region’s archaeological landscapes. In contrast to the Maya Biosphere’s geography, Dr. Gill suggests that hundreds of years of ancient Mayan settlement, agriculture and urban life created a physically and culturally distinct, integrated system they call the ‘Mirador Basin’. Described as a broad, low-relief, oval-shaped basin occupying 2200 km², the area looks like an inverted triangle. Figure 2 shows the overlapping the topographies of the Maya Biosphere forest concessions and the Mirador Basin.

The interdisciplinary scientific team led by Dr. Gill at Mirador uses archaeology, paleoecology, cartography and other scientific methods to define the Mirador Basin as a clearly demarcated geographic entity. They argue the presence of seasonal swamps called bajos that contrast with surrounding upland forests further distinguishes the physicality of the basin (Mejia and Valle 2006, 54–56). The team argues that perhaps the clearest proof of the Mirador Basin’s geographical integrity is a surrounding chain of low-relief
karstic hills (Hansen, Howell, and Guenter 2008). Within the Mirador Basin, there are 51 archaeological sites identified so far, nine of which are larger than the nearby World Heritage site of Tikal (Hansen, Howell, and Guenter 2008). Furthermore, the Mirador Basin is home to different soil types and civales, wet and treeless areas of herbaceous vegetation, not found in the dry savannas of southern and central Petén (Wahl et al. 2007). According to basin supporters, the surrounding karst hills, the presence of seasonal swamps and the density of archaeological sites justify elevating the area’s land-use protection from multiple-use zone to a core protected area.

Dr. Gill is not only a world-renowned archaeologist, but a charismatic spokesperson and fundraiser for Mirador conservation efforts. These skills have combined with the majesty of Mirador and the surrounding forests to create a powerful support network that funds Mirador archaeological research and restoration. Mirador Basin supporters include some of the wealthiest global companies and Guatemalan families, including several Guatemalan presidents, the Global Heritage Fund, CitiBank, Blue Oil, Walmart Centroamerica, Claro and Disagro, among others.

Not everyone, however, agrees with the Mirador Basin team’s science. Several Petén-based biodiversity conservationists and development practitioners argue the evidence supporting the basin’s existence stands on shaky ground. Going one step further, a Petén-based director of a conservation organization dismisses the Mirador Basin as a myth. He and many others suggest the area meets neither criterion of being a geographical defined basin: the area is not surrounded by highlands as claimed, nor does it constitute a watershed basin, but is actually part of the San Pedro watershed that flows into the Usumacinta River. What Dr. Gill and his supporters claim is a basin, he and many others argue is actually a
plateau. A surrounding ridge of karstic hills does indeed outline the purported basin to the east. To the west, however, there is no topographic distinction defining a basin, but a shared watershed reaching all the way to the Laguna del Tigre National Park, far beyond the boundary of the basin. Likewise, the plateau Mirador lies on reaches far into the Mexican states of Quintana Roo and Campeche.

Debates regarding the purported existence of the Mirador Basin are inseparable from the politics of land use and territory in the Maya Biosphere. The Mirador Basin Project’s team of scientists, philanthropists and private foundations have a loosely defined, but shared, dream of making the Mirador Basin, if not all of the Maya Biosphere, a world class archaeological and eco-tourism destination. The tourism imaginary (Salazar 2012) they paint describes the Mirador Basin as an ancient Maya place in a pristine jungle. Movie director and Mirador Basin philanthropist Mel Gibson explains that Dr. Gill ‘has created a new model for rainforest and archaeological site conservation through sustainable programs using the ancient jungle shrouded cities as the economic catalysts for their own preservation’ (PACUNAM n.d., emphasis added). For Gibson and other Mirador Basin advocates, sustainable programs refer to tourism development, not community forestry. Dr. Gill and many of his supporters believe using the region for forestry is environmentally unsustainable and an economic opportunity lost. With his characteristic blend of charisma and passion, Dr. Gill explained to me that he believed ‘using the Maya Biosphere for timber would be like using the Grand Canyon as a landfill for Los Angeles’ (personal interview, 22 July 2010).

