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**Socio-Economics of Forest Use
in the Tropics and Subtropics**

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**The Imataca Forest Reserve:
Golden Future for Venezuela's South-East?**

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The Imataca Forest Reserve: Golden Future for Venezuela's South East?

Introduction

During the last months, the conflicts surrounding the Imataca Forest Reserve in the South-Eastern state of Bolívar has been at the center of debate on environment and development in Venezuela. Despite of its outstanding role in national politics, this conflict has so far received little attention on an international scale. However, the range of different actors, the economic, social and political stakes as well as the ecosystems involved seem to make this not just another local story about tropical forest destruction, but a paradigmatic case that merits deeper analysis. The redefinition of Venezuelan socio-economic strategies is not just about the 3 million ha of a certain forest reserve. Other parts of the Guyana shield within and outside of Venezuela have recently come under heavy pressure through new logging and mining concessions as well, in particular in Surinam and bordering Guyana (see Sizer/ Rice 1995, Sizer 1996). Considering that the economic options of smaller and institutionally weaker states may be much more restricted than those of an OPEC state with the largest oil reserves in the Western hemisphere, the changes in Venezuelan policy may well put additional pressure on adjacent forests and their inhabitants.

In this context, the purpose of this short briefing paper is twofold: firstly, to provide some basic information about the main lines of the conflict and bring it to the attention of a wider public; and, secondly, to briefly inform about our research underway thereby hoping to facilitate communication with other scientists concerned about the latest developments in South American forest policies.

The plan of contention: the new presidential decree 1850 and the Imataca Forest Reserve

Public conflicts erupted in May 1997 with the presidential approval of the new land-use plan for the forest reserve (*Plan de ordenamiento territorial y reglamento de uso de la reserva forestal Imataca*). This plan was deemed necessary for mitigating the increasing tensions regarding access to and use of the abundant natural resources in the forest reserve. The most controversial point revolves around the legalization of mining activities in an area originally designated for the use of forest resources. Nearly one million ha of the forest reserve have been declared a so-called zone of mixed management (*Zona de manejo mixto*) in which mining shall be legally permitted along with the commercial forest exploitation already underway.

At the core of the debates is the opening-up of the forest reserve for large-scale mining which supporters see as the golden promise for riches badly needed to rescue the crisis-ridden national economy. Others believe this decision to be a first step to the inevitable destruction of a unique ecosystem. Yet the lines of conflict are not that simple. It is not merely a matter of different perceptions about the feasibility of environmentally sound

mining. Essential features of the dominant development model are at stake, including the role of the state, civil society, and central aspects of natural resource management.

What's at stake: The Imataca Forest Reserve

The Imataca Forest Reserve was created in 1963 expanding the forest reserve of *El Dorado* which had been in existence since 1961. It covers an area of 3.2 million ha and is situated mainly in the Northeastern part of the state of Bolívar with parts stretching into the state of Delta Amacuro to the North. The fact that the forest reserve borders with Guyana to the East points to the geo-strategic importance of the region.

Imataca belongs to the Guyana Shield, one of the oldest geological formations on earth. It is extremely rich in all sorts of minerals and in particular in diamonds and gold which can be found in great quantities in the *cinturon de rocas verdes* (belt of green rocks). The soils themselves are very poor and the ecosystems extremely fragile (for a more comprehensive description see Hernandez/ Parra/ Sanoja 1994; Franco 1997). The region is further characterised by a remarkably high amount of biological diversity, for some groups of plants and animals the area is considered to be a "hot spot" within Latin America. In a larger perspective, the forests of Imataca form part of the "Orinoquia-Amazonia" and thus belong to the largest tropical forest zone on earth.

The creation of the Imataca forest reserve took place within the course of a larger, international project promulgated by FAO and UNDP to develop forest management techniques and a forest-based industry in Venezuela. The overall idea behind the demarcation of forest reserves was to supply domestic industries with wood in the long run. According to the still valid Forest Law of 1965, forest reserves are meant to be used in a sustainable manner allowing for other uses only to the extent that they are seen as compatible with their basic function as permanent sources of wood supply. However, Imataca has not played an important role concerning wood exploitation until the late 80s when the national forestry service (SEFORVEN) started to grant new forest concessions. Since then, the importance of Imataca for satisfying domestic wood demand has grown continuously, with an interruption only at the beginning of the 90s when exploitation was paralyzed for about two years in most parts of the reserve due to controversies around management plans and related research activities, in particular the necessity of an additional environmental impact assessment as required under the *Ley Penal del Ambiente*.

