

DRUG TRAFFICKING'S IMPACTS
ON THE INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS OF LA MOSQUITIA, HONDURAS

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ABSTRACT

The negative impacts of drug trafficking on regional security in Central America are well documented. However, the effects that drug trafficking has on indigenous communities and livelihoods are less understood. Drawing on the case of the Mosquitia region of Honduras, this research contributes to the gap in the scholarly and policy literature by answering: What are the impacts of drug trafficking on the indigenous populations of La Mosquitia? Analyzing secondary data on forest loss in Central America, a media database on narco-trafficking in Honduras, and two in-depth interviews from a Miskitu and Tawahka leader, this thesis argues that narco-deforestation caused by drug trafficking organizations negatively and disproportionately impacts indigenous communities residing in the Honduran Mosquitia. Furthermore, this deforestation is driving indigenous land dispossession, food insecurity, and threatens the very existence of indigenous peoples and their cultures.

I. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Narco-trafficking is driving deforestation in Honduras' Mosquitia region that is home to 18% of the country's indigenous population, yet little information exists about how drug trafficking is impacting these indigenous populations.¹ This research contributes to this lack of knowledge by answering the following question: how is drug trafficking impacting indigenous people living in La Mosquitia? To answer this question, I analyze secondary data of anomalous, suspected narco-driven deforestation in Central America, media content related drug trafficking in La Mosquitia, and two interviews with indigenous leaders.

The past of indigenous populations is plagued with injustice and violence from colonial powers or corporations seeking to take their land and extract resources. Indigenous communities have had to suffer through slavery, war, torture, and even genocide.² Drug trafficking is another one of these injustices that continues to destroy the forests and the resources of Honduras' indigenous Pech, Garífuna, Tawahka, and Miskitu communities who rely on La Mosquitia to maintain their culture and livelihoods.

Drawing on secondary analysis of anomalous deforestation that researchers suspect is narco-driven, a media analysis of narco-activities in La Mosquitia, and two in-depth interviews with indigenous leaders, this thesis argues that the majority of deforestation in La Mosquitia is driven by narco-trafficking, and this narco-deforestation negatively

¹ Forests of the World. "Honduras." forestssoftheworld.org

² Bellier, Irene. 2005. "The Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the World Indigenous Movement." *Griffith Law Review* 14, no. 2: 227.

impacts the indigenous communities living in La Mosquitia. Specifically, I argue that narco-deforestation and the violence associated with drug trafficking organizations is dispossessing indigenous people of their access to cultural resources. In addition, they are dispossessed of their land, culture, and a way of life which threatens their very existence as indigenous communities.

This research will draw on and contribute to the existing scholarship on indigenous communities in Honduras and literature on the Central American drug trade. More importantly, it draws attention to the historical land dispossession that these groups have endured since the arrival of the Spanish through to the creation of the modern state of Honduras and illustrates that the 2009 coup in Honduras enabled the explosion of trafficking activities in La Mosquitia. Although organized crime creates an immense challenge for these indigenous communities, I argue that secure land tenure offers a way to combat the multiple forms of dispossession occurring in La Mosquitia.

II. BACKGROUND

This background section focuses on the history of the Honduran drug trade and explains why the 2009 coup dramatically increased the flow of cocaine through the Honduran Mosquitia, which is home to a majority of the country's indigenous population. The history of the Honduran drug trade shows the factors that turned Honduras, along with La Mosquitia region, into such a hotspot in for the drug trade. In addition, this background section covers the coup of 2009 that significantly altered the route cocaine followed throughout Latin America and turned La Mosquitia into ground zero for drug trafficking.

History of Drug Trafficking in Honduras

The 1970s provide some of the earliest accounts of the Honduran drug trade attached to drug cartel kingpin Juan Ramon Matta Ballesteros. It is important to mention Matta Ballesteros because, for almost two decades, he served as the middle man between several Mexican and Colombian cartels and singlehandedly brought attention to Honduras' drug-trade favoring factors.³ In 1978, Matta Ballesteros funded the coup that brought General Policarpio Paz Garcia to power and thereafter, worked with the military to guarantee the undisturbed transportation of cocaine through the country.⁴ By the 1980s, Matta Ballesteros had amassed an immense fortune that posed a problem for him in regard to backflow management. So, he invested his money in aviation and agro-industrial industries. Along with this, his company, Matta Investments, which employed

³ Bunck, Julie Marie and Michael Ross Fowler. 2012. *Bribes, Bullets and Intimidation : Drug Trafficking and the Law in Central America*. University Park: Penn State University Press.

⁴ Ibid, 273.

up to 5,000 Hondurans, helped him gain support throughout the country's society and offered an opportunity for the laundering of drug money.⁵ Additionally, this helped Matta Ballesteros foster ties with the government. His most prominent allies being legislative deputy Felix Cerna Salgado and finance minister Reginald Panting.⁶ Panting even stated that Honduras would happily take the money Matta Ballesteros gained from drug trafficking and that it "would be welcomed in our country because it would help us improve our balance of payments... If the gentleman wishes to set up gasoline stations here, I with pleasure will sell him mine".⁷ This deep involvement with the government and the military characterized the Matta Ballesteros era and planted the seeds for the current theme of corruption seen today throughout Honduran state institutions.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Matta Ballesteros was able to escape prosecution repeatedly due to these close ties to the military and the government. It wasn't until early 1989 when US officials were finally able to capture Matta Ballesteros and convict him to four life sentences.⁸ Although Honduras' most prominent drug kingpin was gone, trafficking remained a problem.

Arms-for-drugs deals by smaller groups with fewer individuals have characterized the post-Matta era and cocaine transshipment ventures remain largely unchanged.

Through the 1990s, cocaine trafficking surged in Honduras.⁹ Honduran authorities noted several hidden airstrips in the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve but took up no action.¹⁰

Sea, overland, and air routes have increased in usage and now people along these routes

⁵ Ibid, 276.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 283.

⁹ Ibid, 286.

¹⁰ Ibid, 290.

have become implicated in trafficking whether it is something as small as performing mechanical service on a plane or something as large as helping to hide and store narcotics.¹¹

Honduras' geographical location, like the other "bridge countries" of Central America has been ideal for drug traffickers (such as Matta Ballesteros mentioned previously), who realize its potential as a cocaine trans-shipment node between Colombia, Mexico and ultimately the United States and Canada. The country's long Caribbean coast, mountainous terrain, sparse population, and virtually uninhabited and unpoliced jungles serve to make Honduras an important stop for drugs on their way to the illegal markets of the US and Europe.¹² Bunck (2012) states, "From a very early date drug rings have found transshipment operations through Honduras to operate so smoothly that knowledgeable observers have come to call the country a 'trafficker's paradise'.¹³ No other location is more perfect for the clandestine operations of the illegal drug trade than the northeastern Caribbean coast of Honduras, otherwise known as La Mosquitia. With few settlements and even fewer roads, drugs are easily brought in by the air or sea with little resistance from authorities. In 2000, the DEA reported that Colombian traffickers were even hiring Miskito people to transport cocaine shipments along rivers and between islands.¹⁴ Garifuna villages have also become hotspots for speedboat drug trafficking and the Islas de la Bahia, home to Pech villages, have also become involved.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid, 297.

¹² Ibid, 257.

¹³ Ibid, 256.

¹⁴ Ibid, 257.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Along with Honduras' geographical attributes, poverty and the heavy role of the military in Honduran society have created an environment that allows drug traffickers to thrive.¹⁶ In this system, the northeastern side of Honduras, characterized by La Mosquitia, has sustained the most damage. The remoteness of La Mosquitia was once a blessing to indigenous groups that allowed them to live off the land, but in recent decades, has become a curse due to drug trafficking organizations that seek to take advantage of its location.

Figure 1: Map of the departments of Honduras



Mapadehonduras.com. "División Políticas de Honduras" April 19.

¹⁶ Ibid, 258.

The 2009 Coup and Cocaine

Literature on drug trafficking in Honduras is hardly without mention of the coup of 2009 that ousted President Manuel Zelaya. In 2008, Zelaya began to push for a referendum to rewrite the Honduran constitution. He claimed that it was essential to rewrite the “outdated” constitution to make it fit the people.¹⁷ Zelaya’s opponents argued this was an attempt to change the constitution to allow him more power and reelection.¹⁸ On the day of the referendum, the military placed Zelaya on a plane and forced him into exile in Costa Rica. This action was condemned by almost the entirety of the Western Hemisphere and many countries cut political, military, and economic ties with Honduras.¹⁹

Many researchers see the 2009 coup as a pivotal moment in Honduras’ history for understanding the drug trafficking crisis and how it came to flourish after Zelaya’s coup.²⁰ The most prevalent themes observed in literature that explain this increased flow of cocaine to the region are the political instability created by the coup and the investment that followed.²¹ Primarily, there is a strong correlation between weak governance and the expansion of transnational crime.²² Although Zelaya’s removal may not have been directly caused by organized crime, this did play a destabilizing role in the

¹⁷ Bosworth, James. 2010. “Organized crime gaining amid political crisis”. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

¹⁸ Ibid, 21.

¹⁹ Ibid, 22.

²⁰ Bosworth, James. 2010., Kolb, Ana-Constantina. 2012, Noriega, Roger F. and Jose Javier Lanza. 2013

²¹ Bosworth, James. 2010., Kolb, Ana-Constantina. 2012, McSweeney, Kendra and Z. Pearson. 2013. Noriega, Roger F. and Jose Javier Lanza. 2013.

²² Bosworth, James. 2010., Kolb, Ana-Constantina. 2012, Noriega, Roger F. and Jose Javier Lanza. 2013.

government.²³ The focus of the Honduran government became the legitimization of the new administration and a counterdrug chief in Honduras even stated at that time “the Micheletti government didn’t even have a strategy to fight organized crime.”²⁴ In this weakened state, traffickers could now easily corrupt local government officials and the military in Honduras.²⁵ After Roberto Micheletti’s installment as interim president, it was noted that the transport of drugs increased exponentially following the 2009 coup.²⁶ One official reported that under Micheletti’s term, planes were landing more carefully and taking off again to make second or third trips instead of being abandoned because traffickers were certain they would not be caught by Honduran authorities.²⁷ Additionally, domestic resources to investigate crimes under Micheletti were pulled to repress political protests in Tegucigalpa and to guard the border in case of a possible Zelaya return.²⁸ This left a vacuum of power in the highest levels of the government which some researchers credit to driving the trafficking of drugs in Honduras. Kolb (2012) states, “Although there are voices claiming that organized crime played a significant role in toppling the Zelaya administration, what criminal groups benefited from the most was the vacuum created by the political instability, not the rule of a specific president”.²⁹ On the other hand, there are those that oppose this idea like Noriega

²³ Bosworth, James. 2010. “Organized crime gaining amid political crisis”. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

²⁴ Ibid, 23.

²⁵ Ibid, 24.

²⁶ Kolb, Ana-Constantina. 2012. "Outgunned: the Honduran Fight Against Transnational Cocaine Traffickers." *Journal of International Affairs*, no. 1: 213.

²⁷ Bosworth, James. 2010. “Organized crime gaining amid political crisis”. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

²⁸ Ibid, 22.

²⁹ Kolb, Ana-Constantina. 2012. "Outgunned: the Honduran Fight Against Transnational Cocaine Traffickers " *Journal of International Affairs*, no. 1: 213.

(2013) that state, “Ascribing the current Honduran security crisis to ‘post-coup’ political repression is a flagrant distortion of reality... In short, the unfortunate reality for Honduras is that the country’s law enforcement and judicial institutions are no match for transnational criminal organization and the vast resources at their disposal”.³⁰ Although, the “vacuum of power” idea is debated, it is undeniable that political instability within the country’s institutions allowed cocaine trafficking to thrive.

