

## **Between Bolivar and Bureaucracy: The Mesoamerican Biological Corridor**

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**Liza Grandia**

**Abstract:** *This article explores how the different elements of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (MBC) may not be so “naturally united” as implied by this slogan. I trace the history and evolution of this conservation corridor from its roots in the Central American environment movement to its transformation by the World Bank into a vague bureaucratic framework. The shift to embrace green neoliberalism, in turn, has served to mask threats to biodiversity from three other more powerful economic corridors being simultaneously constructed in the Mesoamerican region, namely: (1) the Puebla to Panama Plan, (2) Mundo Maya, and (3) the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). I conclude by describing some lost opportunities for indigenous and bottom-up environmental initiatives to suggest what a Bolivarian alternative might have been before the MBC became bureaucratized by transnational conservation interests.*

**Keywords:** corridors, World Bank, neoliberalism, BINGOs, biodiversity conservation, indigenous peoples, trade, Mesoamerica

### **INTRODUCTION**

WHETHER DESCRIBED as ecoregions, corridors, hotspots, or wilderness areas, international biodiversity conservation scientists and managers have begun to embrace planning and monitoring frameworks that move beyond the man-

**Liza Grandia**, Department of International Development, Community, and Environment, Clark University, 950 Main St., Worcester, MA 01610, USA.

#### **Address for Correspondence**

Liza Grandia, Department of International Development, Community, and Environment, Clark University, 950 Main St., Worcester, MA 01610, USA.

**E-mail:** lgrandia@clarku.edu

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agement of protected areas to more complex regional programmes that often cross national political boundaries. One such multi-million dollar effort is the World Bank-funded Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (or MBC)<sup>1</sup>, established in Central America and southern Mexico in the late 1990s simultaneously to promote both conservation and sustainable development in a region with high rates of biological endemism as well as seemingly endemic poverty. This paper examines the history, design, and success of this biological corridor, taking into account the broader context of how other transnational plans for neoliberal economic restructuring have shaped its development and impact.

With an estimated 7–8 per cent of the planet's biodiversity squeezed into just one half per cent of the earth's landmass, Mesoamerica is a critical region from a global conservation perspective. According to a ranking system developed by Conservation International (CI), Mesoamerica constitutes the planet's third largest "megadiversity hotspot" by virtue of its multitudinous endemic and endangered species and amazing topographical variety, all packed into an area roughly the size of Texas. As a corridor connecting the biota of two continents, the Mesoamerican isthmus supports 17,000 plant species of which roughly one-fifth (2941) are endemic, as well as an equally impressive number of mammals (440 species, 65 endemics), reptiles (690 species, 240 endemics), amphibians (550 species, 350 endemics), not to mention aquatic species (CI 2006).<sup>2</sup>

This great biological diversity correlates strongly with cultural diversity, with some sixty ethnic and linguistic groups still thriving in Mesoamerica today despite five centuries of colonialism and ethnocide (Ayres 2003). Most, but not all, are descendents of the ancient Maya, who were responsible for domesticating some of the world's most important crops including corn, tomatoes, avocados and cocoa. What might appear to be "primary" or "pristine" forests are likely remnants of ancient agroforestry systems: for example, the northern Maya forests contain unusual numbers of economically useful tree species such as *chicle* (*Manilkara zapota*), allspice (*Pimienta dioica*), *cacao* (*Theobroma cacao*), *ramón* (*Brosimum alicastrum*), and *corozo* (*Orbignya cohune*), among others (Nations 2006). Even today, the most forested areas of Mesoamerica are clearly contiguous with indigenous communities (National Geographic Society & the Center for Native Lands 2002).

Despite its wealth of natural and cultural resources, Mesoamerica is home to some of the most inequitable land regimes and impoverished communities in the western hemisphere. More than half the region's forests have already been destroyed and deforestation continues at roughly 1.4 per cent annually. Wealthy corporations and individuals cut down the forests for cattle, plantation agriculture, oil, timber and other large-scale extractive enterprises, while poor farmers remove trees to plant corn to feed their families. Such vivid contrasts have led many MBC analysts to juxtapose the region's poverty with its endangered natural wealth. By purporting to fight poverty while simultane-

ously conserving biodiversity in a densely populated region, the MBC presents itself as a solution to environmental problems caused both by greed and need.

After pledging at least \$90 million to a nascent MBC in the late 1990s, the World Bank, via its Global Environmental Facility (GEF), became the largest donor supporting the single largest conservation scheme in Central American history. The other funding agencies include United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), the European Union, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as well as private foundations like Ford and Packard.<sup>3</sup> Within the World Bank, the MBC's framework appears to have become an important point of reference for its regional programming. In a 2003 World Bank analysis of the MBC, Guzman et al. calculate that one-third of the World Bank's ongoing projects would contribute either directly (18 per cent) or indirectly (82 per cent) to the MBC. World Bank estimates for projects "indirectly associated" with the MBC run as high as \$1.3 billion (World Bank and IDB 2001, Madrid seminar). Under the MBC umbrella, the Bank includes support for a broad portfolio of programme areas including: eco-tourism, climate change mitigation, forest management, biodiversity research, and even land administration. In response, dozens of conservation organisations at the local, regional and international levels have been re-organising their work agendas to conform to these new financial opportunities. Without a doubt, the MBC has generated many new conservation projects under the rubric of corridors. The critical question is whether or not these additional activities are actually achieving the dual goals of fomenting economic development while simultaneously conserving the environment.

At a rhetorical level, the MBC's objectives appear unobjectionable. Would it not be wonderful to eat one's conservation cake and get a development desert too? What is wrong with expert management? Who can be against regional integration? The fuzziness of the MBC framework is precisely what makes it such a slippery subject for analysis and evaluation. As the title of the article suggests, there exist serious tensions between a genuine bottom-up environmental movement naturally seeking to coordinate across borders and institutions and a top-down, donor driven, bureaucratic-state building vision for the MBC. In many ways, the tensions within the MBC are reflected in - two competing visions for Latin American regionalism: Simon Bolívar's dream of a Pan-American unification of independent countries on their own terms versus a hegemonic US goal of hemispheric domination via the Monroe Doctrine (Bull 2005). MBC managers attempt to claim both the Bolivarian and bureaucratic positions through rhetoric about "participation" by local peoples, as well as the "institutionalisation" of the programme into state agencies, quasi-governmental institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGO) through a process guided by foreign experts.<sup>4</sup>

Based on 13 years of involvement (including 7 years in residence) with conservation programmes in northern Mesoamerica (specifically, Guatemala and Belize),<sup>5</sup> this paper examines the outcomes of the almost decade-old MBC programme, which has thus far received little research attention.<sup>6</sup> I first provide background on the history and evolution of the MBC by dissecting its three etymological elements of the MBC (Mesoamerica, Biological, and Corridor) and examining the purported “natural unity” among them. Then, in the second part of the paper, I describe how the World Bank reshaped a Bolivarian idea for a Mesoamerican biological corridor into a market-based environmental agenda and the subsequent response of community organisations to this green neoliberal paradigm. In the third section, I discuss the murky relationships between the MBC and three more powerful trade and tourism corridors being simultaneously constructed in the Mesoamerica region, namely: (1) the Puebla to Panama Plan, (2) Mundo Maya and (3) CAFTA. Arguing that the scale and style of the World Bank’s approach to the MBC have served to greenwash these more serious economic threats to biodiversity, in the concluding section, I suggest what an alternative and perhaps more autochthonous vision for the MBC might have been.