Dr. Gill’s comment captures the incommensurability of forest concessionaires and Mirador Basin supporters’ conservation visions. The presence of contemporary, ethnically diverse communities engaging in sustainable forestry belies the tourism reverie articulated by Mirador Basin supporters. Despite the controversy surrounding the basin’s boundaries and land use, the message about the existence of the Mirador Basin and its untapped tourism potential has reached millions of people around the world on CNN, 20/20, Good Morning America, 60 Minutes (Australia), the BBC and documentaries on the History Channel, National Geographic and the Learning Channel, among others.

The battle for the Mirador Basin

The competing socio-spatial constructions of nature, forest and livelihoods of forest concessionaires and Mirador Basin advocates resulted in a fierce legal battle lasting over three years. On 18 April 2002, after years of campaigning, the dreams of Mirador Basin advocates appeared within reach when President Portillo emitted Presidential Decree 129-2002 declaring the establishment of a core protected area called the ‘Special Archaeological Zone Mirador Basin’. The newly christened Mirador Basin’s boundaries overlapped with two communities and one industrial concession, limiting land use in those areas to tourism and research only. Carmelita stood to lose 66 percent of its community concession, and Uaxactún faced a 15 percent loss. Regardless of the territorial extent, affected and unaffected members of ACOFOP collectively identified Presidential Decree 129-2002 as a threat to the integrity of the entire community forest concession process.

Just a few weeks after the decree’s publication, ACOFOP’s members and allied conservation and civil society organizations signed and presented to CONAP a document of unconformity to the president. Toward the end of the month, legal representatives of the affected and solidarity communities traveled to Guatemala City to present a recurso de amparo, an appeal for legal protection. President Portillo ruled the appeal without merit
just a few weeks later. By 2003, ACOFOP had taken its campaign from the national congressional floor to the offices of the world’s most powerful financial institutions. At this point, ACOFOP made clear that if their legal efforts to appeal the decree were ineffectual, their members would close the streets and take control of northern Guatemala’s regional airport.

On 1 September 2003, ACOFOP filed a second appeal for legal protection with the help of a non-profit Guatemalan legal team with an office in Petén called the Center for Social and Environmental Legal Action. The appeal claimed the decree was unconstitutional based on three accounts. The strongest point argued that the constitution, as the nation’s highest legal authority, guaranteed the legality of MBR and the community concessions, and therefore could not be overruled by a presidential decree (Figure 3).

In Guatemala’s capital city, two days later, ACOFOP held a peaceful protest receiving national press coverage and marched on the Constitutional Court, the highest court in the land. For many of the protesters it was their first trip to Guatemala City located 10–14 hours away by bus from their communities. Clara explained to me this was just one of many protests she and other Carmelita residents had attended:

There were tons of people there, we all carried signs we had made. We are not anti-park, but the reserve cannot be saved by expanding parks. Because here, if the people don’t get involved, it will be very difficult to take care of the forest.

Clara flags a shared position among many conservationists that local communities must be involved in conservation efforts for them to be successful.

Following presidential elections in 2004, ACOFOP published an open letter in the paper to newly elected President Oscar Berger (2004–2008) calling for the decree’s
appeal. This action secured an audience between community leaders and the president 10 days later. Shortly after, concessionaires celebrated a substantial victory. As a result of the second appeal, Decree 129-2002 and the Mirador Basin’s existence was temporarily suspended for a period of deeper analysis and debate. In an act of political tug-of-war between parties, the same day the Guatemalan Congress emitted Executive Law 2961. Law 2961 furthered the goals and legality of the Mirador Basin at the same time as President Berger expressed his concern over its establishment. Law 2961 declared the Mirador Basin a protected area with the classification of ‘Cultural Landscape Category II’, which changed the administration of the area to a small multi-sector committee, and banned logging in the area (Figure 4).