Because of the coup, which was condemned by most of the western hemisphere, Honduras became isolated and political and economic pressure that was meant to be placed on the interim government resulted in a retraction of resources that, in the past, aided the fight against organized crime.³¹ Along with cutting off joint military activity, the United States cut \$32.7 million in assistance to Honduras which included \$11 million that was for security assistance, as a result of the coup.³² The coup also led to the cutoff of information and cooperation sharing on drug trafficker movements from not only the U.S., but also from neighboring countries.³³ Ultimately, newly elected President Porfirio Lobo Sosa met with U.S. officials in October 2011 to reinstate aid and logistical support from U.S. military forces based in Honduras.³⁴ This aid was to be retracted and then reinstated once more. During the period that radar service was pulled by the U.S, an 89%

³⁰ Noriega, Roger F. and Jose Javier Lanza. 2013. "Honduras Under Siege." *AEI Outlook Series*: 19.

³¹ Bosworth, James. 2010. “Organized crime gaining amid political crisis”. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

³² *Ibid*, 23.

³³ *Ibid*.

³⁴ Noriega, Roger F. and Jose Javier Lanza. 2013. "Honduras Under Siege." *AEI Outlook Series*: 19.

increase in Honduran airspace violation by a drug aircraft occurred.³⁵ Honduras' public interest official stated, "The United States is telling us... that Honduras is open for drug trafficking. We cannot remain in this miserable situation, where we are begging the world's biggest drug consumer to give us a radar".³⁶ Honduran airspace remained unmonitored for 97 days until aid was reinstated and an average of two drug flights a day landed on Honduras' Caribbean coast.³⁷ The yo-yoing of aid to Honduras on the part of the United States that was caused after the coup contributed to the rise of drug smuggling in Honduras because it was difficult for the state to monitor narco-activity without these resources provided by the U.S.³⁸

The political instability caused by the coup allowed cartels to infiltrate most levels of the government, especially local and municipal governments.³⁹ This infiltration after the coup incited a "second coup" characterized by the deeper economic agenda of traffickers, transnational investors, and Honduran elites who had almost free rein to utilize the state as they chose.⁴⁰ Cartels were known to invest in public works and services that the state could not.⁴¹ Kolb (2012) states that this has led some communities on Honduras' Caribbean coast to switch allegiance from the state to the drug trafficking organization and attracted "willing" helpers since the drug business can exceedingly

³⁵ Ibid, 5.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Kolb, Ana-Constantina. 2012. "Outgunned: the Honduran Fight Against Transnational Cocaine Traffickers." *Journal of International Affairs*, no. 1: 213.

⁴⁰ Busch, Michael. 2012. "Honduras Coup Delivering a Bloody Return on Washington's Military Investment." *Foreign Policy in Focus*

⁴¹ Kolb, Ana-Constantina. 2012. "Outgunned: the Honduran Fight Against Transnational Cocaine Traffickers." *Journal of International Affairs*, no. 1: 213

outspend the Honduran state.⁴² Later, this paper will address that, most often, switching allegiances does not occur willingly and many locals have no choice but to help traffickers due to debt or narco-violence. In many cases, it is not a matter of allegiance or an option. Locals must think about their own survival and doing what is best to ensure that survival given their situation.

For transnational investors and the Honduran elite, the top priority was privatization of basic state functions.⁴³ Laws are moving through congress that privatize things like the country's electrical systems, water systems, ports, and even the entire country's schools.⁴⁴ Additionally, in 2011, the Honduran National Congress passed a constitutional amendment that allows the creation of zones for economic development and employment (ZEDEs), or "charter cities".⁴⁵ After the coup, newly elected president Porfirio Lobo Sosa faced a 60% poverty rate throughout the country upon taking office.⁴⁶ These new zones would be quasi-sovereign and built on Honduran soil by foreign investors in an attempt to quell the poverty rate.⁴⁷ It has been revealed that the government is considering development in the indigenous areas of northern Honduras (including La Mosquitia) where land disputes (addressed in the literature review) have

⁴² Ibid, 215.

⁴³ Busch, Michael. 2012. "Honduras Coup Delivering a Bloody Return on Washington's Military Investment." *Foreign Policy in Focus*

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Kroth, Maya. 2014. "The coast of Honduras could be the site of a radical experiment: one in which foreign investors bankroll a quasi-sovereign city. Backers say it will lift the region out of poverty--but residents are anything but convinced. Under new management." *Foreign Policy*

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

had a long and bloody history.⁴⁸ Because of these new economic ventures by the Honduran government, traffickers partake in preparing the land for foreign investors, and even foreign transnational crime leaders who pose as investors that seek to invest in La Mosquitia to cover drug profits.⁴⁹ In addition to posing a neocolonialist threat in which multinational corporations and cartels will rule over Honduran indigenous territory, this investment that opened up as a result of the coup leads to deforestation that incites and adds on to the multiple forms of dispossession demonstrated in post 2009 activities in La Mosquitia. The literature section will next explore how these activities are the latest chapter in ongoing and historical indigenous dispossession.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ McSweeney, Kendra and Z. Pearson. 2013. "Prying Native People from Native Lands: Narco Business in Honduras." *NACLA Report on the Americas* 46, no. 4: 7-12.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical and Ongoing Land Dispossession

This work draws on and contributes to three bodies of literature. The first theme that will be covered is historic and ongoing land dispossession in La Mosquitia. Existing scholarship on dispossession has not paid attention to drug trafficking as a driver of land dispossession. To define dispossession, I will use Devine and Ojeda's (2017) definition which states that dispossession does not necessarily mean the removal of land or the dislocation of a people. Dispossession is "any socio-spatial reconfiguration" that affects a people's decision on their livelihoods or the choices they have in regards to a form of life.⁵⁰ Devine and Ojeda state that dispossession, "...is related as well to the loss in local communities' autonomy. Dispossession here flags the practice of being dispossessed of an object, a cultural artifact or practice, or a land use, but dispossession also signifies being dispossessed of the right to one's own heritage, history and recognized presence in space".⁵¹

Land dispossession has plagued the Pech, Tawahka, Garifuna, and Miskitu since the arrival of the Spanish and the beginning of the colonial era to the present. In 1544, 20 years after the conquest of Honduras began, the Spanish were able to obtain control over the area that can be identified currently as lying between Puerto Cortés and Comayagua. By 1700, sections of the departments of Atlántida, Yoro, northern Olancho, El Paraíso,

⁵⁰ Devine, J. and Diana Ojeda. 2017. "Violence and dispossession in tourism development: A critical geographical approach." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. 25:5, 605-617.

⁵¹ Ibid, 609.

Colón, and the entirety of the department of Gracias a Dios were still out of reach for the Spanish.⁵² Integration of this area was considered difficult due to climatic and topographical factors of the region.⁵³ The social organization and semi-nomadic lifestyle of the indigenous groups that lacked a central authority also provided an obstacle to incorporation.⁵⁴ From the second half of the 19th century, after the creation of the Honduran nation-state, the indigenous population in sections of the departments of Atlántida and Yoro began to lose dominion over their land and started becoming a part of the national economy.⁵⁵

Upon the arrival of the Truxillo Railroad Company during the late 19th century, the indigenous Pech, or Payas, as they are sometimes referred, were stripped of their land in the regions of Tela, Río Sico, and Río Paulaya through concessions given to ladino settlers and foreigners by the central government.⁵⁶ Many Pech fled to the interior of Honduras while others stayed to work temporarily for the new railroad and agriculture businesses that came in.⁵⁷ For these businesses, the indigenous workforce was not enough. They took full advantage of their right to import foreign workers and did so from El Salvador, Belize, the Caribbean Islands, and even Europe and Asia. The removal of their lands was further worsened by the fact that each legal foreign worker was entitled up to seven “*caballerías*” of land. The Honduran government also offered a faster route

⁵² Vargas, J. C. 2006. “Etno-demografía de la etnia pech, Honduras.” *Poblacion y Salud en Mesoamerica, Vol 3, Iss 2, p 5 (2006) 5.*

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

to citizenship for foreign workers who settled on indigenous land.⁵⁸ Currently, the Pech number up to about 6,024 members.⁵⁹

Today, the Tawahka community (the smallest of the four groups numbering at just over 2,600) reside in the Tawahka Asangi Biosphere Reserve.⁶⁰ Like the Pech, many of the Tawahka fled their native land during the 20th century due to harassment from authorities and those seeking gold in the region.⁶¹ For decades, the Tawahka have had to defend themselves against attempts at land removal by Spanish-speaking ladino settlers. During the late 1980s, the Tawahka declared the rights to their land which led to the ratification of the Tawahka Asangi Biosphere Reserve ten years later. As of 1998, the Tawahka settled in five permanent communities near the central portion of the Río Patuca on the Tawahka Asangi Reserve.⁶²

In April of 1797, some 1,600 Garifuna, who were deported inhabitants of Saint Vincent, arrived at Port Royal, Roatán in the hands of the English.⁶³ Since then, the Garifuna, whose total population is at 43,111, have inhabited the northeastern coast of Honduras.⁶⁴ During the 19th century, the Liberal Reform of Honduras inspired the Garifuna to create communal lands, but this movement was upended in the 20th century

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Forests of the World. "Honduras." forests-of-the-world.org

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ McSweeney, Kendra. 2002. "A Demographic Profile of the Tawahka Amerindians of Honduras". *Geographical Review* 398.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Cuisset, Olivier. 2014. "Del campo a la ciudad y vice-versa: Elementos para la historia del movimiento Garifuna en Honduras". *Estudios y Pesquisas sobre las Americas*. Vol. 3 n1.

⁶⁴ Forests of the World. "Honduras." forests-of-the-world.org

with the expansion of banana companies.⁶⁵ After the United Fruit Company Strike of 1954, territorial pressures increased for the Garifuna due to agro-export and cattle ranching developments.⁶⁶ These enterprises pushed peasants to the coast who viewed the area as the “pioneer front” of agrarian reform.⁶⁷ In 1998, the Garifuna fought to gain title to their land and succeeded, but the last three decades have seen an expansion of tourism that demands valuable beachfront property and creates motivation for land invasion and intimidation coupled with bribery and sometimes even violence.⁶⁸

In the 1640s, West African slaves landed on the coast of the current department of Gracias a Dios and quickly settled among the native inhabitants. The descendants of these two people groups, now known as the Miskito, kept a close relationship to the British and resisted Spanish attempts at integration into the Honduran colonial state. While other Sumu indigenous groups of the eastern Honduran coast and Nicaragua retreated from the British, the Miskito welcomed them with their very own Sumu goods and food. In return, the British gave the Miskito weapons that allowed them to claim dominance over their neighbors. The Miskito thrived off their economic relationship with the British and even intermarried with them.⁶⁹ Historical factors such as these are reasons why the Miskito are the most populous of the four indigenous groups discussed here with a population of

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Cuisset, Olivier. 2014. “Del campo a la ciudad y vice-versa: Elementos para la historia del movimiento Garifuna en Honduras”. *Estudios y Pesquisas sobre las Americas*. Vol. 3 n1.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 98.

⁶⁸ Thorne, Eva T. 2004. "Land Rights and Garifuna Identity." *NACLA Report on the Americas* 38, no. 2.

⁶⁹ Mendiola, Daniel. 2017. “The rise of the Mosquito Kingdom in Central America’s Caribbean borderlands: sources, questions, and enduring myths.” *Wiley Online Library*.

about 80,000.⁷⁰ Yet, like the Pech, Tawakha, and Garifuna, the Miskitu have historically faced the threat of land dispossession from logging firms and mining companies that seek to extract resources from Honduras' last frontier.⁷¹

More recently, big businesses helped to fuel this phenomenon by promoting the migration of landless citizens from the interior and foreign workers to the remote northeastern region of Honduras, but existing scholarship has not paid attention to drug trafficking as a driver of this dispossession. The issue of current dispossession has links to the protected areas system and current debates over the efficacy of communal land holdings explored in the second body of literature.

