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# Conservation in the Frontier: Negotiating Ownerships of Nature at the Southern Mexican Border

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## ABSTRACT

The past decade has seen a revival of the long-disfavored concept of frontier, which now elucidates the interdependence between political centers and their naturally rich peripheries in the Global South. “Frontier” has referred to the cyclical discovery of and competition over new resources, and the transformation of power relations in a given space. We contribute to this discussion by exploring its relation to nature conservation. Examining conservation practices along Mexico’s southern border, this article addresses conservation as an unsettled process that pierces the frontier’s politics of nationalizing space and communities. In this way, conservation practices become negotiations over ownerships of nature. These negotiations involve resistance, adaptation, and counter-conservation, and they also influence human-nature relationships. The article shows that conservation practices relate to spheres of both the state and local communities in ways that allow the study of the frontier beyond given binaries and oppositional forces and toward contested, multiscale deliberations about the control of, access to, rights, and attachments to nature.

KEYWORDS: *frontier, border, conservation, Mexico, tropical rainforests*

## RESUMEN

Durante la última década el concepto de la frontera-frente (frontier) ha sido revitalizado por varios autores que han destacado su pertinencia para evidenciar la interdependencia entre los centros políticos y sus periferias abundantes en recursos naturales en el Sur Global. La frontera-frente ha referido al descubrimiento cíclico de nuevos recursos naturales, y la competencia sobre ellos, así como a la transformación de relaciones de poder en un espacio. El artículo contribuye a este debate actual sobre la frontera-frente, al explorar su relación con la conservación de la naturaleza. Mediante un análisis de las prácticas de conservación en la frontera sur de México, el artículo aborda la conservación como un proceso irresuelto que atraviesa la

política de nacionalización del espacio y de las comunidades. De esta manera, las prácticas de conservación revelan las negociaciones sobre las apropiaciones relacionadas con la naturaleza. En términos de las prácticas de conservación, éstas incluyen la resistencia, la adaptación y la “contra-conservación” que también influyen en las relaciones sociedad-naturaleza. El artículo argumenta que las prácticas de conservación se relacionan tanto con los espacios del Estado como de las comunidades locales de tal manera que permite estudiar la frontera-frente más allá de perspectivas fundamentadas en oposiciones binarias para proponer visiones orientadas en torno a las deliberaciones asociadas a las disputas sobre el control, el acceso, los derechos y las conexiones con la naturaleza.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *frontera, región fronteriza, conservación, México, selvas tropicales*

## INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, the concept of *frontier* has been retheorized by various scholars who have considered its value in explaining transformations of power relations in the naturally rich peripheries of the Global South (e.g., Hall, 2002; Greenough & Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2003; Parker & Rodseth, 2005; Guyot, 2011; Peluso & Lund, 2013; Altenbernd & Young, 2014; Rasmussen & Lund, 2018; Thaler et al., 2019). Introduced by Frederick Jackson Turner (1893), the concept of frontier glorified the North American pioneer as a rugged, self-sufficient, colonizing settler conquering a free, pioneer land. The Turnerian frontier later came to be perceived as colonial and flawed, with its assumption of empty lands that were actually the homelands of Native peoples. The concept of frontier fell from grace and was replaced by borderlands studies (e.g., Hämmäläinen & Truett, 2011; Altenbernd & Young, 2014; Laako, 2016).

Lately, however, many scholars have revisited the frontier concept. Three important aspects have emerged from this scholarship, which deal with its contemporary usefulness: first, in explaining territorial transformations,

particularly in the peripheries of the Global South; second, in reviving the role of contemporary nation-states in frontier dynamics; and third, in examining environmental and nature-related aspects of the frontier. We build on these three aspects in our frontier analysis. However, it is the third aspect to which we pay special attention and offer further conceptual elaboration. The environmental dimension so far has been related to interest in understanding the ways in which environmental governance incites resource competition related to frontier dynamics. To mention an example, Guyot (2011) has researched frontier wildernesses as subject to contemporary eco-conquests. Rasmussen and Lund (2018) also have defined frontiers as power relations that are transformed when a new resource is identified, including conservation. Other scholars have explored frontiers in different countries and regions, particularly in contexts that are considered peripheral or composed of remaining wildernesses, many of which have now become subject to conservation practices and policies (e.g., Greenough & Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2003; Messina et al., 2006; Simmons et al.,