Despite the intentions of Decree 129 and Law 2961 to establish the Mirador Basin’s legal existence, late April of 2004 marked the imminent demise of the basin’s legal existence. Two special commissions investigating the Mirador Basin legal controversy presented a joint recommendation letter to congress collating opinions of state institutions ascertaining the merits of Decree 129 and Law 2961. The commission concluded that the decree and law should ‘be discarded’. Over a year later, in May of 2005, ACOFOP and their supporters celebrated the victory for which they spent over three years campaigning. President Berger repealed Presidential Decree 129 and Law 2961, restoring the legal and territorial sovereignty of the MBR and community concessionaire usufruct rights.

The battle for the basin, the sequel: the Baldizón initiative

Despite the 2005 legal victory, concessionaire land tenure remains tenuous. Five years later, in the middle of a hot Petén morning, two pickup trucks full of soldiers showed up in the village of Carmelita. Kids and teachers poured out of the schoolhouse to catch a glimpse of some much-needed excitement. I asked my neighbor, ‘What’s going on?’ ‘They’ve come to

Figure 4. Protest against Presidential Decree 129 at the National Palace: ‘Mr. President, you have three commitments to the environment’.
Source: ACOFOP archives.
evict Carmelita’, he joked. A moment later with a sense of renewed seriousness and reflection he quietly commented, with an air of further contemplation, ‘It could happen’. He is not the only villager living with the uncertainty of Carmelita’s future. On another day, an elderly, life-long resident commented regarding the same event, without a hint of humor, ‘Maybe it’ll be our turn next and the state will come here and evict Carmelita’. This concern is not unfounded.

Since the creation of the community forestry concessions, the Guatemalan state has canceled two concessions and the military evicted the residents. Another concession is currently suspended and residents fear eviction. In 2010, La Colorada, Carmelita’s nearest neighbor, was turned into a military detachment after the original residents allegedly sold their land illegally to cattle ranchers with ties to narco-trafficking. Rumors abound in Carmelita regarding the degree to which state officials and military participated in mismanagement of La Colorada’s lands. Amid speculation, what is clear to Carmelita and Uaxactún residents is that their future land tenure is uncertain and the threat of eviction endures regardless of the relatively healthy status of their forest concession.

There is a palpable fear among residents, which sometimes borders on conspiracy theory, that elites, politicians and businesspeople aim to convert the whole area surrounding Mirador into a nuclear zone where no human residency or livelihood is permitted (Rahder 2015). Following the battle for the Mirador Basin, this fear was rekindled by President Colom’s Four Jaguar eco-tourism (2008–2012) project that coordinated Petén development projects with the aim of transforming the MBR into the world’s largest archaeological park (Devine 2014). Toward the end of Colom’s tenure, congressman and presidential candidate Manual Baldizón proposed another legislative initiative to make the Mirador Basin a national park. Manual Baldizón’s 2010 initiative proposed a ‘Law for the Protection and Tourism Development of Mirador National Park’, used much of the same language found in the 2002 Presidential Decree. In fact, the documents are so similar that the text appears to be copied.

For many residents, the 2010 Baldizón initiative was like a bad sequel to the 2002 Presidential Decree. Once again, members of ACOFOP organized in response. Forest concessionaires published a public statement in the national press articulating their opposition, and sent a copy to President Colom, Manuel Baldizón, and Dr. David Larsen. Despite Dr. Gill’s denial, ACOFOP’s members asserted the archaeologist was behind the Baldizón initiative, and he agreed to meet with ACOFOP’s members in hopes of clearing his name of any association, despite the eerie echoes of the battle over the basin from a few years before.

In the outdoor meeting space of the ACOFOP in October 2010, Dr. Gill sat down with an angry group of over 200 ACOFOP members and reserve residents. The meeting commenced with two 60-minute presentations, one by ACOFOP and the other by Dr. Gill. Despite having met to discuss the Baldizón initiative specifically, both parties did not mention the proposal, but reiterated their contrasting visions, territorial claims and competing histories of Petén’s northern forests. A question-and-answer session followed. Next to me, a woman named Margarita from the concession and village of Cruce a La Colorada, wearing a housedress and apron typical of a Petenera housewife, rose when she was finally called upon to speak. She began to recite the Guatemalan national anthem, staring Dr. Gill directly in the eye. Her powerful delivery reminded me of many conversations with Carmelita and Uaxactún residents who identify Dr. Gill’s presence, politics and elite alliances as a form of neo-imperialism, often using those words specifically. A few minutes later, a tour guide from a nearby Santa Elena, stood up and demanded to know who was funding Dr. Gill’s research. He explained that academics have been stealing
artifacts from Petén for many years. ‘There has been over 500 years of conquest through science in Guatemala’, he professed.