Indigenous Territories and the Creation of the Protected Areas System

In addition to contributing to literature on indigenous dispossession, this work draws upon and contributes to research on indigenous territories in protected areas. In the 1990s, facing pressure from national and international organizations, Honduras began an ambitious conservation program. Under *La Ley General del Ambiente, Decreto 104-93*, Honduras established the National System of Protected Areas in 1993.⁷² This system divides areas under the categories of either declared or proposed. Investment from the World Bank in Honduras' Project for Environmental Development in 1995 resulted in the Secretariat of Natural Resources and the Environment, known by its Spanish acronym as SERNA, and the General Directorate of Biodiversity, known as DIBIO.⁷³ While SERNA

⁷⁰ Sletto, Bjorn. 1999. "New Partners on Shifting Shores." *Organization of American States*.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷² House, Paul R. 2002. "Racionalizacion del sistema nacional de las areas protegidas de Honduras Volumen I: Estudio principal."

⁷³ *Ibid.*

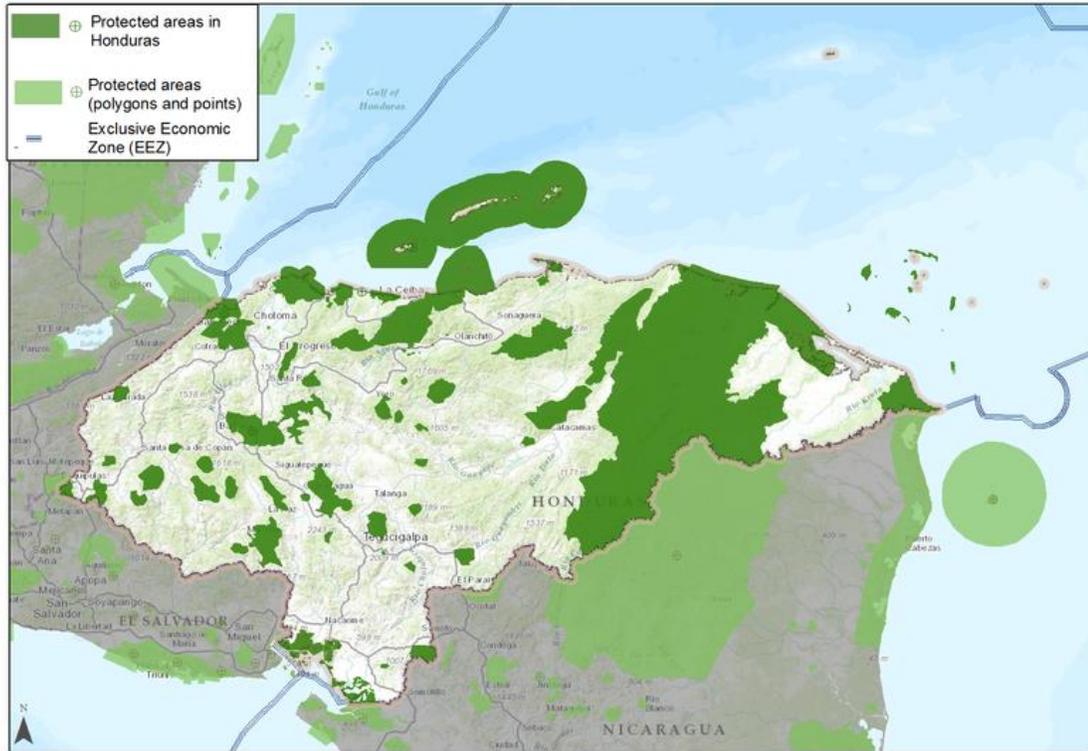
was established to manage natural resources and the environment, DIBIO became the specialized institution within SERNA that oversaw the conservation of biodiversity.⁷⁴ These two institutions work together to propose laws to the National Congress on protected areas. That same year, the Law of Forests was created which placed the administration of the protected areas under AFE-COHDEFOR (*Administración Forestal del Estado/ Corporación Hondureña de Desarrollo Forestal*). Currently, there are 75 legally established protected areas that total to about two million hectares.⁷⁵ In 2001, the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, or ENBRA, was created to establish the rules and actions that needed to be taken to conserve biodiversity in Honduras for the next ten years.⁷⁶ The largest protected areas stemming out of these organizations are the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, the Tawahka Asangi National Reservation, and the Patuca National Park.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

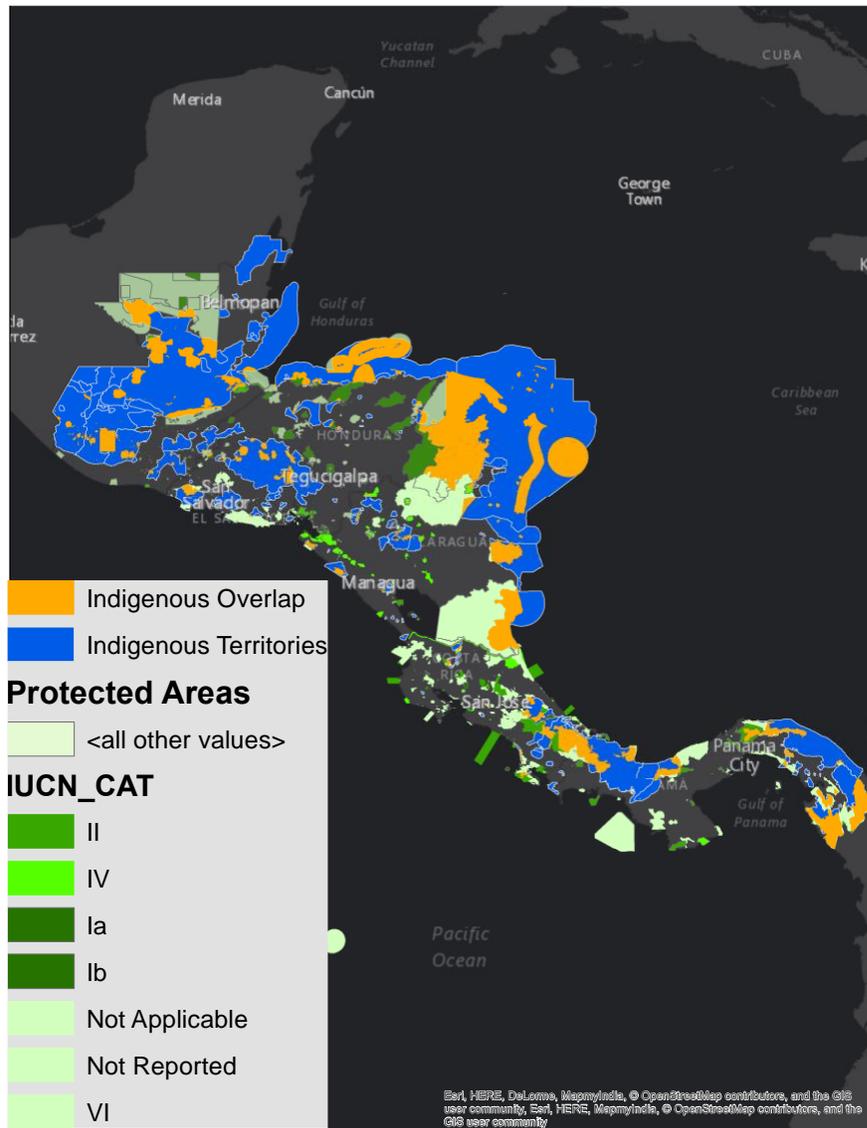
⁷⁶ Ibid.

Figure 2: Map of Honduras' Protected Areas



Biodiversity A-Z. "Protected Areas of Honduras." April 19. biodiversity-a-z.org.

Figure 3: Indigenous Territory and Protected Area Overlap



Sesnie et. al (2017)

The creation of the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve in 1980 includes most of the Miskitu lands and has given the Miskitu hope that they can protect their cultural autonomy.⁷⁷ The Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve was created in 1980 in accordance to UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Program.⁷⁸ Serving as the largest protected area in Honduras, the reserve is nestled between the departments of Gracias a Dios, Colón, and Olancho and overlaps La Mosquitia. In 1980, the population of the reserve was approximately 500 and consisted of mainly indigenous groups. By 1999, there were 40,000 residents with the largest group being the ladino.⁷⁹ Along with the encroachment of companies that sought to extract resources from La Mosquitia, ladino migrations posed a threat to indigenous culture that depends so heavily on the sustained environmental health of the region.

The creation of the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve offered indigenous communities hope that they may be able to sustain the region's environmental health and combat the increasing exploitation of their land by becoming the government's partner in conservation. Donaldo Allen, a Miskitu teacher and political leader in the village of Belen stated, "The Honduran government does not have the resources to protect this reserve alone, so it needs our help. This is a great opportunity for the Miskito people. This project allows us to protect our land, but also to protect our culture. Without our land, we are nothing".⁸⁰ With financial support by the German government and backing

⁷⁷ Sletto, Bjorn. 1999. "New Partners on Shifting Shores." *Organization of American States*.

⁷⁸ Friedle, C.M. "Forest Resource Use, Land-Use, and Ecotourism in the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, Honduras."

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Sletto, Bjorn. 1999. "New Partners on Shifting Shores." *Organization of American States*.

from the US Wildlife Conservation Society, COHDEFOR administers zoning projects on the reserve to protect the subsistence hunting and gardening needs of the indigenous populations. Although this means fewer hunting areas, the indigenous population believes that more effective reserve management will keep Ladino settlers out while preserving their culture and creating economic growth.⁸¹

Unfortunately, since 2006 the Honduran government has failed to control illegal logging in the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve.⁸² While the reserve was born of a progressive social forestry concept, actors within the government and AFE-COHDEFOR have found a way to manipulate the system and legalize abandoned timber.⁸³ Illegal logging causes a loss to the potential of community forestry which in turn increases the likelihood of converting to ranching or agriculture as the next best land use option.⁸⁴ Furthermore, it was reported that in 2003 and 2004, over 11,000 meters of timber was illegally extracted from the protected area of the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve resulting in about \$3 million in unpaid state taxes.⁸⁵

Environmental conservation and territorial rights are indeed a major concern for the indigenous populations residing in Honduras' protected areas. The Pech, Tawahka, Garifuna, and Miskito groups have had to fight endlessly for the rights of the lands that constitute their livelihoods. The creation of the National System for Protected Areas offered some hope towards cultural autonomy, but nevertheless, illegal practices, such as

⁸¹ Ibid, 36.

⁸² Global Witness. 2009. "Tackling political corruption to combat illegal logging: A farce in three acts."

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

those just mentioned have found their way into these areas and endangered the indigenous identity once more, and none more so dangerous than the trafficking of illegal narcotics

Narco-deforestation in Central America

The third theme examined in this literature review is that of narco-deforestation. The term narco-deforestation was first coined in the magazine *Science* and is defined as the acceleration of forest-loss due to drug trafficking.⁸⁶ McSweeney is part of a research team that aims to quantify narco-trafficking's impact on forest-loss at the Central American scale. She and her team estimate that 30 to 60% of forest loss in Central America from cocaine trafficking occurs in protected areas.⁸⁷ In addition to this, Sesnie et al. (2017), McSweeney (n.d.) and Devine et. al (n.d.) illustrate that the need to launder money by traffickers leads to forests being turning into pastures for cattle ranching.⁸⁸ Cattle ranching has long been a primary source of deforestation in Central America, but now cattle ranching has been narco-capitalized. Essentially, this is cattle ranching on drugs.

This research in Honduras shows high levels of deforestation in the departments of Olancho, Colón, and Gracias a Dios, which are the three departments that hold the Mosquitia region, home to Honduras' largest protected area and indigenous lands, the Río

⁸⁶ McSweeney, Kendra, et al. 2014. "Conservation. Drug policy as conservation policy: narco-deforestation." *Science (New York, N.Y.)* 343, no. 6170: 489-490

⁸⁷ Sesnie, Steven E., et al. 2017. "A spatio-temporal analysis of forest loss related to cocaine trafficking in Central America." *Environmental Research Letters* 12, no. 5.

⁸⁸ Devine et. al (n.d.), McSweeney (n.d.), Sesnie, Steven E., et al. 2017

Plátano Biosphere Reserve.⁸⁹ In “The Impact of Drug Policy on the Environment,” McSweeney makes the argument that successful eradication campaigns will only push traffickers into new and sometimes more biodiverse areas.⁹⁰ These impacts help explain Sesnie et al.’s (2017) findings of high deforestation levels in the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve of the Mosquitia region.