#### EXAMINING THE NATURAL UNITY OF THE MBC

*Naturalmente unidos*, or “naturally united”, like the programme it represents, the slogan for the MBC is rich with ambiguity. Who is united? For what purpose? To what kind of nature do they refer? In the top frame of the MBC website is a horizontal strip of photographs meant to illustrate this enigmatic slogan. From left to right, one sees an indigenous-looking man’s face fading into a forest landscape that blends into a seascape that cuts to some coffee beans, then a toucan, and ends with images of ancient Maya temples. Many other official MBC publications utilise similar triptychs to highlight its nomenclature: (1) *Mesoamerica* through images of smiling indigenous people; (2) the *Biological* with stock nature photos of mountains, flora, or fauna; and (3) the *Corridor* by scenes of agriculture, business, or tourism. In such composite images, economic development, cultural survival and biodiversity blend together harmoniously without conflict or trade-offs. Fact or façade?

#### *Defining Mesoamerica*

“Mesoamerica” has various definitions depending on whether one is talking with an archaeologist, a socio-cultural anthropologist, a historian, a political scientist, an economist, or a wildlife biologist. Archaeologists tend to circumscribe the region around a belt of Aztec and Maya cities (e.g., Kirchoff 1952 as a foundational text), while historians and cultural anthropologists tend to define the region more broadly as “Middle America”, meaning both Mexico and Central America, focusing on the legacies of Spanish colonialism (e.g.,

Wolf 1959 and Helms 1975). Political scientists might emphasise the nationalist divisions of Central America after its short-lived federation (1824–1838) following independence from Spain, while economists might envision the region in terms of common markets.

Recent attempts to reunify Central America have produced different configurations. At the behest of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Central American Common Market emerged in the 1960s. It disintegrated in the 1970s, and re-emerged as the System of Central American Integration (SICA) in 1991. Since then, “Mesoamerican” membership in this alliance and other offshoots remains porous, as illustrated by Table 1.

While the political economy and institutional complexities of these various “imagined” Mesoamericas are beyond the scope of the paper, suffice it to say here that who, what and where gets defined as “Central America” or “Mesoamerica” is not as clear or natural as implied by the MBC’s logo and may be influenced by outsiders and their agendas.

### *Delimiting Biology*

While advocates for biological corridors may claim that their designs emerge objectively from ecological science, they are also a historical product of the tensions between “people and the environment”. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation’s (UNESCO) Man and the Biosphere (MAB) programme emerged as one of the first attempts to reconcile those tensions by designating different zones of permitted and prohibited human activities within protected areas. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, most international conservation work focused on the establishment and management of parks according to this concentric model. Leading these efforts were a small number of nonprofits to which I refer in this paper as the conservation Big International Non-Governmental Organisations (BINGOs). By 2002, just three of these organisations—Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), and CI controlled an estimated half of the \$1.5 billion available for conservation (Chapin 2004).

Following the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, these and other conservation organisations made introductory forays into addressing the community, social and economic issues provoked by the establishment of many new protected areas. Integrated Conservation and Development Programmes (ICDPs) became the donor and NGO buzzwords of the decade. By the end of the 1990s, however, fragile alliances between conservation and community interests appeared to be breaking down. Many scientists/managers within the conservation BINGOs were expressing disenchantment about their development experiences and reasserting preservationist rhetoric. Meanwhile, indigenous and human rights advocates had become increasingly concerned about the

**Table 1**  
*The shifting membership of "Mesoamerica"*

Country	Academic Perspectives		Political Science and Economics	Circa 1991	Contemporary Institutional Realities			
	Archaeology	Cultural Anthropology and History			2004-2005	Early 2000s	1990s	Early 2000s
Mexico	Mesoamerica X	Middle America	Central America	SICA	DR-CAFTA	PPP	CCAD	MBC
Guatemala	X	X	X	X	X	X	Observer	X (same as PPP except for the state of Guerrero)
Belize	X	X	X	X		Consultative	X	X
Honduras	Partially	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
El Salvador		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Nicaragua		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Costa Rica		X	X	X	X, but not ratified	X	X	X
Panama			Sometimes	X		X	X	X
Dominican Republic					X, ratified but not yet implemented		X, associative status	

millions of people being displaced by parks worldwide (see Dowie 2005 on the emergence of “conservation refugees”). From this context, donors seized upon the idea for “conservation corridors” as a possible peacemaking panacea to overcome the conflicts between people and parks.

The conservation BINGOS quickly took administrative, financial and ecological advantage of the global reorientation of conservation around corridors.<sup>7</sup> As a young CI project coordinator, I recall that all planning and budgeting was done at the country level throughout the 1990s. Then, at the annual planning week at Washington, D.C. headquarters in 1999, CI executives suddenly began talking about corridors. My Guatemalan colleagues were discomfited about this new model thrust on them, which they felt was better suited to large countries like Brazil and not tiny, complex, multi-ethnic regions like Central America. However, one by one, the people and programmes opposing the restructuring left the organisation. In fact, 70 per cent of senior staff and an astounding 80 per cent of field directors have left, which means that less than one out of five key decision-makers at CI today were working with the organisation before this shift to corridors.

Many of the ideas supporting corridors are, in fact, scientifically sound. Wherever parks get established, their borders may be less than ideal in terms of species protection. Once established, scientists may realise that the areas are simply too small to sustain species populations or to resist outside threats (cf. MacArthur & Wilson’s 1967 theory of island biogeography). It also is true that certain species need to roam larger areas to survive.<sup>8</sup> Ecosystems of any size, no doubt, can be more resilient if they have outlets for germplasm exchange—whether by active movement, pollination or passive dispersal. Finally, corridor management has the potential to establish important linkages between the conservation of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.

The corridor approach might also draw greater attention to the agrarian contexts *outside* of parks, which may be just as ecologically important as what happens *inside* parks. By bringing agricultural systems into conservation debates, corridors may present new opportunities for supporting fair-trade projects and other small-scale agroforestry systems compatible with conservation. In other words, corridors could offer a method for moving beyond protectionism to embrace a mosaic vision for conservation that includes local people more explicitly. Corridor planning frameworks also could provide more democratic conservation forums.

As compelling as these ecological and social rationales may be, there were also undoubtedly political and financial issues involved in the BINGOs’ shift to corridors. As Mario Boza of Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) observes, they ‘realized the tremendous potential of this project not only for biological conservation but for fund raising’ (Kaiser 2001:2197). Corridors also created new political leverage with national governments that might have already reached conservation saturation and no longer wanted any new parks. While flagship management of single species had largely been replaced by

broader policies of ecosystem conservation for very sound scientific reasons, conservation executives were nonetheless aware that charismatic megafauna would captivate the public's imagination. By profiling them in corridors—for example, “jaguars without borders”, “the path of the tapir”, “scarlet macaws without borders”—the conservation BINGOs discovered a subtle new packaging for raising both money and tolerance for the designation of new kinds of protected areas.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Demarcating Corridors***

Although wildlife biologists at WCS frequently take the credit for introducing the MBC concept, a closer examination of the political and legal genealogy of the corridor shows that it actually had multiple origins and intellectual authors.<sup>10</sup> Costa Rican biologists, for instance, had begun talking about the importance of connecting their parks as early as the 1970s. Their idea re-emerged in the late 1980s during preparations for the 1992 United Nations “Earth Summit”. Lobbying by key national environmentalists succeeded in getting five Central American presidents to sign a Charter Agreement for the Protection of the Environment, which led to the establishment of the Central American Commission on Environment and Development (CCAD) in 1989 as a programme of SICA.<sup>11</sup> Working at high political levels, CCAD's initial mandate was to help its member countries strengthen their own Agenda 21 commitments, modernise their environmental legislation, and establish strong Ministries of the Environment at home to address a broad spectrum of environmental problems, not just biodiversity conservation.