Chewing-gum workers and companies like the Wrigley’s Chewing Gum Company founded the villages of Carmelita and Uaxactún nearly a century ago (Schwartz 1990). Despite over 100 years of participation in the global economy, the villages and their inhabitants remain poor and lack basic services such as access to clean water, electricity and education. While the chicle industry is unique to northern Petén, primary resource extraction for the financial gain of foreign individuals and companies in Guatemala is not. For many Guatemalans, the Central Intelligence Agency-backed coup and subsequent United States funding of Guatemala’s army during 36 years of genocidal warfare epitomizes the neo-imperial role the country has played, and continues to play, in Guatemalan affairs (Schlesinger and Kinzer 2005). These living civil war histories intertwine with contemporary anti-mining protests in the highlands, anti-African palm and sugar plantation struggles in the lowlands, and the failures of market-assisted land reform across the country to produce the land politics of the present.

Despite what I observed as Dr. Gill’s laudable intentions to conserve the cultural and environmental treasures of the reserve, his activism is intractably embedded in this history that implicates the US government, academic institutions, corporations and development agencies in ongoing relations of poverty, inequality and insecurity in Guatemala. Rumors abound that some of the world’s most powerful companies funding Mirador conservation efforts have financial, rather than altruistic, interests in the area (Rahder 2015). No longer fighting communism, but championing conservation instead, residents suggest foreigners like Dr. Gill and his backers are interfering in ongoing Guatemalan struggles for land and livelihood. Manny, a young man from Carmelita who believed that Dr. Gill was behind the Baldizón initiative, rhetorically asked me, ‘How can he treat chapines [Guatemalans] like this in our own country?’ Despite the fact that the 2010 Baldizón initiative lost steam in congress, and then, Manuel Baldizón subsequently lost his bid for the presidency in 2015, there is no shortage of Mirador Basin advocates who continue to campaign for World Heritage and wildlife refuge status for the area. As such, the fear of land dispossession emanating from a green land grab looms large for many forest concessionaires.

Articulating political subjects: community forest concessionaire

In an interview, an elderly, lifelong resident from Carmelita, Don Pedro, echoed his neighbor’s critiques of elite intervention in local affairs when he recounted a story about a wildfire that threatened the village to the ground in 1994. He woke in the middle of the night to shrill shouting from his neighbors. He jumped out of bed, quickly joined assembly-line efforts to douse the encroaching fire, and dug fire lines to protect the village. The fire came within hundreds of yards of the community from the south. This fire stands out in local memory and folklore as a near-death experience; however, residents are actively involved in fire management year-round and have been for decades. Fire fighting and the historical extraction of chicle and xate are part of the village’s self-proclaimed culture of care for the forest, and the foundation of residents’ claims to rightfully remain and work in the MBR.

Fire, however, is a double-edged sword in the political forests of northern Guatemala. In moments of immense anger tainted with fear, a few residents suggest that fire is part of a powerful symbolic arsenal of potential tactics available to locals to ward off land dispossession. Pedro explained that setting fire to the forest would be a last-ditch option for residents
to defend their land if they were evicted. He explained how difficult it would be to do so, but at least this way, ‘the rich wouldn’t get richer from kicking the poor off their land’. The threat of burning the forests for Pedro signifies a powerful counterclaim to territory, and a means to protest the reproduction of poverty and inequality in contemporary conservation, archaeology and eco-tourism projects.

While few residents threaten to use fire as a counter-dispossession strategy, Don Pedro is not alone in the tenor of his sentiments. Many residents in the MBR feel similarly passionate about their rights to live and work in the forests surrounding Mirador. Several residents relate how fears of dispossession in the present are rooted in the violence and US-Guatemalan elite alliances of the past. Jacóbo from Uaxactún explained:

If Carmelita is made into a nuclear zone [national park], it will be because Dr. Gill and Baldizón want there to be just one owner. There will be another armed conflict – it will be like the eighties again. It will be like another war. We aren’t going to allow the government to make contracts with foreigners, people will protest against this.