This literature on narco-deforestation illustrates that it is difficult to separate deforestation from the rights of indigenous people and their role in the preservation of these protected areas. McSweeney (n.d.) addresses how drug policies can work in opposition to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People because drug prohibitions can stand in the way of how indigenous populations use their land which violates the declaration.⁹¹ She states that the eradication of drug fields by the UN and its organizations cause a “special infinity” for new, potential cultivation areas.⁹²

This is not the first time policies from the global north have negatively impacted the forests of Central America. Gareau (2007) explains that the action of classifying an area as protected can have the opposite effect on resources.⁹³ Gareau outlines that the management of protected areas by outside actors, who may not have the same goals as locals, leads to the globalization of protected areas that can threaten their equilibrium. He

⁸⁹ Sesnie, Steven E., et al. 2017. "A spatio-temporal analysis of forest loss related to cocaine trafficking in Central America." *Environmental Research Letters* 12, no. 5.

⁹⁰ McSweeney, Kendra. (n.d). “The impact of drug policy on the environment.” *Open Society Foundations*.

⁹¹ McSweeney, Kendra. (n.d). “The impact of drug policy on the environment.” *Open Society Foundations*.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Gareau, Brian J. 2007. “Ecological values amid local interests: Natural resource conservation, social differentiation, and human survival in Honduras.” *Rural Sociology*.

states, “Communities located in protected areas could not survive while maintaining an ecological value sphere of preservationism” and that this is purely a “First World” protectionist concept.⁹⁴ This fetishized perception of nature that drives world-wide environmentalism is a social construct that conflicts with local indigenous reality. In order for resource degradation to be avoided, Gareau urges local residents to be a part of the decision making process that constitutes what resource degradation is.⁹⁵

According to McSweeney (2013) and (n.d), bribes, threats, and even violence are all used by traffickers to acquire land from indigenous communities in protected areas.⁹⁶ The evidence in these sources portray that protected areas coincide with indigenous territories and that the label of “protected” cannot necessarily mean that indigenous territories in these overlap areas will be able to safeguard their forests and other natural resources. Moreover, Plumb et al. (2012) argues that the cattle ranching practices of ladino settlers has been the main driver of deforestation in the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve.⁹⁷ Plumb (2012) does acknowledge that agriculture is a driver of 96% of the cases related to tropical deforestation and of those, 44% were related to unsecure land tenure.⁹⁸ Additionally, 60% of deforestation cases were related to colonization occurring due to unenforced laws or undefined property rights.⁹⁹ Given the year of the articles publication, it is certainly not taking into account drug trafficking as a deforestation

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ McSweeney (n.d.), McSweeney, Kendra and Z. Pearson. 2013.

⁹⁷ Plumb, Spencer T., Yeon-Su Kim, and Erik A. Nielsen. 2012. "Challenges of Opportunity Cost Analysis in Planning REDD+: A Honduran Case Study of Social and Cultural Values Associated with Indigenous Forest Uses." *Forests, Vol 3, Iss 2, Pp 244-264 (2012)*.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 253.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

driver. It does however state that an REDD+ programs¹⁰⁰ would be difficult to install in this area because of “several different groups, changing governance, and interests of international, national, and local actors.” This quote shows that Plumb et al. (2012) acknowledges that there is instability driving deforestation on the Río Plátano Reserve, but he does not mention drug trafficking. I found it interesting that Plumb et al. (2012) states that “logging, deforestation for agricultural expansion, poaching, and raiding of archeological sites” triggered a response for conservation, yet there is no mention of drug trafficking, or its possible relationship to agricultural expansion, given the year of its publication.¹⁰¹

Current research is underway that focuses on the impacts of drug trafficking on protected areas’ forest loss rates and will continue to be observed, but there exists little qualitative research explaining how drug trafficking in protected areas impacts indigenous communities in particular. The analysis of these sources related to deforestation and drug trafficking in Honduras’ Mosquitia area will help to support this paper’s argument that drug trafficking plays a fundamental role in reducing the numbers of indigenous populations residing in these protected areas.

¹⁰⁰ the program being advocated in their piece which presents the idea of developed countries providing funds to offset the opportunity costs that come with avoiding deforestation

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 259.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a critical, political ecology framework grounded in analysis of secondary forest loss data, primary content analysis of media, and open coding of two, unpublished in-depth interviews conducted by my thesis advisor to illustrate the multiple ways that narco-deforestation is fueling dispossession of all kinds. Along with my thesis advisor, the resources analyzed in this project were created by a ten-person team from all over the Americas called Landscapes in Transformation in Central America, or LITCA, that studies the phenomenon of drug trafficking. This thesis now forms part of the products of that research team and for that research, I was able to access unpublished interview and ancillary data.

Anomalous Deforestation Data

This thesis analyzes secondary forest loss data throughout Central America to pinpoint which areas of Honduras are affected the most by narco-deforestation to test my hypothesis that the Mosquita is one the region's most impacted places. Anomalous forest loss, for the purposes of this research, is defined as forest loss that is suspected to be caused by drug trafficking organizations or narco-capitalized agro-industrial enterprises.¹⁰² To perform a statistical analysis of forest loss in Honduras, "A Spatio-Temporal Analysis of Forest Loss Related to Cocaine Trafficking in Central America" by Sesnie et. al (2017) became one of my most important resources as it held an enormous amount of data regarding suspected narco-deforestation. Using the background data from the Sesnie et. al (2017) article provided to me by my thesis supervisor, I narrowed down

¹⁰² Sesnie, Steven E., et al. 2017. "A spatio-temporal analysis of forest loss related to cocaine trafficking in Central America." *Environmental Research Letters* 12, no. 5.

the results to only those that were recorded in Honduras and removed any data from Guatemala and Nicaragua. The locations that were recorded are protected reserves. For the purposes of overall comprehension, I then recorded what department these protected areas were in.

Content Analysis of Media Data

Now that I was able to get a clear picture of where narco-deforestation was taking place and at what level, I used a media database of 867 entries of narco-events recorded in Honduras by primary national news outlets from 2000 to 2015. My thesis supervisor was able to acquire permission for me to view this information from her fellow members at LITCA, who produced this database. I queried this database to find evidence of drug trafficking and its impacts on narco-deforestation and society in the area covered by La Mosquitia and its protected areas by searching for keywords such as: Mosquitia, Olancho, Colon, Gracias a Dios, Rio Platano, and Tawahka Asangi. This search generated 376 articles. After this, I pulled those 376 articles into a separate spreadsheet and looked through the variables that provided a description of each article. Using the descriptions in the variables, I identified three common themes (mass trafficking and cocaine seizures, land use change, and violence) and pulled 7-10 random articles relating to each theme to total 30 articles. After pulling the articles, I conducted a content analysis of the news pieces to test my hypothesis that narco-activity and narco-deforestation in Central America is concentrated in the La Mosquitia. This search garnered sources written mostly in Spanish which allowed me to read about the various narco-events and drug trafficking dynamics from the Honduran point of view.

In-Depth Interviews

Lastly, I used two in-depth unpublished interviews from tribe leaders, provided to me by my thesis supervisor, as primary sources. The first interview I analyzed of a Miskitu leader, who works for a Miskitu NGO, was produced by LITCA. The second interview included in this thesis was from a Tawahka leader of another non-profit organization also residing in La Mosquitia. Even though I had completed a large amount of research on secondary sources related to the indigenous groups of La Mosquitia, I decided to use grounded theory during the analysis of these interviews to generate codes that would identify the impacts of narco-trafficking on these two leaders' ancestral landscapes, livelihoods, and cultures. Using the open coding method, I took notes of the interviews and identified different themes to support the argument that narco-deforestation is a primary threat to these indigenous communities, and to provide direct examples of the different kinds of dispossession occurring in La Mosquitia due to drug trafficking.

Because I am an outsider researching something that I have not been able to experience firsthand, I faced several empirical, conceptual, and methodological limitations. The first being, the amount of time that has passed since I last visited Honduras. Empirically and conceptually, I do not personally know the pain of losing a forest that I have known all of my life or the fear of being part of what may be the last generations of my people. However, conducting this research and contributing to the knowledge that is already out there allows me to bring attention to these issues and educate anyone who may read this thesis on the deeper, human consequences of the drug trade.

V. DISCUSSION

I. Narco-deforestation

This section argues that narco-deforestation is threatening the ancestral forests of Honduras' indigenous people through the analysis of anomalous, suspected narco-driven forest loss, a media content analysis, and two in-depth interviews with indigenous leaders.

Since the early 2000s, drug trafficking and related crimes have driven extensive forest loss in Central America. Remote forested areas are especially attractive to traffickers and therefore much more vulnerable to deforestation.¹⁰³ About 86% of the cocaine trafficked around the world stops through Central America on its way to market.¹⁰⁴ This creates an enormous revenue for traffickers and an increased need to launder this money. The conversion of forests to agricultural land for the sale of cattle, cultivation of oil palm, or timber extraction is quite often used as an outlet for the illegal revenue coming in.¹⁰⁵ In 2007, La Mosquitia became the primary transit hub for cocaine after negotiations between Colombian traffickers and Honduran military personnel in Puerto Lempira. From there, cocaine has been relayed in two directions: northwest through Colón and Atlantida and southwest through Olancho .¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Sesnie, Steven E., et al. 2017. "A spatio-temporal analysis of forest loss related to cocaine trafficking in Central America." *Environmental Research Letters* 12, no. 5.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 2.

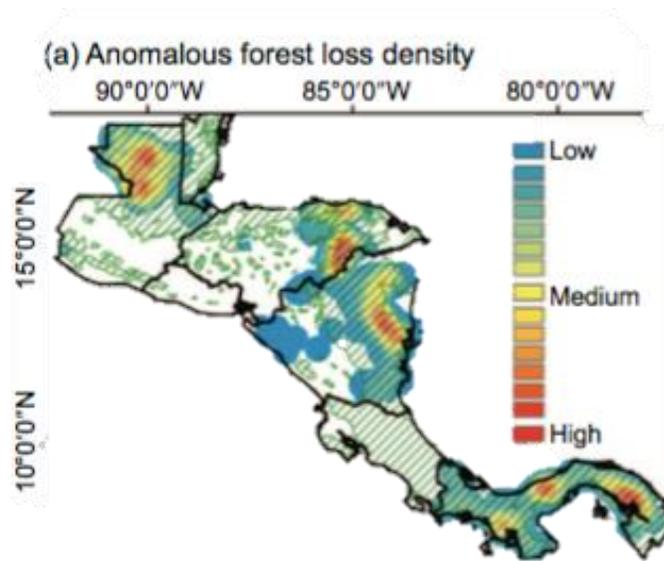
¹⁰⁵ Devine et. al (n.d), Sesnie, Steven E., et al. 2017.

¹⁰⁶ McSweeney et. al (n.d)

Analysis of Anomalous Forest Loss Data

Sensie et. al (2017) devised a methodology to identify suspected narco-driven forest loss that they call anomalous deforestation. Anomalous deforestation is different from background forest loss in that it is “forest loss hotspots that are spatially and temporally correlated with high cocaine trafficking activity”.¹⁰⁷ These are patches of deforestation that are deforested more quickly and at a larger scale than what would typically be seen at the agro-industrial frontier. The map below from Sesnie et. al (2017) shows that Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua are hot spots for anomalous forest loss.

Figure 4: Anomalous forest loss density in Central America



¹⁰⁷ Sensie, Steven E., et al. 2017. "A spatio-temporal analysis of forest loss related to cocaine trafficking in Central America." *Environmental Research Letters* 12, no. 5.

When separating Honduras' data from the rest of the region, we see that almost the entirety of anomalous, trafficking-related forest loss is occurring in the western Caribbean coast in the departments of the Bay Islands, Francisco Morazán, Atlántida, Gracias a Dios, Colón, and Olancho.