Forest management techniques have a long-standing tradition, Venezuela being the first country in Latin America to introduce logging concessions based on management plans in the 70s. The techniques have not been changed much since then, and an overall evaluation of the outcomes of this kind of management is still left to be done (for more information about the issues of concessions and management in Venezuela see Centeno 1995 or <http://www.ciens.ula.ve/~jcenteno/>).

Changes in the legal status of forest reserves, however, need the approval of Congress. The new plan tries to avoid any such legal implications by simply defining mining as being compatible with the sustainable use and management of the forest reserve. It thus

legitimizes access to nearly a third of the reserve for mining which until recently has been more of a semi-legal and small-scale practice. Based on such legal inconsistencies including, according to the opponents, violation of national environmental laws and international conventions, several demands for nullification of the decree have been brought forward to the Supreme Court. So far, no final decision has been taken. In December 1997, the Supreme Court formally decided to put a hold on the granting of new mining permits and concession contracts in the Forest Reserve.

Looking a little closer

A closer look at the various actors involved and the growing diversity of issues that are being discussed as the "Imataca case" shows that Imataca has become a political battlefield where different meanings of and means to development are being fought over. Like one delegate of the Permanent Commission on Environment of the Senate said at a two-day public meeting organized by various groups in San Felix in September 1997,

"Al principio discutimos el decreto 1850 primariamente del punto de vista ambiental, pero ahora sabemos que el problema no es solamente eso. Tenemos que pensar también sobre el modelo de desarrollo que el Decreto presenta y sus consecuencias para las comunidades indígenas, la soberanía nacional, el pueblo venezolano y el planeta tierra."

Not surprisingly maybe, all interest groups have increasingly incorporated these broader issues into their own arguments to defend their point of view. But each of them is framing the story differently.

Large and small-scale miners

Mining - in particular the exploitation of gold and diamonds - is not a recent development in the region, but can be dated back more than 100 years when mainly English and French companies started to set up the first mines in the Guayana region. And of course, there always has been what is called "minería artesanal" subsuming those mining activities with low capital and technology input: the classic individual miner who uses his *batea* or *suruka* to get the gold or diamonds respectively.

Still, in recent years the mining sector in Venezuela has undergone tremendous transformation and development. With the beginning of the decline of national economy in the 1980s, mining has become an important economic alternative for many Venezuelans. Along with the rising number of migrants from other parts of Venezuela to those areas with high reserves of gold and other minerals, among them the Imataca Forest Reserve, there have been substantial changes in the forms of exploitation and organization of work. While in the 80s the Venezuelan state via the powerful and parastatal Cooperación Venezolana de Guayana (CVG) initiated programs to support and organize the mining activities of "small miners", state policies on mining have now increasingly adopted a neo-liberal approach. The aim is to develop technically more sophisticated, larger-scale and more effective forms of exploitation mainly by big transnational companies which, as they maintain, do not only provide employment and economic development in general, but work in a way that minimizes environmental

impacts. More importantly even, large private companies hold the promise to indirectly facilitate state control over mining activities in remote areas.

The small mining sector, on the other hand, is portrayed by high officials in the mining ministry as being the great destroyer of the environment, an unorganized mass of miners that roam in the virgin forests. The ongoing and fruit-bearing efforts of the small miners to organize themselves and legalize their activities are largely ignored. By pointing to the fact that "el Garimperismo ya controla 2200 ha" of the forest reserve, which according to the president of the Camara Minera is an "elemento ausente" (absent element) in the whole debate about the Decreto 1850, government officials legitimize the need to bring order in what they see as total anarchy. Order for them primarily means legalization, more state control, and more efficient technologies - all three of which figure prominently in the management and land-use plan under dispute.

Indigeneous peoples' concerns

While the position of the small mining sector towards the new Decree is ambivalent due to its unclear status within the plan, straight-forward resistance to the new managing scheme has come not only from a range of NGOs but also from the indigenous people living in the forest reserve. There are about 50 indigenous communities of 5 different ethnic groups that are directly affected by the new managing plan. Although part of the indigenous population has taken up mining as an alternative or complementary income source to their traditional subsistence activities, to them the Decreto 1850 is not only a problem of mining and environment, but a symbol for continuing ignorance and violation of indigenous rights by the Venezuelan state. The controversy about Imataca has given them a platform to reanimate public attention towards their situation and to divulge long-standing claims for land titles and their own understanding of sustainable development.