During this same time period, some conservationists were working to establish transboundary “peace parks” to capitalise on the goodwill for regional cooperation expressed by Central American presidents at the 1987 Esquipulas Conference after decades of brutal civil wars (Arias & Nations 1992).<sup>12</sup> Examples of peace parks include: a belt of protected areas across Mexico, Guatemala and Belize collectively known as the Maya Tropical Forest; the Chiquibul mountain range in Guatemala and Belize; and a bi-national park between Costa Rica and Panamá referred to as “La Amistad” (Friendship). As a result of these and other efforts, around 13 per cent of Mesoamerican territory is now under some protected status, with significant variability by country. Nearly half of Belize, a third of Guatemala, a quarter of Costa Rica and Panama, and less than 1 per cent of El Salvador are now protected by national parks and peace parks.<sup>13</sup>

Following their success in the early 1990s in demarcating so many bi- and tri-national parks, conservationists logically began imagining ways in which they might string together these building blocks into a more ambitious, transnational corridor. Yet while obviously related, transnational corridors like the MBC and peace parks are not necessarily synonymous. The coordination of a peace park belongs to two sovereign nations, whereas transboundary corridors



lend themselves to management by international organisations or multilateral institutions that are not necessarily accountable to local organisations and governments. Moreover, early advocates for peace parks such as Arias and Nations (1992) invoked rationales for cross-border environmental coordination broader than just the preservation of biodiversity, citing, for example: public health benefits of addressing pollution from pesticides or oil refineries; political benefits in resolving border conflicts; and agricultural benefits such as preventing soil erosion or the spread of hoof-and-mouth disease. Their arguments implicitly challenged big business and seemed almost a prescient call for regional environmental justice. As we shall see, however, the World Bank funding in the mid-1990s shifted the Bolivarian effort led by Central American environmentalists to a different kind of corridor that reflected the Bank's own peculiarly capitalist interpretation of the relationship between people and the environment.

### THE MBC AS GREEN NEOLIBERALISM

Based on a small grant of \$340,000, the World Bank jumpstarted a series of feasibility studies for the MBC. After Central American heads of state approved the plan at a summit in 1997, the Bank began disbursing another 8 year grant for the MBC starting in 1998. Belize and Panama officially joined the effort. Policy papers, institutional research, mapping, workshops, meetings all began in a flurry. The MBC's institutional focal point became the CCAD, which was to coordinate *ad hoc* projects across four general sectors: (1) water, (2) environmental management, (3) clean production and (4) forests and biodiversity. Other regional donor programmes pledged funding, further complicating institutional coordination.<sup>14</sup> With all this new bureaucracy, a broad and unfocused agenda, and the challenges of high-level political coordination, the MBC quickly lost its potential to inject a stronger environmental justice component into regional biodiversity conservation programmes.

Indeed, the MBC that emerged from the World Bank's incubator was decidedly more business-oriented than initial proposals for Central American environmental coordination at the 1992 Earth Summit. Influencing this transition to a more business-oriented conservation agenda was a highly-cited policy paper written by the World Resources Institute (WRI) (Miller et al. 2001), which proposed eight strategic areas for the MBC. Some of the goals reflect generic rhetoric of the development industry, such as: (1) fostering good governance and citizen participation; (2) providing information to participants through training and media; and (3) supporting regional land-use planning.<sup>15</sup> Other goals borrow the language of corporate business and express a clear intent to orient the MBC's conservation strategy around market mechanisms, including: (1) "reconciling stakeholder interests"; (2) "addressing property rights"; (3) setting up mechanisms to capture "ecosystem services"; and (4) "harmonizing" institutional and legal frameworks. For example, the authors

propose that if only “properly planned and implemented, the MBC offers a means to maximise conservation benefits while improving social and economic opportunities for rural populations” (Miller et al. 2001:7). In other words, they advocate that a more explicit involvement of the private sector in conservation could make economic growth and sustainable development mutually reinforcing. Throughout such planning documents, the Mesoamerican people are described as amorphous “stakeholders” (a peculiar word itself not easily translated into Spanish)—thereby implying that they may participate in the MBC through ownership, but not as citizens with inherent rights and freedoms.

The reader may recall that at the 1992 UNCED (Earth Summit) in Rio, the conservation BINGOS had championed partnerships with indigenous and local peoples as the solution for getting past the “environment vs. development” dichotomy. By the time of the Rio+10 Summit in Johannesburg in 2002, however, BINGOS heralded new alliances with big business through the United Nations’ “type two” public-private-partnerships (another PPP).<sup>16</sup> In just a decade, big business had displaced local people as partners in conservation (Toly 2004). Following this same paradigm shift, MBC planners professed faith in the ability of markets not only to solve intractable development problems, but simultaneously to achieve environmental goals and inspire democratisation. As the Honduras environmental minister declared, the MBC “has the objective of improving business opportunities and living standards, as well as conserving biodiversity and the quality of environmental services” (Honduras This Week, Online 7/17/2000). As if “win-win” solutions were not enough, we can now have “win-win-win-win-win-win-win” equations that benefit alike corporate investors, national economies, biodiversity, local people, western consumers, not to mention the World Bank and the BINGOs implementing the corridor.<sup>17</sup>

Ignoring the obvious causal factors of extractive deforestation like oil drilling, cattle ranching, logging, export-plantation agriculture, inequities in land distribution, and many other market activities that primarily threaten protected areas in Central America, MBC advocates insist that the key cause of deforestation is that nature has not yet been sufficiently commodified. As CI staff write:

*Another factor underlying deforestation has been that basic ecosystem services derived from maintaining forest cover, such as soil conservation, watershed management, biodiversity conservation, and carbon sequestration, have been undervalued. **Failure to monetize these services has meant that landowners and communities have not received direct income from intact forest.** (Rodríguez & Asquith 2004:16, emphasis mine).*

Much of the MBC literature expresses the hope that carbon trading and payment for environmental services will provide sufficient motive for private landowners to collaborate in corridor management by reforesting their land. Such market-based payments could potentially catalyse positive conservation practices, but only if they address problems of scale, sovereignty, and supervision as described in the next few paragraphs.