Figure 5: Forest loss data for Honduras

Name	Anomalous Def	Background Def	Total Def	Percent of Def	Country	Department
Colibri Esmeralda Hondureno	59.67	216.63	276.3	21.59609121	Honduras	Bay Islands
Cuyamel - Omoa	33.03	440.37	473.4	6.977186312	Honduras	Cortes
El Cajon	45.9	528.03	573.93	7.997490983	Honduras	Francisco Morazan
Lancetilla	21.51	9.18	30.69	70.08797654	Honduras	Atlantida
Mocoron	49.95	434.07	484.02	10.3198215	Honduras	Gracias a Dios
Montana de Botaderos	456.03	4677.03	5133.06	8.884174352	Honduras	Colon, Yoro, y Olancho
Patuca	19683.09	30412.71	50095.8	39.29089864	Honduras	Olancho
Rio Platano	17599.14	19352.52	36951.7	47.62746789	Honduras	Gracias a Dios, Colon, y Olancho
Rus-Rus	2059.83	1923.3	3983.13	51.71385318	Honduras	Gracias a Dios
Sierra de Rio Tinto	3777.39	6203.52	9980.91	37.8461483	Honduras	Colon
Tawahka Asangni	10736.46	13741.74	24478.2	43.86131333	Honduras	Olancho
Warunta	164.34	607.77	772.11	21.284532	Honduras	Gracias a Dios

Sesnie et. al (2017)

The metadata from the Sensie et. al (2017) article provides further geo-spatially referenced data on where anomalous deforestation is happening. The chart above shows the various forest loss data along with the location. Compared to the rest of the region, Honduras has the most narco-related forest loss. Most of this forest loss is concentrated in the departments of Gracias a Dios, Colón, and Olancho, which constitute La Mosquitia. This area also holds most of Honduras' protected areas, that include the two largest biospheres in the country: The Río Plátano and Tawahka Asangi Biosphere Reserves which made the list above.

Upon dividing these areas up by their respective departments, we can see that areas with the least amount of forest loss, like the Bay Islands, Cortes, Francisco

Morazan, and Atlantida put together make up 160.11 hectares of anomalous, or trafficking related, forest loss that differs from overall background and regular forest loss created by other non-trafficking associated human activities. Out of all of the departments in Honduras, it has been established that the Mosquitia departments of Gracias a Dios, Olancho, and Colon have endured the most forest loss. When we pull together the areas of Mocerón, Rus-Rus, and Warunta, we find that Gracias a Dios has lost 2,274.123 hectares of forest related to drug trafficking. In second place is Colón, with only the Sierra de Rio Tinto that has suffered 3,777.39 hectares of forest loss which is an astonishing amount for just one single area. Olancho, by far, takes the hardest hit in relation to anomalous forest loss with 30,419.55 hectares. Patuca, a protected area located in Olancho, is the research location with highest overall, anomalous forest loss with 19683.09 hectares. The Río Plátano and Tawahka Asangi Biosphere Reserves in themselves have suffered 28,335.6 hectares of drug related forest loss and because both of these reserves are in the departments of Olancho, Colón, and Gracias a Dios they also add to the anomalous forest of the Mosquitia region that was already dissected.

The data attributes this 38% anomalous forest loss to La Mosquitia's remoteness, sparse population, and poor infrastructure and thus creating another link between areas with high conservation importance and narco-deforestation.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, this data also found that when comparing Honduras' background and anomalous forest loss, there was a significant non-temporal difference and a clear impact of cocaine trafficking on forest

¹⁰⁸ Sesnie, Steven E., et al. 2017. "A spatio-temporal analysis of forest loss related to cocaine trafficking in Central America." *Environmental Research Letters* 12, no. 5.

loss.¹⁰⁹ After 2005, an increase in marine and air drug shipments to the Caribbean coast found in Gracias a Dios further supported this evidence.¹¹⁰ Sesnie et. al (2107) further states that forest loss in Central America typically correlates with illegal logging or land grabs through cattle ranching and mining. The article states, “Our comparisons of anomalous and background forest loss using BACI or a ‘difference in differences’ approach centered on year 2005 clearly highlighted increased forest loss in Honduras where a marked and sustained increase in cocaine trafficking was apparent from counter narcotics data”.¹¹¹

The article and its ancillary data establish that drug trafficking is directly correlated with forest loss in La Mosquitia, yet it is important to take note that deforestation also coincides with private capital and the government’s resource exploitation agenda in the region. In 2010, President Porfirio Lobo Sosa’s administration passed the National Program for Investment Promotion. This administration also passed the Law for the Promotion of Development and Reconversion of the Public Debt in 2011.¹¹² These programs allowed the country to use its resources as collateral to bring in investment from the agroindustry which meant that Honduras was now open for foreign direct investment.¹¹³ This has created a larger incentive for traffickers to forcefully take indigenous land and “prepare” it for agroindustry corporations. One example of this is Dinant Corporation owner Miguel Facussé who is expanding his oil palm plantations into

¹⁰⁹Ibid, 12.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² McSweeney, Kendra and Z. Pearson. 2013. "Prying Native People from Native Lands: Narco Business in Honduras." *NACLA Report on the Americas* 46, no. 4: 7-12.

¹¹³ Ibid, 7.

La Mosquitia and reported by locals to allow drug planes to land on his property for profit.¹¹⁴ A Miskitu leader stated, “Miguel Facussé has it all mapped out! He’s using local families to corner the land market with money from the drug traffic. He wants to plant African palm! And there are other people doing the same thing”.¹¹⁵

As mentioned earlier, the 2009 coup enabled the “open for business” programs of 2010 and 2011 that, in addition to agribusiness corporations, included drug trafficking. In most cases, agribusinesses in protected areas are fueled by narco-capital and the need to launder drug money and claim territory, not garner profits.¹¹⁶ The next section will examine the narco-trafficking media database for different dynamics of the drug trade that play a role in the narco-deforestation discussed here.

Narco-trafficking Media Database: Cocaine Flows, Land use change, and Violence in La Mosquitia

The LITCA team has created a media database of all narco-events happening in Honduras from 2000 to 2015. After an analysis of this unpublished database, I identified around 376 out of 867 narco-events that were recorded to have taken place in the departments of Olancho, Colón, and Gracias a Dios that constitute La Mosquitia. Often, articles used the general Mosquitia term as the place of occurrence as well. This means that of all the recorded narco-events in Honduras, 43% occurred in La Mosquitia. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it gives us some ground on what narco-deforestation means in practice. At first glance, the departments in the west of Honduras that include

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 11.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 11.

¹¹⁶ Devine et. al n.d

Copán, Ocotepeque, Lempira, Intibucá, La Paz, Valle, Comayagua, and Santa Barbara are rarely seen in the database as areas with reported narco-activity. Along with the Islas de la Bahía, Atlantida, and Yoro, the departments most often mentioned are indeed Gracias a Dios, Colón, and Olancho.

To begin, I created my own excel spreadsheet that separated areas in La Mosquitia along with the three Mosquitia departments and looked at 30 different articles from that set. While a complete analysis of the media database is outside the scope of this project, drawing on events covered by the media helps understand what narco-deforestation looks like on the ground. I found that the media analysis points to three important dynamics; large-scale trafficking effects evidenced by seizures, the impacts of deforestation on land use change, and deforestation coinciding with violence. The following section offers a narrative of each dynamic using the 30 different news articles.

a. Mass cocaine seizures and trafficking in La Mosquitia

Primarily, in 2009, a narco-plane with a Venezuelan flag was found incinerated in Olancho. Upon investigation, the police stated that if the plane had been carrying drugs, it could not have been more than 500 kilos. The owner of the property on which the plane landed was arrested.¹¹⁷ Another aspect of the massive cocaine seizures and drug trafficking dynamics evidenced by the media database is how indigenous communities' economic activity can be impacted. This same year, community members in Colón and Gracias a Dios spent time walking on the beach in search of cocaine that has become a "modus vivendi" for thousands of families in the Miskitu group. Cocaine left by

¹¹⁷ La Prensa. "Honduras: incineran narcoavioneta en Olancho." May 18, 2009.

speedboat trafficking or dropped by planes is collected and then sold for profit. One interviewee in this particular new article said, “In this municipality there are evils that are necessary to survive, but the lack of opportunities for development and the abandonment of government have been determining factors in the growth of this activity that is now rooted in the population”.¹¹⁸ Additionally, in 2010 natives in La Mosquitia continued this trend because of the high prevalence of narco-events. A Miskitu man said in this news interview, “Almost every day we have activity, at night it is when the work of collecting suitcases is done. I do not consume it, but for me it means money so I do not hurt anyone, it’s just a way to earn my living.”¹¹⁹ This same year, authorities discovered 247 kilos of cocaine. Two men in Olancho were accused for the building of tracks and facilitating the landing of narco-planes where the 247 kilos of cocaine were found.¹²⁰ Another piece from 2010 discusses the phenomenon of “*mula del narcotráfico*” in which traffickers place their drug loads on mules after a plane with drugs has landed. According to this source, flights to Olancho tripled in 2009 and even mentioned a plane carrying 1,000 kilos of cocaine.¹²¹

In 2011, the national police clashed with drug traffickers in Gracias a Dios where four bales of cocaine coming from South America were seized. There was a confrontation between officials and traffickers in which a police officer was injured. This news article also mentions two tons of cocaine that were seized on February 23 by boat which is an impressive amount of narcotics documented in just one piece.¹²² Indigenous communities

¹¹⁸ La Prensa. “Litoral atlántico, reflejo del tráfico de drogas.” February 24, 2009.

¹¹⁹ La Prensa. “La Mosquitia: Aquí todos quieren hacerse ricos.” February 10, 2010.

¹²⁰ La Prensa. “Destruyen 3 pistas usadas por narcotraficantes.” June 3, 2010.

¹²¹ La Prensa. “A lomo de mula sacan la droga en Olancho.” February 11, 2010.

¹²² La Prensa. “Cae narcoavioneta en Honduras: un detenido.” March 2, 2011.

were touched on again in 2014 in an article discussing trafficking activities that are replacing fishing as the main source of economic activity for 15 communities in La Mosquitia. Enforcing sea routes has become a priority to prevent speedboat trafficking.¹²³

In 2015, 414 kilos of cocaine were seized in Gracias a Dios. The men associated were sentenced to 20 years in prison with a fine of a million dollars.¹²⁴ Another 600 kilos of cocaine coming from South America appeared in an article from 2016. The plane transporting the drugs crashed into the department of Gracias a Dios. This particular crash was already the third in the country since the beginning of the year. The first crash took place in Brus Laguna (Gracias a Dios) and the second in Los Caraos (Cortés).¹²⁵ This same year, 214 more kilos of cocaine were recovered from a plane that attempted to land in Brus Laguna in Gracias a Dios but then crashed.¹²⁶ In addition to this, a narco-laboratory was even discovered in Olancho adding an new facet to the drug trade in La Mosquitia.¹²⁷

Just from these 11 articles we can see that there is an incredible amount of cocaine moving through La Mosquitia. In fact, according to McSweeney et. al (n.d.), by 2010 Honduras was estimated to be receiving 79% of all direct cocaine shipments (by sea and air) out of northern South America.¹²⁸ Between, 2007 and 2012, 1,000 metric tons² of

¹²³ Orellana, Xiomara. “En poder de narcos 15 comunidades de La Mosquitia de Honduras.” *La Prensa*. March 10, 2014.

¹²⁴ El Heraldo. “Viente años de prison a hondureño y dos extranjeros”. August 29 2015.

¹²⁵ El Heraldo. “Se estrella narcoavioneta con 600 kilos de coca.” April 10, 2016.

¹²⁶ La Prensa. “Recuperan 214 kilos de coca de avioneta estrellada en La Mosquitia.” April 11, 2017.

¹²⁷ La Prensa. “Descubren supuesto narcolaboratorio en Olancho.” May 10, 2017.