The plight of the indigenous people has been given a rather broad space within the public arguments against Decree 1850. This is quite surprising, considering the usually little notice taken of indigenous concerns in national debates in comparison with other countries in the region. Their prominence and high visibility in the Imataca conflict can be explained, however, taking into account their considerable "symbolic capital" (to use a term of Bourdieu), as they worldwide have become key symbols for a life-style that not only is seen as being more ecologically sound, but for an increasing number of people points to a political alternative to the modernist, capitalist development model altogether. They are, in other words, the "human face" to the complex issues at stake here. It is therefore not surprising that the resistance of the non-indigenous civil society has been centered primarily around the indigenous cause which itself is being framed by a story that emphasizes the "global benefits" of preserving the cultural and biological diversity in Imataca.

Institutional change

Government agencies highlight the significance of environmental protection, too. There are many apparent conflicts and power struggles between the various administrative entities involved - for instance the ministries of mining and environment - and due to on-

going political decentralization processes the division of tasks between central state and regional governments in matters of natural resource politics is far from being clear. Notwithstanding these troubles and uncertainties, the ministries present themselves united in their central belief that the rational and sustainable use of the resources in the region is possible. The underlying assumption of their interventions is that the new land-use plan will be equally beneficial to everybody in the long run. The state's task as seen by the ministries then is just to set up an "adequate" political, legislative and administrative framework. First steps in this direction have already been taken as illustrated by the various new decrees, regulations and institutions that have recently been created or are currently under debate. In proposing a new regional coordination body, the following statement of the Governor of Bolívar, printed in a regional newspaper in June last year, also illustrates this point:

"La propuesta de la Gobernación es la creación de una autoridad única integrada por el Ejecutivo regional, la CVG y los representantes de los organismos descentralizados. Para que se hable un solo lenguaje en materia minera, (...). Luego agregó que se abre así el proceso mediante el cual, por primera vez en la historia de Guayana, se va a discutir con seriedad y con responsabilidad una solución a mediano plazo y que nos permita una mejor distribución y mejor uso de los recursos del oro, del diamante y los minerales no metálicos y la mejor protección del ambiente." (Correo del Caroni, June 5th, 1997)

On our research topics

This brief description of the conflicts around Imataca gives a first impression of some of the major actors involved. In our view, to understand the ongoing controversy it is not sufficient to consider only the "place-based actors" (Blaikie 1985) like miners, loggers, indigenous people etc., but also those actors whose stakes, interests and activities are not inherently embedded within the locality. Government institutions, transnational companies, and non-local NGOs are important examples of this category. Thus a thorough analysis needs to focus in more detail on these different actors involved in the discussion around the Imataca Forest Reserve, on the specific ways how they try to reach their goals and on the processes resulting from their action, from the local and regional up to national and international levels.

Research is being carried out in the framework of the PhD program "Socio-Economics of Forest Use in the Tropics and Subtropics" based at the University of Freiburg, Germany, in cooperation with the Universidad Experimental de Guyana (UNEG), the Universidad de los Andes (ULA) and the Central University's Centro de Estudios de Desarrollo (CENDES) as our Venezuelan partners. Based on a 12-month fieldwork we are focussing on central conflicts around access to natural resources of three principal clusters of actors, namely state forest policies and the logging industry (1), indigenous peoples and their organisations (2) and the different actors involved in mining (3). Shared questions of our works in progress include:

- What main topics have emerged in the course of the discussion process about Imataca and how have they changed over the time? And by the same token, why do other issues, e.g. the forest sector receive comparably little attention?

- What "discourse coalitions" have been formed? And how do coalition building processes effect the way actors are perceiving the problem and their choosing of strategies to realize their interests?
- How do the different actors legitimate their interests and activities? What can be said, for example, about attempts, possibilities and limitations of the state to intervene and regulate the conflict?
- Is forest destruction in the Forest Reserve Imataca mainly a local environmental problem or must it be seen as a manifestation of unresolved problems on the regional, national and international levels? How valid is the economic argument for the use of forest and mineral resources in the Venezuelan case?
- How do activities of "place-based" and "non place-based" actors impact on the local forest situation? For example, how do particular state policies in the economic and environmental field influence use patterns in the forested areas?

Coming from different disciplines and scientific backgrounds we are trying to make our theses relate to each other, but we clearly don't share one unified theoretical approach to our work and draw on quite different theoretical strands such as policy analysis, discourse analysis, regional planning theory and Third World political ecology.

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Further information

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