Strikingly, MBC planners never differentiate between helping small or large holders with environmental service payments. In practice, cattle ranchers and other large landholders have been the ones most able to take advantage of such programmes, thereby reinforcing production inequities between the rich and poor. Consequently, many peasant activists now fear that carbon-trading programmes may catalyse the development of the kinds of tree plantations characterised by the World Rainforest Movement as ‘green deserts’ that threaten indigenous territories around the planet (Barreda Marín 2004). Under the logic of the Kyoto Protocol, a small farmer who maintains mature forests on his land would not be eligible for carbon credits. Yet, a rancher who plants African oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) on denuded pastures would be counted as providing an additional CO<sub>2</sub> “sink” and producing biodiesel fuel, thereby making him eligible for carbon credits (see Lohmann 2006 for further critiques on carbon trading), despite scientific evidence that a mature tropical forest is a better carbon sink than a monoculture plantation, not to mention other biodiversity indicators. Such distortions have led to African oil palm planters buying up tens of thousands of hectares of farmland in northern Guatemala. If small farmers refuse to sell, African oil palm plantation buyers reportedly threaten them by saying, “Well, either you can sell your land to me now or your widow will later.” These speculative pressures have displaced hundreds of Q’eqchi’ Maya and other small-farming families, driving them to migrate into protected areas like the Maya Biosphere Reserve.

In the meanwhile, conservation BINGOs like CI continue to advocate carbon sequestration schemes or what they call “conservation incentives”, meaning the direct purchase of forest concessions from third-world governments. I recall how at a conference in 2002, with colonial flair, a senior CI economist whipped out a calculator, punched in a few numbers and declared to the audience that buying up a 45,000 hectare timber concession in Bolivia would be “less than the cost of a house in my DC neighbourhood.” That same year CI attempted to undermine nearly a decade of successful work by twenty two community-led forest concessions in Petén by proposing to pay just two of them cash for not harvesting their wood. The Guatemalan national park service rejected the proposal, which suggested that buying up Central American land for corridors and other conservation goals might be cheap enough for foreign NGOs, but thornier questions about sovereignty and the policing of those areas remain unresolved.<sup>18</sup>

Yet another problem with market-based programmes is the reliance on international “expert” management to tinker with markets to produce conserva-

tion outcomes. As many other scholars have noted, the constant construction of a biodiversity “crisis” often serves to justify the intervention of foreign experts or those who Michael Goldman (2004) refers to as “global resource managers”—i.e., the well-connected and networked multilateral staff, donors, and employees of transnational NGOs (see also Sachs 1992, Leach 1998, Asher 2000, among others). Rhetoric about the complexities of transboundary conservation only exacerbates this tendency to seek “expert” management. Donor framing of big conservation problems over a big area seems to be a recipe for working with big conservation organisations.

Indeed, the sheer budgetary scale of the MBC is deepening an unfortunate schism between the well-endowed conservation BINGOs that the World Bank hires to manage such projects and the poorer local and national environmental groups, which struggle to glean any of the MBC’s leftover resources. Two decades ago simply because there were very few local or national NGOs, environmental donors understandably felt they had to work with BINGOs. Since then, many Central American NGOs have been established and matured, but very few of them are benefiting from the MBC budget spoils. Precisely because the MBC emphasises regionality, the multilateral donors still seem to prefer to work with BINGOs that can mount large projects in multiple countries through their regional offices. They find it administratively easier to contract one BINGO to do all the work vertically, instead of investing in various Central American NGOs and helping them to coordinate horizontally across borders to exchange ideas and methodologies.<sup>19</sup>

What is good for World Bank bureaucracy, however, may not be good for conservation. In other words, the challenge of disbursing multimillion budgets pushes the MBC organisers to contract the services of the most expensive international consultants and organisations to the exclusion of local communities and organisations that do not operate on the circuit of environmental meetings held in five-star hotels. However, it is precisely those small and medium-sized, locally based organisations that can develop the most creative projects integrating both conservation and development goals, and which have the most linkages to the grassroots. Besides, if the stated goal of the MBC is to deepen democracy in Mesoamerica, how can this be done with foreign “experts” harnessing the bulk of the financial resources? If donors really believe in participation, would they give local people and organisations the power to change the direction of the MBC or even reject it entirely? Or, is the rhetoric of participation really about managing public opinion and manufacturing consent (cf. Herman & Chomsky 1988)? Rather than building coalitions and coordination from below, the MBC seems to have employed a top-down, ideologically driven approach to conservation planning—ironically simplifying the complexities of biodiversity conservation into a single model of “corridors” easily co-opted by other neoliberal economic corridors as we shall see in the next section.

### NEOLIBERAL ECONOMIC CORRIDORS

Early plans for the MBC clearly emphasised park linkages and the establishment of new protected areas, which peasant and indigenous groups immediately perceived as a threat to their lands and territories. In 1998, Asociación Campesina e Indígena de Agroforestería Comunitaria Centroamericana or the Central American Peasant and Indigenous Association of Community Agroforestry (ACICAFOC), a coalition of fifty Central American indigenous and peasant organisations established in 1994, countered with their own proposal for an indigenous and peasant biological corridor. Fearing that the MBC would mean more externally imposed protected areas, they demanded a conceptual expansion of the MBC from conservation to a more inclusive vision of sustainable development, which would include all the Central American peoples and cultures depending upon natural resources for their survival. The devastating effects of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 had made especially visible the disproportionate impact of natural disasters on the poor and added a new rationale for broadening the MBC to include local people (World Rainforest Movement 2001). Moreover, their “Bolivarian” demands for an alternative “ecodevelopment” corridor at least demonstrated that the Mesoamerican people were not so “naturally united” to the plan as the MBC slogan might imply.

In response, at least rhetorically, the CCAD incorporated ACICAFOC’s proposals into a revised MBC by adding a “social and productive component”, natural disaster mitigation and leadership training for indigenous groups. Privately, many within the conservation BINGOs viewed the nominal inclusion of indigenous and peasant concerns into the MBC as a deviation from their central mission to save biodiversity. In the opposing camp, some grassroots groups were disappointed that ACICAFOC had been used to “people-wash” the MBC; they felt that this new social component was more about quelling and conforming people to the MBC than redesigning the MBC to fit people’s needs. Still others were worried that at a historical moment of intense corporate globalisation, the MBC itself was being used to greenwash other major processes of regional integration through infrastructure, tourism, and trade, such as: (1) the Puebla to Panama Plan, (2) Mundo Maya, and (3) CAFTA. Indeed, MBC planners seem to have uncritically adopted the language of “corridors,” “connectivity” and “regionality”—employing very much the same rhetoric used by powerful transnational business interests supporting these three other trade and tourism corridors which may ultimately destroy Mesoamerica’s biodiversity and any possibility for sustainable development.

#### ***PPP—Privatisation, Profiteering, and Poverty***

Sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Puebla to Panama Plan (or PPP) is a \$50 billion package of infrastructure and legal projects meant to “economically integrate” Mesoamerica and to support foreign

investment expected under CAFTA. It represents an infrastructure plan for Central America unparalleled since the days of Teddy Roosevelt and the Pan American Highway. The presidents of all eight Mesoamerican countries (plus Belize informally) signed a loose agreement in 2001, with more than a \$10 billion price tag, though later plans describe it as totalling \$25 billion over 25 years. More than 90 per cent of the projects under the PPP umbrella are for transportation (improving seaports and airports, harmonising border regulations, above all building roads), energy (hydroelectric dams, pipelines, and electricity grids), or telecommunications technology. Many of these infrastructure plans already existed; what the IDB did was to package them together with financial and political support and give it spin.