¹²⁸ McSweeney et. al (n.d)

high purity cocaine was sent to Gracias a Dios alone for transshipment.¹²⁹ With this much activity, there can be no doubt that the extensive amount of the deforestation being documented in this region is a byproduct of drug trafficking. Along with this, there are many other dynamics associated with the seizure of cocaine such as the what locals will do with the drug and more recently, the building of narco-laboratories.

b. Land use change

Beginning in 2007, the first news story covers a Venezuelan plane that landed in an oil palm plantation. Agribusiness entrepreneur Miguel Facussé is also mentioned since many of his properties are known landing sites or oil palm plantations.¹³⁰ Four years later in 2011, a plane carrying 500 kilos of drugs landed in Olancho. The 24km² piece of land that it descended on had been stripped to create tracks for Venezuelan and Colombian planes.¹³¹ Three years later in 2014 in this same department, 500 head of cattle were found on 500 acres of land in San Esteban belonging to the Matta Ballesteros family.¹³²

In Atlántida, Olancho, Yoro, and Colón during 2015, properties belonging to Wilter Neptali Blanco Ruiz, alleged to be the second largest drug transporter in the country were seized. He and his wife were turned in by Miskitu people who complained of their activities and their contribution to deforestation in the Río Plátano Reserve.¹³³

¹²⁹ Ibid, 7.

¹³⁰ Zapata, Pablo. “Narcos queman avioneta.” La Prensa. January 27, 2007.

¹³¹ La Prensa. “Honduras: Queman narcoavioneta en Olancho.” October 21, 2009.

¹³² El Heraldo. “Más de 300 cabezas de ganado había en hacienda de familia Matta.” August 1, 2014.

¹³³ El Heraldo. “Honduras: Incautan 20 bienes en La Ceiba y Tocoa.” April 13, 2015.

Blanco Ruiz's properties were investigated again in 2015 and extensive plantations of oil palm were discovered.¹³⁴

This same year, the seizure of assets belonging to the Rosenthal family, who are linked to drug trafficking, found that the family uses livestock and agribusiness ventures to launder money in Colón and several other departments.¹³⁵ Returning to Olancho one month after the seizure of assets belonging to the Rosenthal family, Los Cachiros had 27 properties with 148 heads of cattle seized in San Esteban.¹³⁶ Additionally, in 2015, authorities raided 92 assets in La Mosquitia region owned by two brothers known to be traffickers. A dozen head of cattle was found on one property, 217 in another, and an undetermined amount of cattle was found on the Olancho property. One property even held a landing track.¹³⁷

Along with narco-cattle ranching, another article from 2015, addresses the illegal selling of timber and shark fishing in La Mosquitia. It also attributes the reduction of cocaine transport occurring through beaches to strong military supervision.¹³⁸ Returning to Olancho, 27 properties belonging to "Cachiro" members were raided. The properties included 148 heads of cattle.¹³⁹ One year later, authorities seized more properties

¹³⁴ Departamento 19. "Anti-drug corps on the trail of the second largest narcotics transporter". Apr 29, 2015

¹³⁵ La Prensa. "Incautan empresas y varias casas de la familia Rosenthal." October 14, 2015.

¹³⁶ La Prensa. "Aseguran más propiedades de los cachiros en Olancho." November 20, 2015.

¹³⁷ El Heraldo. "Incautan y aseguran 92 bienes a socios de los hermanos Valle." May 25, 2015.

¹³⁸ El Heraldo. "Honduras: Férreo control military en el mar y laguna de Caratasca." February 8, 2015.

¹³⁹ La Prensa. "Aseguran más propiedades de 'Los Cachiros' en Olancho." November 20, 2015.

belonging to the “Cachiros” in Colón which held cattle and an oil palm producing company.¹⁴⁰ This same year, 26 assets belonging to several people associated with drug trafficking were investigated. This seizure of property did include cattle.¹⁴¹

There is, undoubtedly, a link between narco-activity and land use change. In many of the articles from the media, raids on properties belonging to those suspected of being traffickers usually reveal heads of cattle being held. Most likely for the purposes of money laundering. In addition to this, oil palm plantations have been exposed during raids and even illegal timber extraction were addressed. The creation of landing strips reported in these articles further supports the argument that traffickers are wiping out the forest in La Mosquitia to cover their illegal profits.

c. Violence and trafficking in the Mosquitia

Using the media database’s articles, the first story addressing violence and trafficking in La Mosquitia is from 2009. This story began by covering a plane that fell in Olancho. This article goes on to mention the violence traffickers use to help facilitate their drugs to the north. One interviewee stated “They have captured people from all Honduran professions and even foreigners. It’s a terrible threat against the country.”¹⁴² This same year, 7 people were massacred in the corridor between Atlántida, Colón, Yoro, and Gracias a Dios.¹⁴³ Staying in 2009, another article discusses how the violence index

¹⁴⁰ La Prensa. “Incautan hacienda con helipuerto a socio de los Cachiros en Colón.” June 20, 2016.

¹⁴¹ Rodriguez, Roxana. “Aseguran 26 bienes en operacion contra el narco.” May 24, 2016.

¹⁴² La Prensa. “Cae avion cargado de cocaina en Olancho.” June 24, 2009.

¹⁴³ La Prensa. “Plantaciones de palma tomadas por narcos.” June 27, 2009.

was expanded in Honduras due to drug trafficking and the coup and covers massacres that occurred in Colón.¹⁴⁴

Two years later, the murder of many lawyers, journalists, and other violent deaths throughout the country are covered. The police demonstrate a permanent struggle in that there are little rescued victims of kidnap, criminal captures, or drug and dollar seizures.¹⁴⁵ In 2014, the assets of the mayor of a town in Yoro, who is believed to also be the leader of a criminal organization, were raided. He was arrested for money laundering and 110 heads of cattle were found on one of his properties. It was also reported that 137 people were killed who did not want to get rid of their cattle or houses.¹⁴⁶ This same year, after the confiscation of 717 kilos of cocaine, several deaths of narcos who ran their operations out of La Mosquitia, a judge, and even a child occurred in the area.¹⁴⁷ Lastly, an article published in 2017 covered the 78 deaths committed by “Los Cachiros”. These deaths included many government officials, reporters, fellow traffickers, and lawyers, including the journalist Nahúm Elí Palacios Arteaga who was killed in Colón.¹⁴⁸

These articles unfortunately only scratch the surface of the violence that occurs in La Mosquitia. It is evident that mass cocaine seizures along with land use change work together to fuel violence. In many of these articles, it is not uncommon to find these three dynamics working together and even creating one another. Deforestation and

¹⁴⁴ La Prensa. “Las claves 2009.” December 14, 2009.

¹⁴⁵ Departamento 19. March 9, 2011. “Drug lab discovery, another stitch in the labyrinth of organized crime in Honduras”.

¹⁴⁶ Mendoza, Jose Edwin. “Honduras: ligan al alcalde de Yoro con el narcotráfico.” *La Prensa*. July 28, 2014.

¹⁴⁷ El Herald. “Baño de sangre dejó fallido trasiego en La Mosquitia hondureña.” July 4, 2014.

¹⁴⁸ La Tribuna. “Una decada de horror: las 78 victimas de los Cachiros.” March 20, 2017.

dispossession in La Mosquitia is not only the result of land use change but, it is also a key indicator of violence created by the drug trafficking trade.

Interviews: Drug Trafficking is Driving Indigenous Dispossession and Threatens Indigenous Cultural Survival

Although the media database provides an immense amount of evidence to analyze what sorts of patterns and dynamics result from narco-trafficking, they fail to account for how these dynamics impact indigenous communities specifically. Some articles did contain pieces of interviews by locals or police officers, but they were not enough to fully display the effect that drug trafficking has on people living in La Mosquitia, much less the effects on the indigenous populations. However, using LITCA's unpublished interviews with a Miskitu and Tawahka tribe leader, the many forms that narco-deforestation takes in the lives of indigenous people living in La Mosquitia becomes much more evident. The main impacts of narco-trafficking's violence and deforestation identified by open coding analysis of these interviews include narco-deforestation through narco-cattle ranching land use change and the increasing powerlessness to stop it.

a. Narco-deforestation

According to the Tawahka tribe leader, indigenous communities are losing their forests at an unprecedented rate. He states, "They are decompressing too much. In one year, 3,000 hectares. And what will they do in ten years when they do? It is too much!"

We are in crisis”.¹⁴⁹ Although the leaders are from two different groups, the same forest loss dynamic was observed in their interviews.

As mentioned before in Sesnie et. al (2017), the large amount of revenue created by traffickers needs a legal outlet that usually involves the use *narcoganadería*, or narco-cattle ranching. This practice is by far the biggest land use change described by the two tribe leaders. The Miskitu leader describes the environmental impact of narco-cattle ranching: “You have to have a way to do it. One of the ways that is the easiest is to become a *ganadero*. Buy cows. To have 100 heads of cattle, you need 100 hectares of forest. For 1,000 heads of cattle, you need 1,000 hectares of forest”.¹⁵⁰ In Honduras, the process of becoming a *ganadero* is laissez-faire and involves little to no inspection of your registration application. The Miskitu leader goes on to explain the process:

I am Honduran. I go to the system’s rent administration service and say, ‘I am a rancher. I have 10 heads of cattle that I inherited from my parents.’ They give me my documents that say I am a rancher. With this, I am a businessman. I go back to the community when I actually have 10,000 heads of cattle and with this document I put my cattle up for sale. ‘I am a business man’. I can open a bank account with this document. I can deposit money in to the bank. There is no title and you don’t need a title. The process of becoming a businessman has nothing to do with the land. They go depositing their money in the bank that comes in clean. You don’t need to register national money.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ *Están descombrando mucho. En un año, hacen tres mil hectares. Y que hagan en 10 años cuando hacen? Demasiado! Nosotros estamos en crisis.* trans. LITCA

¹⁵⁰ *Tienes que tener medio para hacerlo. Una de las formas más fácil es convertirse en ganadero. Comprar vacas. Para tener 100 cabezas de ganada, necesita 100 hectares de bosque. Si 1,000 ganado, 1,000 hectares de bosque,* trans. LITCA

¹⁵¹ *Soy hondureño, voy al sistemas servicio de administración de rentas. Voy y me declaro ‘Que soy ganadero. Tengo 10 cabezas que herede de mis padres.’ Me dan mis documentos que soy ganadero. Con esto soy empresario. Voy a la comunidad pero, realmente tengo 10,000 cabezas y con este documento saco mi ganado para la venta. Soy empresario. Puedo abrir cuenta bancaria con este permiso. Puedo depositar dinero al banco. No hay título y no necesita título. El proceso de declararse*

This process is incredibly easy for drug traffickers. *Ganadería* not only offers a way to launder drug profits, but also creates another source of income for traffickers through further direct deforestation of the land. According to McSweeney et. al (2014), domestic and foreign criminal organizations increasingly seek rural enterprises which creates a land speculation market for traffickers.¹⁵² From there, domestic and foreign criminal organizations can sell this land to corporations looking to invest in agribusiness which results in the permanent conversion of forest to pasture, for the same reason of cattle-ranching. These methods are also combined with investment in urban real estate, tourism development, and off-shore accounts to create a diversified and conventional money laundering system.¹⁵³ The Tawahka leader states, “Of selling so much hectares of land, we can’t get close. They have grass and cattle. Everything is cattle. Buying little by little and expanding more”.¹⁵⁴

b. Confronting the Issue

With the practice of cattle-ranching adding on to the alarming rate of deforestation, protecting the forests of La Mosquitia are absolutely crucial for the survival of the indigenous groups that inhabit the region. It has been shown that community forest rights that are legally recognized and protected by state governments

comerciante no tiene relacion con la tierra. Lo va depositando dinero que entra limpio en el banco. No tiene que registrar el dinero nacional.