Another Carmelita resident who had worked in the forest extracting xate palm for export since he was a boy asserted, in a mixed tone of desperation and determination:

Where else can we go? We don’t have titles to sell our houses to find another place to live. We only know how to work the land and the forest. I can’t find a job in the central [urban] area. No … the community will only be taken out in coffins.

Contrary to analyses of eco-governmentality, the creation of community forest concessions, the reversal of the Mirador Basin green grab, and residents’ willingness to burn the forest they call home and revive violence from the past illustrate the complex and non-determined ways power works in relations of environmental governance. In her book *The will to improve*, Li (2007) draws on Foucault to think about how governmental power works to discipline people participating in development projects, but turns to Antonio Gramsci to explain why in certain times and places, and not others, social groups come to see themselves as collectivities and mobilize in resistance. In contrast to orthodox Marxists, Gramsci (1971) did not see class consciousness automatically deriving from working-class experience, nor did he blame ‘false consciousness’ for workers failing to identify with their own class interests. Gramsci, rather, saw identity, and collective identity in particular, as the political work of articulating individuals into alliances and collective social movements.

For Li, Gramscian-inspired ideas of articulation help explain subject formation in relations of green governance as a contentious political practice in ways that do not take the disciplinary work of eco-governmentality as a fait accompli. Articulation as a practice of collective identity formation has two related meanings: first, to coherently express a feeling or ideology; and, second, linking that particular ideology to an engaged group of people (Hall 1996; Li 2000). Thus, the political practice of articulation defines identity as ‘a positioning that draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes, and repertoires of meanings’ that emerge through ‘particular patterns of engagement and struggle’ (Li 2000, 151, emphasis original). Thinking about identity formation as situated, political and contingent practices of articulation foregrounds how collective subjects emerge through conflict in which people, like community concessionaires, demand rights and resources based on their shared histories and livelihoods, and, at the same time, redefine themselves.

Following the creation of the MBR, residents came together to express their demands to land and livelihood in the forests they call home, and then linked that demand to a
collectivity, ACOFOP, forming a social force. Residents were incorporated into emerging UNESCO structures of green governance only after demanding the restoration of lost usufruct rights and new land tenure rights in the form of forest concessions. In doing so, residents forged a new political positioning, an individual and collective rights-bearing subject, the community forest concessionaire. When residents fought to reverse the Mirador Basin green land grab, something unexpected happened. As Marta from Carmelita explained,

ACOFOP brought people together from across all the different cooperatives. The good part of ACOFOP is that if something affects Carmelita, Melchor [another cooperative] is united. We felt we had the support of all the concessions. It didn’t matter if they were directly affected or not. It was the concessions process that mattered. ACOFOP played a positive political role and invested more than two million quetzals in the legal battle.

For many residents, the fight for the Mirador Basin led by ACOFOP legitimized the concessionaire as a rights-bearing political subject and consolidated ACOFOP as an infantile organization. Through their land struggle, concessionaires transformed themselves from a loose-knit amalgamation of residents wading through the bureaucracy and new order of the MBR into powerful actors participating in policy formation and reserve governance. Subsequently, global conservationists and state officials have struggled to discipline and circumscribe the growing power of community forest concessionaires.

The 2005 reversal of the Mirador Basin green grab is but one moment of time in a much longer history of reserve residents’ struggles against land grabbing in northern Guatemala’s forests. The very creation of the Maya Biosphere Reserve in 1990 was a green grab defined by practices of enclosure and resident land dispossession. In many ways, the genesis of the forest concessionaire identity that residents successfully leveraged and politicized in 2005 resembles what other scholars identify as practices of ‘incorporation’ (Larder 2015) or ‘acquiescence’ (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2015; Moreda 2015) into relations of green governance, because this subject position and community forestry depend on the legitimacy of the Maya Biosphere – its boundaries, land uses and governance structures. As Hall et al. (2015) and their collection contributors suggest (Alonso-Fradejas 2015), recognizing these entanglements does not, however, mean that incorporation and acquiescence equate with practices of disciplinary power circumscribing subject production and social movements. Gramsci’s (1971) analysis of hegemony reminds us that practices of incorporation and acquiescence are not simply practices of consent, but are also potentially practices of contestation creating radical possibilities for transformative politics.