Though ostensibly a Mesoamerican initiative, the geopolitical impetus for the PPP programme comes from further north.<sup>20</sup> With the bulk of US population and manufacturing on its Atlantic coast, North American-based corporations face a problem reaching rising Asian markets. The Panama Canal is now saturated, and alternative ground shipment east-west across the North American continent is prohibitively expensive. Hence, the US is seeking to develop new highways or “dry canals” from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans across other thin parts of the Central American isthmus. Specifically, that means \$7.5 billion for a 9000 km network of new and existing roads along and between two corridors: 1) a Pacific corridor from Puebla to Panama and 2) an Atlantic corridor from Yucatan to Belize to Honduras. Improved electricity and transportation will enable the opening of new factories (*maquiladoras*) along these corridors to employ a Central American labour force that will earn between 25 to 50 US cents an hour, even less than their Mexican counterparts under NAFTA.

Covering a broad agenda but with the details shrouded in secrecy, the PPP immediately raised suspicions from Mesoamerican civil society groups. Yet, whenever a project meets controversy, the IDB simply moves the budget from one IDB country office to another or simply removes it from the official PPP portfolio and shifts the blame to the national governments co-financing the effort. For example, in 2002 I had the opportunity to ask an IDB/Guatemala representative about their plans to fund a controversial hydroelectric dam along the Usumacinta River that would flood thousands of hectares of national parks in Mexico and Guatemala (including very high biodiversity regions of the Sierra Lacandón Park in northern Petén). He cleverly replied that there would be no funding from the IDB office in Guatemala, but did not rule out the possibility of the Mexico office funding the same project. Community activists were not easily fooled and controversy continued to swell around the project. Ultimately, the IDB removed the project altogether from the PPP, leaving blame to the Mexican government. Such budgetary shifts disingenuously deny the IDB’s symbolic power of suggestion and demonstrates how even ill-conceived projects tend to take on a life of their own once underway, even if the original donor pulls out.

Since 2001, grassroots organisations have organised constant meetings and protests against other PPP projects. Across the region, there have been teacher strikes, roads blocked by *campesino* organisations, and other acts of civil disobedience, many of them symbolically coordinated to fall on Columbus Day (October 12). Conspicuously absent from these anti-PPP coalitions have been the transnational conservation NGOs even though many of the planned mega-projects will crisscross areas of high biodiversity.

In response to the opposition, the PPP, or at least its public *appearance*, has morphed over time. The original PPP “plan” emphasised hard infrastructure—highways, electrical grids, dams and ports. Stepp and Lasseter (2004:28) describe the original PPP website as “filled with stark gray images of telecommunications, highways, bridges, trains, bulldozers and irrigations systems, yet not a single image of people or communities.” After the IDB hired the largest US-based public relations firm, Fleishman-Hillard International (Call 2003), the website’s new reincarnation features smiling indigenous people, workers wearing safety hats and green scenery. Besides these cosmetic changes, they also began organising a series of public consultations. Held in regional five-star hotels, these were highly orchestrated events led by normally grey-suited consultants dressed down in short-sleeve shirts, khakis, hiking boots and other safari-style accessories. Local people dressed up for the meetings. True to form, in Petén, the IDB arranged its public consultation in the luxurious Maya International Hotel. After the PowerPoint presentations, when local people were finally allowed to talk, they asked, “Why do you consult communities *after* the projects like the PPP are already defined?” Civil society leaders clearly stated that they wanted local *decision making*, not just cursory “participation” in project planning after the fact.

The other response of the IDB/PPP architects has been to greenwash projects through the promotion of regional eco/ethno-tourism and biodiversity conservation, hiring conservation BINGOs such as CI for those tasks. With the 2004 “Declaration of La Ceiba,” the PPP commissioners and presidents also formally integrated an indigenous “advisory group” to “promote joint venture schemes” between investors and consenting communities. Despite these gestures, the PPP’s overall budgetary allocations remain virtually unchanged. Added up, these new social and environmental items constitute less than 5 per cent of the overall PPP budget, which otherwise remains devoted to outdated, mega-infrastructure projects to cultivate foreign investment and trade.

### ***Mundo Maya—the Cancunisation of the Maya World***

Closely related to the PPP is Mundo Maya (The Maya World), another IDB initiative devoting \$120 million to develop a circuit of Maya archaeological sites along with eco and adventure tourism across Mesoamerica. Established in 1992, the original inspiration for Mundo Maya was a series in *National*

*Geographic* magazine called the “Maya Route” (Garrett 1989). Organisationally, Mundo Maya comprises a network of the Ministers of Tourism of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, with a rotating presidency; in that sense, its organisational structure mirrors that of the MBC/CCAD, which divides management tasks among the Central American Ministries of the Environment. Although early documents describing the MBC limit it to conservation and community land management, in more recent publications (e.g. Guzman et al. 2003), the World Bank has begun mentioning the importance of supporting “cultural heritage” projects in the region, suggesting a closer alliance between the World Bank and Mundo Maya.

According to Mundo Maya, between the years of 1997 and 2000, more than 23.5 million tourists visited its five member countries, and that number that has been increasing at a rate of 10 per cent per year. Nonetheless, some important archaeological sites in Petén like El Peru only receive a few hundred annual visitors, while Tikal receives more than 200,000 people a year (70 per cent foreigners), causing sanitation problems, degradation of the temples and disturbances to wildlife. For good reason, the IDB wants to spread archaeological tourism beyond such overly congested destinations and promote alternative sites like Yaxhá.<sup>21</sup> What is not yet clear is if Mundo Maya and the IDB are committed to projects that will contribute to the development of impoverished communities surrounding archaeological sites or to projects that will mostly benefit large tourism agencies and result in the Cancunisation of the Maya World. One wonders if the Maya participants in an IDB-PPP effort to promote partnerships between Marriott International and indigenous tourist organisations will become *owners* or *servants* in the process. One also wonders if the Mundo Maya goal of facilitating “the free movement of tourists in the Mayan World,” will include the free movement of Maya peoples to enjoy their cultural heritage and to maintain unrestricted access to archaeological sites for their own ceremonies.

Another point of contention with the IDB/Mundo Maya is the investment plan for new road development to make alternative destinations accessible to foreign tourists. In doing so, they may eventually destroy what they seek to promote, because new roads that might foment eco-archaeological tourism will also facilitate deforestation by providing entry to cattle ranchers, oil companies, oil palm plantations and other actors who seek roadside land. For instance, a proposed Mundo Maya route between Tikal and Calakmul would bifurcate the central Maya Biosphere Reserve on a north-south axis, thereby exposing this otherwise well-conserved region to outsiders.<sup>22</sup> The US archaeologist Richard Hansen nonetheless keeps pushing for such a road because it would provide access to El Mirador, the site on the Mexico-Guatemala border where he excavates. Opposition by local Guatemalan environmentalists has inhibited explicit funding. Yet, experience shows that one cannot underestimate the capacity that planning documents have to roll projects into motion beyond even the planners’ control. This is not to say that roads become inevi-



table, but rather that there are serious regional economic pressures pushing forward road projects, despite negative impacts on biodiversity conservation. For instance, local environmental groups had strongly objected to a bi-national road project (connecting Tenosique, Mexico, with El Naranjo, Guatemala via El Ceibo) because it would bifurcate the western Maya Biosphere Reserve. They succeeded in opposing the project in 2002, but by October 2006 large business interests regrouped to get the road built and inaugurated with bi-national fanfare.