¹⁵² McSweeney, Kendra, et al. 2014. "Conservation. Drug policy as conservation policy: narco-deforestation." *Science (New York, N.Y.)* 343, no. 6170: 489-490

¹⁵³ McSweeney et. al n.d

¹⁵⁴ *De vendió tanto manzana de tierras, nosotros no podemos acercar. Tiene zacate y ganado. Todo es ganado. Compran poco a poco y extienden mas.*

tend to display less deforestation and lower carbon dioxide emissions.¹⁵⁵ Although Honduras has taken steps to protect some areas of La Mosquitia, deforestation is still occurring and continues to increase. Time and time again, we see examples of traffickers who are above the law and officials who can be bought to turn a blind eye to illegal activity. This has created insecurity among native populations and made it exceedingly difficult for them to protect their forests. The Miskitu leader states, “It was national. An agrarian reform law. One person says, invades a piece of government and three years they acquire. Better the land and drop trees. Even though we have our defenses, ancestrally, there are legal documents. But there is an extremely high cost to bring lawyers and everything”.¹⁵⁶ Evidently, even legal documents are no match against deforestation. The Miskitu leader adds, “In Honduras, a law for the clearing of land doesn’t exist. We have to impact the government so that there is a land clearing law. It is as long as we do not have this law, we do not have the legal backing to get these people out to our advantage”.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, a recognized law to address the clearing of land is needed, but in the current scheme of things, reporting illegal deforestation can become dangerous.

¹⁵⁵ IUCN. 2016. “Map shows indigenous peoples as guardians of Central American ecosystems.”

¹⁵⁶ *Era nacional. Ley de reforma agraria. Dice una persona invade una pedazo de gobierno y de tres años adquiere. Mejorar la tierra y botar árboles. Aunque tenemos nuestras defensas, ancestralmente, hay documentos legales. Costo altísimo para llevar abogados y todo.*

¹⁵⁷ *En Honduras no existe una ley de saneamiento de tierras. Tenemos que incide con el gobierno para que hay una ley de saneamiento de tierras ancestral. Es mientras que no tengamos este ley, no tengamos un respaldo legal para sacar esta gente a nuestro favor.*

The Miskitu leader states, “Nowadays, reporting illegal *narcoganadería* is a threat because we do not know who to report to... all of the police is involved. Everyone is involved”.¹⁵⁸

2. Dispossession

Narco-trafficking is driving indigenous dispossession in many ways that includes land dispossession, food insecurity, a loss of cultural heritage practices and ultimately, a way of life. Land dispossession, like narco-deforestation, comes in many forms such as land acquisitions or “land grabs”. These types of land grabs, in terms of prevalence, have increased since the financial crisis of 2008.¹⁵⁹ Access to land has been well documented as being an important policy and political issue in this region. The dispossession of peasants, indigenous, and Afro-descendent people is thought to be a result of drug capital. These lands already face pressure from state and corporate development actors, but it is drug traffickers who appear to be the ones quickly acquiring these lands for their own illegal ventures.¹⁶⁰

The middlemen of La Mosquitia who facilitate this acquisition can be split into two groups. The first being the business owners who are skilled in “inter-personal relationships of debt, credit, and social obligations”, and the second consisting of *colonos* who typically participate in cattle-ranching, petty trade, and fishing and arrived in La

¹⁵⁸ *Este día poner una denuncia de tráfico ilegal de narcoganadería es amenaza porque no sabemos a quién ir a denunciar... la policías todo están involucrado. A todos están involucrado*, trans. LITCA

¹⁵⁹ McSweeney et. al (n.d).

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 12.

Mosquitia post 1980.¹⁶¹ Since their arrival, *colono* middlemen have acted as the land-agents who clear and sell forestland to other nonindigenous settlers.¹⁶² The Tawahka leader stated in his interview, “This invasion of the *colonos* brought the narcos”.¹⁶³ Land dispossession in La Mosquitia occurs through forced coercion or economic coercion. These two dynamics that fuel land dispossession also drive food insecurity in the region. This land dispossession also incites a loss of cultural heritage and a way of life.

Land Dispossession and Forced Coercion

To take land from indigenous communities, narcos may use fear and violence. For example, homicides among *transportista* groups in trafficking hubs within Miskitu and Garífuna lands incite fear and the violence in these hubs pushes natives to sell their land.¹⁶⁴ The Honduran government has also been a key player in the territorial dispossession of indigenous groups. The government declared the Mosquitia a “Red Zone” which displayed that the state was unable to secure the region and signaled to traffickers that La Mosquitia was open for land acquisition.¹⁶⁵ Devine et. al (2017) states, “It is important to focus on how violence ends up inscribed in everyday life.”¹⁶⁶ For the indigenous populations of La Mosquitia, drug trafficking, and the land dispossession it creates, materializes itself in every day, not only through deforestation, but also outright physical violence. The Tawahka leader states, “Many Tawahka leaders have been killed.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 11.

¹⁶² Ibid, 12.

¹⁶³ *Este invasion de los colonos inicio el narcos*, trans. LITCA.

¹⁶⁴ McSweeney et. al (n.d.)

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 21.

¹⁶⁶ Devine, J. and Diana Ojeda. 2017. “Violence and dispossession in tourism development: A critical geographical approach.” *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. 25:5, 605-617.

I go out and they have followed me. I am in danger too.”¹⁶⁷ There is indeed conflict between the indigenous populations and those involved in drug trafficking, but unfortunately sometimes these conflicts are played out on a much larger in scale. Operation Anvil, which occurred on May 11, 2012, was believed to have been tracking a drug plane coming from South America. Honduran police officers were seen working together with DEA agents by the locals who suffered through this tragedy in Ahuas, Gracias a Dios. This mission occurred in the needless deaths of seven locals while DEA and Honduran officials ripped the town apart in search of drugs. One local woman stated, “The Americans went down to the river, got the drugs and then took them out in the helicopter. They saw very well that they were leaving people dead. But they weren’t even dignified enough to stop and look at what they had done. They only cared about themselves”.¹⁶⁸ Another woman who lost her son and cousin said, “My poor baby, only 14 years old, how could he be involved in that? He didn’t know anything about the badness. He’s with God now... My cousin was in that boat with her two babies, what did they have to do with the narcos?”¹⁶⁹ Operation Anvil is just one example of the extreme culmination of violence that can occur as a result of the drug trade. In this case, due to the immense amount of drug trafficking activity in La Mosquitia, large state actors came together in this small village, deep in the Honduran jungle. With the sort of steady, everyday violence discussed by the Tawahka leader and the eruptions of brutality that can occur exemplified by Operation Anvil, it is not difficult to see why some would choose to escape the violence and let traffickers have the land. The impacts of land dispossession

¹⁶⁷ *Mucho líderes de pueblo Tawahka se ha matado. Yo salgo y me han perseguido. Estoy en un peligro también*, trans. LITCA.

¹⁶⁸ Forde, Kaelyn. 2013. "Collateral damage: blood and the drug war on the Miskitu coast." *NACLA Report on the Americas*, no. 3

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 11.

are widely felt across all four indigenous groups and evident in the rifts it creates within the communities which makes it even more difficult to combat land dispossession. In his interview with LITCA team members, the Miskitu leader states, “The Garifuna are divided. Tawahka are in conflicts. The Pech, united but fragile. And us, we are a little more united. But we need much more work. Fifty Tawahka currently do not live in their territory. All invaded by middlemen”.¹⁷⁰ This exemplifies the heavy human and environmental toll indigenous communities pay when their lands are used as crucial drug transshipment points for the illegal economy. Undoubtedly, coercion through the use of violence to force indigenous communities to give up their land is an obvious result of drug trafficking in this region. Another subtler, yet devastating, method that middlemen use to drive land dispossession in La Mosquitia is economic coercion.

Land Dispossession and Economic Coercion

Most often, cash in exchange for land deals are what middlemen use to acquire land. Because many communities have fought for land titles, gaining territory for the narco-middlemen is not easy. Middlemen began to use family histories and vulnerabilities, like an illness or extreme poverty, to approach these families with cash for their land.¹⁷¹ Eventually, other families began to sell and many community members “described this process like a disease: residents’ ‘contamination’ by the idea of selling land”.¹⁷² In Garífuna and Miskitu territories, where land is under title, middlemen must

¹⁷⁰ *La Garífuna están divididos. Tawahka están en conflictos. Los Pech, unido pero débil. Y nosotros, somos un poco más unidos. Pero necesitamos mucho más trabajo. 50 de Tawahka ya no viven en sus territorio. Todo invadido por terceros*, trans. LITCA.

¹⁷¹ McSweeney et. al (n.d.)

¹⁷² *Ibid*,14.

pay off notaries and mayors to legalize these land sales. They are even paid off to legalize land sales within the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve.¹⁷³

Typically, this type of land dispossession begins with business owners who pay local residents to clear land, build their homes, and move drugs for them. They then launder this drug money by establishing businesses and purchasing inventory. Their main customers are the local residents who they just finished paying, so they are able to regain the money they lost.¹⁷⁴ The other facet of this case is that it is also difficult for local residents in La Mosquitia to invest the US dollars with which they are paid because store owners typically exchange dollars for lempiras at a steep price. They are left with little choice but to spend their dollars at the stores that will take them, which are owned by the narco-business owners.¹⁷⁵ This process created an incredible amount of narco-wealth in transit nodes that worked to make the poor, poorer and the rich, richer. Residents have taken advantage of the credit lines that narco-brokers offer. Normally, a resident would be able to pay back their debt with natural resources or agricultural products, but this was becoming almost impossible as narco-middlemen were increasingly enclosing land and its resources.¹⁷⁶ When residents could not pay their debt, they were forced to use family or communal land to clear that debt. By 2011, this practice was well entrenched in Garífuna communities.¹⁷⁷ McSweeney et. al (n.d.) provides this example of a narco-broker: “He helped to acquire Garífuna lands by selectively applying property taxes to Garífuna residents. Unable to pay their back-taxes, Garífuna landowners were given the

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 15.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 16.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

option of relinquishing their land to the municipality. The municipality then sold the land to affiliated ‘cattle-ranchers’.¹⁷⁸

These types of direct and indirect investment methods worked to allow narco-middlemen to open land markets on indigenous land. In 2002, the thought of a Tawahka selling their land was inconceivable, but by 2011, 16% of families had sold their land that included pieces of the Tawahka Asangi Biosphere Reserve.¹⁷⁹ In the Río Plátano Reserve, two indigenous communities held steady against pressure to sell and even established land vigilance groups in 1995, but by 2016, they had sold off the entirety of their land. This land then became cattle pasture.¹⁸⁰ The Miskitu tribe leader reaffirms that nonindigenous colonizers are land speculating in La Mosquitia and deforesting this land in the hopes of selling it to narco-ranchers when he says, “What people sell is the better. The ranchers buy because there are no trees there and plant grass. They pay others plus for the grass. It’s convenient for the rancher, the job is already completed. Invaders come and plant grass hoping that a rancher will come and then they move somewhere else!”¹⁸¹ This adds another dynamic to narco-deforestation. Earlier, it was mentioned that traffickers use cattle ranching to launder their drug money. In this case, we see how traffickers acquire this land.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 17.

¹⁸¹ *Lo que vende la gente es la mejora. Los ganaderos compran porque ya no hay palos allí y siembra zacate. Pagan otros plus por el zacate. Le conviene el ganadero ya está hecho el trabajo. Invasores viene siembran zacate esperando que algún ganadero viene y luego se mueven a otro punto*, trans. LITCA

Food Insecurity

Because dispossession involves any socio-spatial reconfiguration that affects decisions on livelihoods,¹⁸² it is important to point out that drug trafficking in La Mosquitia also impacts food security.¹⁸³ This is occurring because focus from subsistence food production is being pulled to labor and wage work. Farmers who primarily used family labor or communal labor parties to till their land could not compete with illegally backed shops with low food prices. McSweeney et. al (n.d.) states, “Without land, some residents now see their future as *peones* on cattle ranches, poor in both cash and food”.¹⁸⁴ Traffickers and narco-middlemen also use cash as an incentive to have natives diminish their own resources. The Miskitu leader pointed to an area of his territory during his interview and said, “Here in (9-5).¹⁸⁵ This mayor here is an investment in the community. He gives money, 500 lempiras per vote. How he pays money, although little. For the people, it is income. They feel motivated to cut trees, plant grass. But they don’t see that in the long run they are throwing away their resources. The people see him as a good mayor”.¹⁸⁶ There are many factors at play working to increase food insecurity among the indigenous populations of La Mosquitia, such as low food prices and jobs

¹⁸² Devine, J. and Diana Ojeda. 2017. “Violence and dispossession in tourism development: A critical geographical approach.” *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. 25:5, 605-617

¹⁸³ McSweeney et. al. (n.d.)