At the same time, residents’ 2005 Mirador Basin victory may be impermanent and is constantly under threat. As such, it may seem premature to call the 2005 moment a reversal. Each new president, including the current Jimmy Morales administration, identifies a newly titled, yet altogether too familiar plan for Mirador and Maya Biosphere tourism development that threatens community forestry. Nonetheless, more than a decade out, the contested lands remain under forest concession management. Furthermore, the green grab reversal has left a permanent, indelible mark on the political identities and memories of reserve residents, which they will draw on as a resource in future land struggles.

**Conclusion**

The physical and legal existence of the Mirador Basin in northern Guatemala’s Maya Biosphere Reserve is under heated debate. Mirador scientists, philanthropists and advocates marshal controversial evidence to argue that the Mirador Basin geographically and
culturally reflects an integrated system and distinguished topography of an ancient Maya civilization. These scientific claims transformed into a territorial vision of expanding extant national park boundaries around the site into areas currently defined as sustainable forest concessions, and restricting land use in the basin to scientific and tourism activities only. Despite ongoing debate regarding the basin’s scientific existence, in 2002 Guatemalan President Portillo issued Presidential Decree 129-2002 that defined the ‘Mirador Basin’ as a ‘Special Archeological Zone’.

Maya Biosphere Reserve residents identified the creation of the Mirador Basin and their resulting lost land tenure rights as a green land grab, an act of appropriation, enclosure and land dispossession that threatened their rights to sustainably harvest timber and other forest products in the reserve’s community forest concessions. The basin’s creation reduced Carmelita’s community concession by 60 percent and Uaxactún’s concession by almost 15 percent. Residents living in unaffected community concessions felt the green grab threatened the integrity of the system a whole, and concessionaires organized in response. Members of ACOFOP, the umbrella organization for Maya Biosphere community forestry concessions, articulated a political front in opposition to the Mirador Basin green grab. Following a protracted, three-year legal battle, ACOFOP and its allies achieved a remarkable reversal of the green grab when subsequent President Berger overturned Decree 129 that had legally produced a green, allegedly pristine space out of a working forest landscape.

Today, villagers in Carmelita and Uaxactún suggest the threat of land dispossession encroaches from many angles. In the last decade, the Guatemalan military has evicted several communities from the MBR because residents purportedly failed to comply with their forest concession contracts, illegally sold their land to cattle ranchers laundering narco-capital or mismanaged their timber cooperatives, among other offenses. In contrast, the villages of Carmelita and Uaxactún are often heralded as success stories of community forestry. Nevertheless, residents feel that conservation and tourism development efforts surrounding Mirador threaten their land rights as residents and forest concessionaires. Residents’ fears about land dispossession in the present reflect broader national landscapes of agrarian and environmental struggle, and are deeply rooted in the living legacies of agrarian inequality and civil war violence from the past.

In contrast to Anglo-Foucaultian emphasis on the ways disciplinary power shapes the production of green, neo-liberal subjects in practices of eco-governmentality, Guatemalan community forestry illustrates the formation of recalcitrant and unpredictable subjects in hybrid, multi-sector relations of green governance. Following the biosphere’s formation in the 1990, reserve residents redefined themselves as community forest concessionaires as a means to defend their rights to land and livelihood. In doing so, they have appropriated Maya Biosphere conservation efforts to create one of the world’s largest community forest systems and a powerful platform of transformative change. The political articulation of the identity of community forest concessionaire as a rights-bearing subject has been central to the establishment and defense of this land tenure system. As community forest concessionaires, Maya Biosphere residents are participating in the re-territorialization of contemporary power in northern Petén’s structures of green governance, albeit not always under conditions of their own choosing.

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