Nonetheless, representatives of conservation BINGOs such as CI somehow remain optimistic that they can control the impact of other such PPP infrastructure projects: “Fortunately, through projects such as the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, efforts are underway to work with communities to conduct land-use planning in which the carrying capacity of protected areas is considered” (Rodríguez & Asquith 2004:18). In December 2002, CI also signed a contract with the IDB to work with CI and the National Geographic Society in developing regional ecotourism. Perhaps organisations like CI hope that by working inside the system they will somehow be able to mitigate the economic momentum for regional road integration. However, if their own organisational budgets depend upon the same donors financing the roads, they may find it difficult to muster opposition against those that hold the purse strings.

#### ***CAFTA— A Corporate Trade Agreement***

Perhaps the most important threat to Mesoamerican biodiversity may come from CAFTA. As witnessed by the North American Free Trade Agreement’s (NAFTA) (between the US, Canada and Mexico) experiences since 1994, the consequences of CAFTA upon environmental legislation and rural livelihoods will be serious indeed. Under NAFTA’s Chapter 11, transnational corporations gained legal standing to bring anti-environmental suits against any of its member nations via secret trade tribunals and they did so repeatedly. In Mexico, for example, Metalclad used NAFTA to sue for \$90 million and eventually to win \$15.6 million from the Mexican government because the San Luis Potosi municipality denied them permission to construct a toxic-waste dump at the site of an ecological reserve. In another case, Canada had to pay S.D. Meyers \$4.8 million for a law banning the export of PCBs and then had to eliminate the ban (Bottari 2001).

Building on NAFTA’s Chapter 11, CAFTA contains an even more drastic, and some might say anti-democratic, provision that enables corporations to sue governments over hypothetically projected *future* lost profits if their investment goals are denied on account of local environmental laws. For example, before CAFTA was passed in the US Congress, Harken Energy (on whose board George W. Bush formerly served) stated its intention to drill offshore in Costa Rica’s Talamanca region—one of the planet’s richest marine ecosys-

tems that has been named a UNESCO World Heritage Site and provides resources to three indigenous groups. Should Costa Rica ratify CAFTA, but not allow Harken Energy to drill, this corporation has threatened to sue the government of Costa Rica for \$58 billion, a sum greater than the country's entire GDP (\$37 billion), in compensation for *future* lost profits.

CAFTA also poses indirect threats to farmers' livelihoods, as reflected by the experiences of Mexican corn farmers under NAFTA, which obligated Mexico to open its borders to cheap, subsidised US corn. After NAFTA was ratified in 1994, Mexican corn imports leaped from 2.5 to 6 million tonnes and prices plummeted 70 per cent by 2001. This displaced an estimated 1.5 million Mexican farmers, pushing thousands of them to emigrate to the US. It also resulted in fantastic profits for vertically integrated corporations like Con-Agra and ADM, which tripled their earnings since between 1994 and 2000 (Global Trade Watch 2001).

CAFTA will be even worse for countries like Guatemala, which is even more dependent on corn production than Mexico and where the Maya people consider corn sacred and essential for life. More than half of Guatemala's population continues to grow their own corn with little more than a hoe, a machete and a digging stick because mechanisation is economically and geographically unfeasible in this mountainous country. Guatemalan farmers can currently sell their corn on the national market for about \$10 per 100 pounds, though prices range seasonally and across regions. If these farmers must suddenly compete with subsidised US corn prices (roughly \$4 per 100 pounds on the Chicago Board of Trade), they will lose more than half their income. As documented by numerous studies on deforestation, when small farmers get squeezed by the market, they expand into new areas to plant more acreage to make up for their losses, often pushing them to squat in protected areas (Grandia 2006).

Other threats to Central American farming livelihoods under CAFTA include changes to intellectual property laws. For example, although the Guatemalan Congress had banned the use of genetically-modified corn, CAFTA will likely require the revocation of this law, since corporations like Monsanto could claim that it is a non-tariff barrier to trade. In the same way, corporate agribusiness may prevent Guatemala from ever improving its regulation of pesticides known to damage both human and ecosystem health (Grandia 2001). Finally, although Guatemala had previously outlawed the patenting of flora and fauna, CAFTA will demand free and open legal access for bio-prospecting, thereby enabling the theft of traditional indigenous knowledge.

Although CAFTA will clearly have adverse impacts on biodiversity, the conservation BINGOs have remained strangely noncommittal on trade issues. Although NAFTA provoked acerbic debates and created great rifts in the international conservation community, CAFTA was passed without a single public comment from the conservation BINGO leadership. To assess whether or not they might be working behind the scenes, I consulted the policy de-

partments of the major international conservation organisations for their positions on CAFTA. CI's Vice-President for Conservation and Government responded: *We don't have a position.*<sup>23</sup> A representative of The Nature Conservancy said: *We are resigned to that fact that it will be approved... and have decided to do nothing.* Said a regretful colleague from Rainforest Alliance: *We don't take positions on anything. And, well, it's inevitable and we have to work with it.* World Wildlife Foundation's Central America programme could not be bothered to state a position. Although CAFTA runs contrary to the long-term interests of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development, the repeated excuse of the BINGOs has been that addressing this trade agreement lay beyond their organisational expertise (Grandia et al. 2005). Yet, they nonetheless maintain faith in their own capacity to coordinate complex cross-national biodiversity conservation efforts like the MBC.

#### **CONCLUSION: THE LOST BOLIVARIAN POTENTIAL OF THE MBC**

On a recent trip to Belize, I happened to meet an elderly Q'eqchi' leader, Juan Choc, who lives in a community that adjoins an important forest reserve and an archaeological site in the Toledo district. A group of twenty families in his village were concerned about the deforestation around their community—not only because of the loss of timber and non-timber forest resources (food, building and craft materials, medicines, ritual materials and so forth), but also for aesthetic reasons. Juan Choc noted wistfully that he worried his grandchildren would not ever see a *gibnut* in the forest. As an anthropologist, I was struck by how he spoke about his environmental concerns—which clearly originated from a deeply Q'eqchi' Maya cultural perspective, but which also had subtle intonations of a more British sense of nature drawn from the colonial legacies of his Belizean context. He explained that he had already made all the administrative rounds necessary to register his village association called *Junajib Re Mokon* in Q'eqchi' (which means roughly All of Us Together For Tomorrow) as an official non-profit, meeting the expenses himself. The group had evaluated various ideas and decided they would start a tree nursery and reforestation project on a 100 acre piece of communal land that his village agreed to designate as an additional forest reserve. He had made visits to other villages to observe which trees flourished on different kinds of soil, noting, "I've been going around and noticing things, you see. Over in Sehix village, I see they have a lot of red soil and that Emery tree...the one we call San Juan...grows well there. And you can make a lot of things from that Emery—canoes, sticks (lumber) for your house, all kinds of things!"