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 19.

¹⁸⁵ This numbers refers to a specific area on a map that the Miskitu leader points out during the interview.

¹⁸⁶ *Aqui en (9-5) Este alcalde hay una inversión en la comunidad. Regala el dinero, 500 lempiras el voto. Como le paga un dinero aunque poco. Para le gente local es un ingreso. Se siente motivado cortar árbol, sembrar pasto. Pero no ven a largo plazo que se están botando su recursos. La gente lo ven a Bueno alcalde*, trans. LITCA.

offered by narco-middlemen. Land dispossession is among the leading causes of this food insecurity because if you do not have land, you do not have food.

Cultural Dispossession

Along with food insecurity, drug trafficking is also inciting a loss of cultural heritage and practices. The fear felt among indigenous groups of losing their forests is exemplified when the Tawahka leader speaks of his plight: “We are pressuring the government of Honduras to give the Tawahka community a title. In ten years, we will no longer have anything. Our ancestors. Flowers. Traditional medicines that we have in the forest, we will no longer have. This gives us great sadness”.¹⁸⁷ The Tawahka leader not only describes the loss of resources and the food insecurity that this loss will bring with it, he is also expressing the loss of a way of life, culture, and history that is dwindling the numbers of indigenous populations. But to the indigenous populations of La Mosquita, this is so much more than just a “loss”. This is cultural genocide. The indigenous communities are fighting to preserve their identity, presence, and history in this space, but as we can see, there are many internal and outside forces acting upon their environment that dispossession has permeated every group. Without land, indigenous populations face the extermination of their way of life. These factors combined together constitute a genocide on many levels. The Miskitu leader asks an important question: “How do we create conservation? How do we say ‘don’t cut the trees’ when they respond with bullets? There is no dialogue. When we say this is our territory: ‘Only dead will you

¹⁸⁷ *El gobierno de Honduras lo estamos presionando mucho para que no de un título para el pueblo Tawahke. En 10 años ya no vamos a tener nada. Nuestros ancestros. Flores. Medicinas tradicionales que tenemos en el bosque ya no vamos a tener. Esto nos da una tristeza*, trans. LITCA.

take me out of here'. We are not there to create wars. We want to defend our territory and the resources that are there".¹⁸⁸ To answer the Miskitu leader's question, the Tawahka leader identifies land titling and his struggle for land titles as center to the debate on deforestation and its environmental and social dispossession when he states, "For this, we are working hard for them to give us a title".¹⁸⁹

Communal Land Rights and Titles

The lands of La Mosquitia are seen as ancestral to these indigenous groups who believe the forest belongs to God and cannot be owned. Therefore, the land is viewed as the inheritance of future generations.¹⁹⁰ In Miskitu cosmology, natural resource access is related to their ancestral past that existed way before the modern state. Their history is materialized in the forest as a central space for the reproduction of their culture.¹⁹¹ This same idea is held among the Garífuna whose identity has been tied to La Mosquitia since before the creation of the nation-state.¹⁹² Securing land tenure is indeed important for the indigenous groups to gain sovereignty in their land, but there are many factors that play into the process of secure land tenure.

It is important to point out that both the Tawahka and Miskitu leaders both expressed concerns over the designation of a "protected area". The Tawahka leader said,

¹⁸⁸ *Como hacemos conservación? Como decimo 'no corte árbol' cuando se responde con balas? Allí no hay dialogo. Cuando reclamamos que este es nuestro territorio. 'Solo muerto me vas a sacar de acá'. No estamos allí para generar una guerras. Queremos defender nuestro territorio y los recursos que hay,* trans. LITCA.

¹⁸⁹ *Por esto estamos trabajando fuerte para quenos de un titulo,* trans. LITCA.

¹⁹⁰ Mollett, Sharlene. 2006. "Race and natural resource conflicts in Honduras: The Miskito and Garifuna struggle for Lasa Pulan." *Latin American research review* 76.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 81.

¹⁹² *Ibid*.

“It is not that, the project. We are not asking for that. It has been two years since we started fighting for a title”.¹⁹³ On the Miskitu side it is stated, “We decided not to declare and accept protected area.... The title was given to us last year. We are searching how to clean this”.¹⁹⁴ Earlier in this piece, Sletto (1999) discussed how the creation of protected areas offered many communities hope that they would be able to work alongside the government for the effective protection of their home. Along with the fact that many officials in COHDEFOR were corrupt and allowed illegal timber harvesting to take place in La Mosquitia,¹⁹⁵ this may be due to the fact that the creation of national protected areas limits the access they indigenous groups have to their lands.¹⁹⁶ Furthermore, Robinson et. al (2014) found that government-controlled lands, such as protected land and unmanaged public land, seem particularly susceptible to insecure conditions.¹⁹⁷ The Miskitu and Garífuna were granted titles, but the Tawahka remain without one. Although both leaders in these unpublished interviews view the protected area designation as unsuitable, they differ in their views of title ownership. The Tawahka leader states, “The solution is to get a title. And say to the government ‘send the armed forces to protect us’”.¹⁹⁸ Although the Miskitu and Garífuna peoples have earned titles, they still face increasing dispossession.

¹⁹³ *No es que el proyecto. No andamos pidiendo esto. Hace dos años estamos peleando para que nos dé un título*, trans. LITCA.

¹⁹⁴ *Decidimos no declarar y aceptar área protegida... El título se nos entregó el año pasado. Estamos buscando como hacer limpieza en esto*, trans. LITCA.

¹⁹⁵ Global Witness. 2009. “Tackling political corruption to combat illegal logging: A farce in three acts.”

¹⁹⁶ Stevenson, Mark. "Honduran Indians complain to UN official about incursions by drug gangs, illegal settlers." *Canadian Press*

¹⁹⁷ Robinson, Brian E., Margaret B. Holland, and Lisa Naughton-Treves. 2014. "Does secure land tenure save forests? A meta-analysis of the relationship between land tenure and tropical deforestation." *Global Environmental Change*.

¹⁹⁸ *La resolución es hacer título. Y decir al gobierno que mande el ejército para que nos proteja a nosotros. Para proteger*, trans. LITCA

Most of my research on this topic has led to the idea that titles work if local management and defense procedures have been created through cooperation with the state. Honduras has no doubt ignored ILO Convention 169 (International Labor Organization) that obligates the state to provide indigenous and tribal people territorial guarantees, and the transfer of reserve land to AFE-COHDEFOR that has occurred violates the Honduran constitution clause that states ethnic people have the right to communal lands by *dominio pleno*.¹⁹⁹ Because of this, even gaining a title cannot fully defend an indigenous territory. Titles in Honduras establish, on paper, the limits and accessibility rights to a certain geographic area.²⁰⁰ Forest Trends (2015) states, “A territory is not established through an ownership document, but rather through the social and political processes that lead to social control over the land”.²⁰¹

Although, the issue of the state’s recognition of indigenous territories appears as a case against land titles, Robinson et. al’s (2014) research on land tenure security and deforestation in different regions of the world, which included Central America, found that “The most striking feature of the results is that tenure security is consistently present in all solutions as associated with positive forest outcomes. Several combinations of regions and tenure forms also show up as associated with positive forest outcomes, most notably communal forest in Latin America and South Asia”.²⁰² This is the idea behind the Tawahka’s fight for titled lands. As shown with the Miskitu and Garífuna cases, upon

¹⁹⁹ Mollett, Sharlene. 2006. “Race and natural resource conflicts in Honduras: The Miskito and Garifuna struggle for Lasa Pulan.” *Latin American research review* 76

²⁰⁰ Forest Trends. 2015. “Titling ancestral lands in the Honduran Muskitia.” *Forest Trends Information Brief*

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Robinson, Brian E., Margaret B. Holland, and Lisa Naughton-Treves. 2014. "Does secure land tenure save forests? A meta-analysis of the relationship between land tenure and tropical deforestation." *Global Environmental Change*.

gaining a title, there is not much certainty as to how effective it will be against dispossession and other facets of drug trafficking, but evidence such as Devine et. al (n.d.) in Guatemala suggest it is the best option in combination with other approaches that strengthen civil and political institutions.²⁰³ The Tawahka are not wrong in wanting a title to their land. In order to stop dispossession, it is necessary to have legal and documented rights to the land in the eyes of the state. Whether the state will defend indigenous territorial rights, unfortunately, is another matter. But, without communal titles one thing is absolutely undeniable about this situation, and that is that the land, the forest, and the native people are at risk of perishing from drug trafficking if their rights, and even existence, are not legitimately supported by their government.

²⁰³ Devine et. al (n.d.)

VI. CONCLUSION

The major goal of this article is to better understand what impacts drug trafficking has on the indigenous populations of the Honduran Mosquitia. First, we find that drug trafficking in the region is a relatively recent phenomenon, beginning with the cartel leaders who saw Honduras' geography as favorable to the drug trade in the 1970's. The impacts of the drug trade reached outstanding levels after the 2009 coup that allowed drug traffickers to infiltrate the weakened state system and take advantage of La Mosquitia's unpoliced jungles. This paper analyzes and places drug trafficking into three bodies of knowledge that have ignored the effects that the drug trade has had specifically on indigenous communities in La Mosquitia. By examining the historic land dispossession of the Pech, Garífuna, Tawahka, and Miskitu groups that goes back to the times of Spanish colonization, we see that land dispossession has taken a new form through the drug trade. By drawing upon the historic and ongoing land dispossession of these groups, this thesis contributes to research that is already available by demonstrating that dispossession is more than land. For the indigenous groups of La Mosquitia, drug trafficking dispossesses them of their culture, ancestry, livelihoods, and a future. These indigenous territories that lay in protected areas face many struggles in regards to how to combat this dispossession. The protected area classification that was, at first, seen as way to protect indigenous territories has now been replaced by the fight for communal land titles as an effective security strategy. One of the largest challenges these groups face is the deforestation caused by drug trafficking. Narco-deforestation is one of the leading threats to the environment in

this region, but this research expands upon that idea to include the direct effects that narco-deforestation has on the communities living in these forests.

Using three unpublished resources provided by my thesis advisor and the LITCA team, this research analyzed ancillary data on anomalous deforestation, a Honduran media database of news articles, two unpublished secondary sources, and two unpublished interviews of community leaders to examine how deforestation and dispossession caused by the drug trade impact the four indigenous groups residing in La Mosquitia. Further, this paper has looked at the effect of land titles and communally managed land as a way to combat the various forms of dispossession and deforestation that were outlined, and defends that indigenous communally managed lands are more resistant to narco-land grabs.

Future work on this subject would integrate quantitative and qualitative data to gain a better understanding of narco-impacts on both environment and society. As better data becomes available, research should humanize this data and interpret what it means to society. As made evident by Operation Anvil, and the entire international drug trade as a whole, militarized interdiction efforts are to blame for economic and political power of the cartels.²⁰⁴ It is important to note that Operation Anvil involved U.S. agents. Along with this, drug trafficking thrives in this region because there is such a huge, illegal market for cocaine in the global north. Lastly, it is crucial to mention that drug policy is indeed conservation policy and that measures taken to

²⁰⁴ Kolb, Ana-Constantina. 2012, Noriega, Roger F. and Jose Javier Lanza. 2013

control the drug trade benefit the environment. (McSweeney 2014).²⁰⁵ This research would like to add one more facet to this idea and state that drug policy is not only conservation policy, but also indigenous livelihood and cultural protection policy.

²⁰⁵ McSweeney, Kendra, et al. 2014. "Conservation. Drug policy as conservation policy: narco-deforestation." *Science (New York, N.Y.)* 343, no. 6170: 489-490

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