Juan Choc made especially clear that he was not asking for a handout, salaries, or environmental services; the villagers would undertake all the work. He just wanted some ideas, training and perhaps a little technical support to learn about improved forest management. Alas, he could find no institutional sup-

port. He had approached all the local NGOs and government offices—some of which I knew had received money from the MBC—but none was able to help him. Despite its strategic location, Juan Choc's village apparently lay outside every organisation's project range. Nonetheless, I was impressed by his determination and agreed to connect him with some village-based forest concessions I would be visiting in Guatemala; they agreed, as a personal favour, to receive Juan Choc in their communities if he could pay to get himself to the Guatemalan border. Village to village self-help and sharing of experiences; community forest reserves connected to important protected areas; figuring out sustainable human uses for the forest; helping local communities improve their village livelihoods; a clear sense of indigenous identity and belonging to a place—all the elements of what one might imagine to be an effective Meso-american cultural and conservation corridor were there, but not a dime of institutional support from the \$90 million spent by the World Bank on the MBC was to be found.

In retrospect, the MBC planning process could have opened a unique window of opportunity: there was interest and political will on the part of Central American leaders to do something for the regional environment, and also a significant amount of money for implementing creative ideas during a multi-year planning process. Visionary environmental leaders from Central America themselves had already started a process of regional planning through the CCAD. Following Hurricane Mitch, there was renewed political will to protect ecosystems and fight deforestation as a part of disaster mitigation. Further, the MBC had clearly captured the imagination of indigenous and peasant groups, as they mobilised to suggest alternatives proposals.

Of course, like almost any other complex international institution, the World Bank is a many-headed hydra. There are those within the Bank who intend to reform it from within, and there are just as many working outside the Bank whose critiques (both hostile and supportive) help establish the political will for reform within the Bank. Many talented and intelligent people have certainly worked on the MBC at one point or another. Unfortunately, the main architects and implementers of the MBC seem to have misused the citizen's concerns for merely 'people-washing' their plans. In the end, the World Bank-styled MBC seems to have diverged little from its bureaucratic business as usual. The language of sustainable development and "participation" cloaked it in apparent Bolivarian concern for the poor, but the outcome was a biological corridor clearly aligned with other regional plans for neoliberal economic development and trade.

In turn, the conservation BINGOS colluded with the Bank by absorbing almost all of the MBC's programmatic resources for the non-governmental sector, and then limiting their agendas to biodiversity conservation instead of a broader vision of environmental justice that a mosaic approach to corridor conservation could otherwise have inspired. The conservation BINGOs, as I hope to have shown in my discussions of the PPP, Mundo Maya and CAFTA,

ignore the threats posed by neoliberal economic development and trade to the peril their own long-term goals of biodiversity conservation. In the meanwhile, the perception that the MBC and the BINGOs are nebulously and nefariously linked with these other regional integration plans has continued to concern Central American civil society groups and led them to reject outright the MBC or at least maintain a deep suspicion of their motives. Another consequence of this distrust is a growing schism between local and national environmental groups and other kinds of civil society organisations (for land, health, human rights, women's issues, to name a few of the most active groups in Petén, Guatemala). Such fissures lamentably divide the very sectors that most urgently need to work together to halt or mitigate the effects of the mega-development projects and trade initiatives being foisted on Central America via corporate globalisation.

Had MBC planners truly listened to the concerns of ACICAFOC and other citizen groups, they might have reoriented their conservation plans along a different scale of environmental justice (Zerner 2000) to embrace a wider range of common health and livelihood problems, including pollution, water and sanitation, pesticides contamination, firewood acquisition, zoonotic and infectious diseases, agro-biodiversity, farmers' markets, and other issues that might better weave together the well-being of poor people with biodiversity conservation to foster an "environmentalism of the poor" (Guha & Martinez-Alier 1997). In doing so, they could have established a broader constituency for environmental issues beyond the same small groups of national elites who have the luxury to worry about wildlife.

Problems as complex as biodiversity conservation and sustainable development will require a variety of solutions from many sectors of the society. Dozens of Bolivarian, bottom-up initiatives that could have found a home within the MBC got excluded because the scale and stakes of the planning process were so highly bureaucratised and operated at such high levels of power. Had the Bank invested in real participatory decision-making (not just symbolic "consultations" about plans already underway), the corridor concept could very well have engendered creative programmes within a new paradigm of social and ecological justice. Alas, it seems that the rhetoric of corridors was just new jargon for really worn out ways of trying to achieve biodiversity conservation and the MBC will be doomed to pass into the dusty archives of the growing number of failed projects hatched in the corridors of the World Bank.

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mala colleagues for their candid perspectives on these issues. Undoubtedly, this article may ruffle the feathers of a few people in the international conservation community. The views represented in this paper are mine alone and should not be taken to reflect the views of any organisation with which I have been or am affiliated.

## Notes

1. The MBC translates as the CBM (Corredor Biológico Mesoamericano) in Spanish. For more information, see the bi-lingual website, [www.biomeso.net](http://www.biomeso.net).
2. Among Central America's most famous fauna are quetzal birds (*Pharomachrus mocinno*), howler monkeys (*Alouatta palliata*), scarlet macaws (*Ara macao*), tapirs (*Tapirus bairdii*) and jaguars (*Panthera onca*).
3. Taking a wider inventory of all biodiversity funding for just the northern Mesoamerican region, CI estimated that between 1993–1996, donors have given \$53 million; this figure fell to \$29 million between 1997 and 2003, but is expected to grow to \$125 between 2004–2008, with new funding under the MBC umbrella (Rodríguez & Asquith 2004).
4. Regarding an apparent contradiction between my description of the MBC as simultaneously “neoliberal” and “bureaucratic,” I would clarify that while neoliberal policies tend to be described as anti-bureaucratic because they seek to reduce government involvement in business, in practice, they often promote more government subsidies for business, or what some activists might call expanded “corporate welfare”. What I mean to suggest with my invocation of a “bureaucratic” approach to the MBC is a criticism of what anthropologists might describe as “arm-chair” conservation work based on high-level meetings and offices located far away from the communities affected.
5. Although the name suggests a single corridor, in practice, the MBC gets divided between northern and southern Central America. My ethnographic work has been primarily within the northern corridor region (known also as the Maya Forest), though many of the transnational processes described here will impact Central America as a whole. The paper highlights CI's role in the MBC for two reasons: (a) I have significant firsthand knowledge about CI, and also (b) as an organisation, CI has demonstrated a remarkable institutional agility to restructure itself into new donor frameworks such as the MBC.
6. Despite the discourse on regional integration, the differing geographies and cultural histories of northern and southern Central America have effectively divided “regional” Mesoamerica conservation programmes into two subregions: (1) the well-linked Atlantic coastal areas between Nicaragua, Honduras, Panama and Costa Rica; and (2) the northern Maya forest lying between Mexico, Guatemala and Belize. A third emerging area is a marine conservation region stretching from the coast of Yucatan down into Belize and Honduras, established under the Mesoamerican Caribbean Coral Reef Systems Initiative via the 1997 Tulum Declaration (Mittermeier et al. 2005:315). This Mesoamerican barrier reef system unfortunately tends to be separated from the other two sub-regional programmes because the ocean conservation organisations tend to be more highly specialised and separated from terrestrially based conservation organisations.
7. With their GIS mapping tools and various priority-setting methodologies, the BINGOs were well equipped to move quickly into the realm of corridors. CI has a biodiversity planning framework centred around the concept of “hotspots” based roughly on endemism, species diversities, and threats and “high biodiversity wilderness areas” based on area, population density, and political possibility for preservation. By contrast, WWF defines its priorities through classifications of “ecoregions”, which have a few additional criteria such as species richness, rare habitats and rare evolutionary phenomenon. TNC relies on WWF's classification system for their international work. WCS, by contrast, organises its work around single species. Meanwhile, the Alliance for Zero Extinction, a coalition of forty or-

- ganisations including those already mentioned, is prioritising sites according to three other criteria: endangerment, irreplaceability, and discreteness (Gordon et al. 2005).
8. However, wide-ranging species are not the only species around which one could design corridors. Ecologists point to the importance of other kinds of species such as: keystone species (those which regulate the system in a critical way), indicator species (those which reveal the system's overall health), and umbrella species (those whose protection includes many other species) (Gordon et al. 2005).
  9. On a practical level, however, channelling wildlife into well-known corridors could aid poachers by signalling the designated paths where wildlife is known to cross.
  10. Archie Carr III of WCS claims to have originated the idea in Gainesville, Florida (Kaiser 2001) with inspiration from the Wildlands Project launched to link reserves across the United States and also the efforts by the Florida park service to establish conservation corridors across his state. Enlisting the help of ecologists Larry Harris and Reed Noss, they sketched a proposed Path of the Panther ("Paseo Pantera") along which a jaguar might hypothetically walk the full length of Central America from the Darien to Chiapas under cover of undisturbed forests. Although WCS states on its website that the Paseo Pantera then became the MBC in 1997, their designs are not synonymous.
  11. Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Guatemala were the initiators, but they also included El Salvador and Honduras.
  12. The impetus for establishing the CCAD was tied closely to these peace processes, but CCAD founders at first struggled to get governmental ministries from Belize, Mexico, and Guatemala to set aside their border disputes and work together on environmental issues.
  13. Because 68 per cent of the almost four hundred protected areas in Mesoamerica are smaller than 10,000 hectares (Zimmerer et al. 2004) they face problems of fragmentation.
  14. These include the USAID-funded Central American Environmental programme (PROARCA), or the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) consortium, funded by the Japanese government, the MacArthur Foundation, CI and the GEF.
  15. Concretely one of the most successful and visible projects thus far of the MBC is a land-mapping collaboration with NASA and the University of Maine, which continues previously USAID-funded projects of satellite monitoring of land cover. Precisely because it grew out of previously established field-based projects, the NASA/land-use project has trained a remarkable number of Central American nationals and established well-organised monitoring centres through the Ministries of Environment across Central America. While some activists have concerns that this same technology can be used for military surveillance (for example, in Chiapas against the Zapatistas), on the whole the programme has been well received by NGOs and government agencies, who use these maps and images frequently in their planning and for the monitoring and fighting of forest fires.
  16. This paradigm shift was typified by the location of the conservation BINGO forum in a swanky bank next to the business forum located in an expensive hotel across the street from official government meetings in downtown Johannesburg. By contrast, the UN relegated the NGO forum to a drafty exposition centre miles south of the city.
  17. Echoing their "win-win" approach to business/environment partnerships, MBC documents employ seemingly innocuous rhetoric about "harmonizing institutional and legal frameworks and promoting intersectoral cooperation" (Miller et al. 2001:27). Such goals, however, may actually cause local misunderstanding in an indigenous cultural context that accepts "harmony" as an unquestioned social good. Unlike Western notions of harmony as quiescence or consensus, for Maya people, however, harmony is about fairness and balance. Maya groups have a deep sense of autonomy of themselves as individuals, of their communities and of their people as a whole. This is reflected in their child-rearing practices that allow children independence from a very young age. An oft-repeated Guatemala expression is that "Cada cabeza es un mundo" (each person's head is its own world.) In essence, they are saying that no one can truly understand the motivations of another and therefore must re-

- spect the other's autonomy. In contrast, the MBC's genre of harmonisation is analogous to "standardisation" and "homogenisation" of environmental legislation—words that are compatible with foreign capitalist investment and the commodification of the environment and not necessarily with peaceful co-existence of differing perspectives and traditions, as understood by indigenous expressions of the concept. The MBC spin on harmony as "homogenisation" also contradicts a basic ecological understanding of the importance of diversity for ecosystem survival to keep delicate ecological webs (Asher 2000).
18. Perhaps that is why CI recently commissioned a major study about "Strategies for Improving the Enforcement of Environmental Laws Globally" (Akella & Cannon 2004). Nowhere in this 34 page document do the authors worry about aligning themselves with the military dictatorships governing most of CI's so-called "hotspots". Amazingly, not once in their "in-depth" case study of Chiapas do the authors even mention the Zapatista revolt. While CI may claim to be "apolitical" in such matters, in places as politicised as Chiapas, silence is, indeed, very political. Zapatista allies argue that the deployment of army troops to protect Montes Azules reserve in Chiapas is a ploy for militarising the region.
  19. USAID and other donors invested approximately \$60 million between 1992 and 2002 in the Petén in a similar way. Between 24 and 38 per cent of these funds were assigned directly as administrative overheads to the headquarters offices of CI, TNC, Rodale Institute, I don't believe that CARE ever uses their long name, but technically they are: American Co-Operative Agency for Relief Everywhere (CARE), and Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza or "Troical Agronomy Center for Investigation and Teaching (CATIE). When USAID funding for Petén was anticipated to end in 2002, every one of these organisations withdrew from this lowland region (although TNC continued to provide some financial support for a Guatemalan NGO called Defensores de la Naturaleza). Several dozen middle-class professional NGO workers lost their jobs, leaving them embittered about the fickleness of the conservation BINGOs. As USAID shifted its environmental funding to the highlands in the early 2000s, suddenly the same BINGOS re-opened their doors in the highlands, following the donor winds.
  20. In this vein, the PPP is remarkably similar to the Plan Pacífico and the Proyecto BioPacífico, funded by the GEF in Colombia as described by Asher (2000).
  21. Yaxhá incidentally became the filming site for the 2005 season of the reality television "Survivor", but the show failed to increase tourism to the area.
  22. Ironically, it was the World Conservation Union which originally proposed the Tikal-Calakmul route about fifteen years ago at a conference called "Tourism: A Vital Force for Peace". The same road linkage reappeared in Mexican development plans in the 1990s, but in response to local opposition it disappeared again until resurfacing as part of the IDB's most recent plans for the region (Call 2004). The three routes currently being evaluated are: (1) Tikal-Uaxactún-Río Azul to Quintana Roo, Mexico; (2) Tikal-Mirador-Calakmul to Campeche, Mexico; and (3) Tikal-Uaxactun-Río Azul to Lamanai, Belize (Burgués Arrea 2005).
  23. In another document I acquired, CI staff did comment on CAFTA, but with sunny optimism: "*In the future, ambitious infrastructure and development projects and new economic policies promoted under Plan Puebla-Panama (PPP) and the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) promise to bring the potential for real and urgently needed economic growth in this under-served region.... The proposed free trade agreement for Central American will commit Mesoamerica to greater openness, deepen the roots of democracy and the rule of law and reinforce market reforms. These reforms, coupled with increased trade and investment, will promote growth and achieve stronger environmental protection and improved working conditions. The World Bank's CAFTA support strategy includes loans and analytical support as well as grant funds.*" (Rodríguez & Asquith 2004: appendix 1). (emphasis mine) Perhaps they simply anticipate economic growth for their own programme budgets.



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