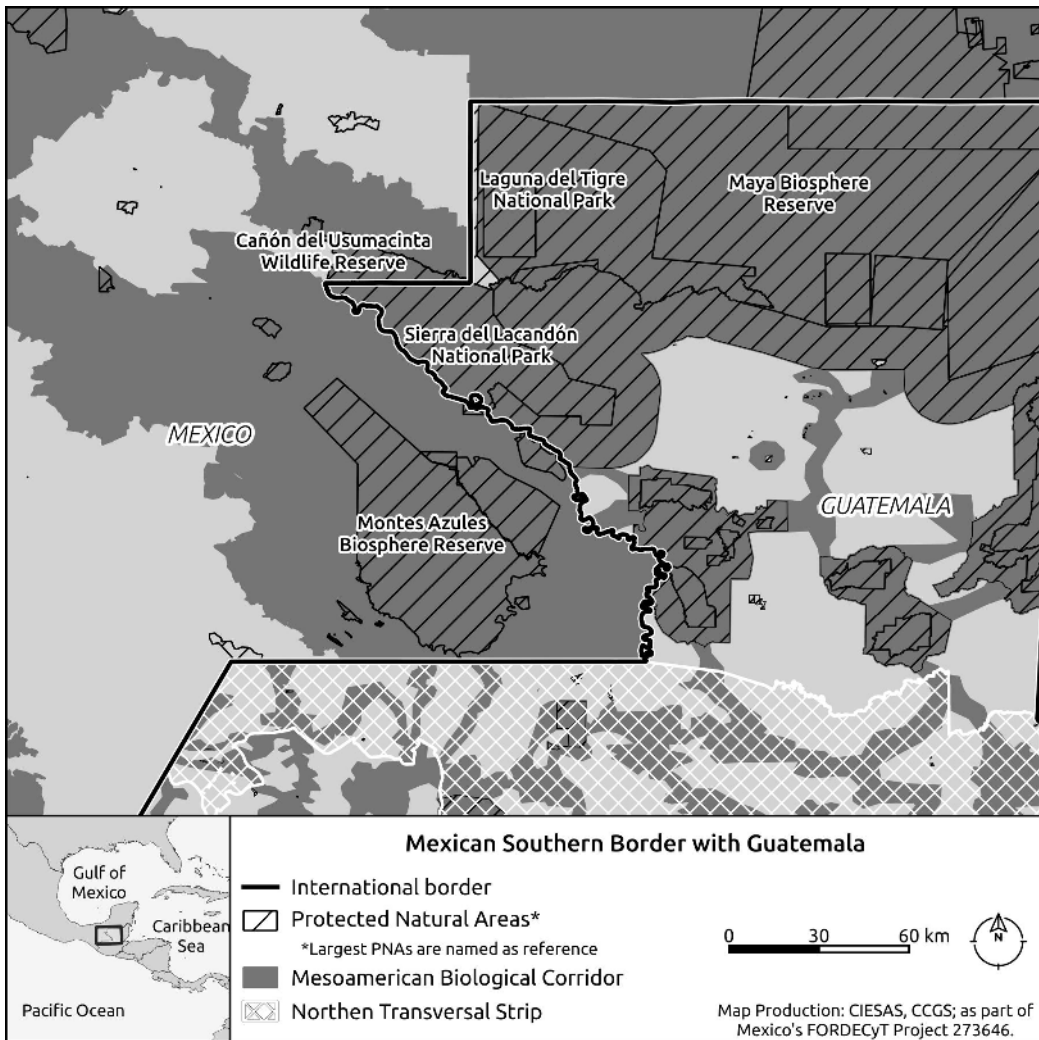
2016; Wakild, 2017; Ioris, 2018; Thaler et al., 2019).

However, the exclusive focus on resource competition may result in reproducing the same historical oppositional binaries that were typical of the original frontier analysis that fell from grace (e.g., Guyot 2011; Büscher, 2013; Adams, 2020; Ramutsindela, et al., 2020). The traditional frontier “invoked colonial binaries: imperial vs. Indigenous, conqueror vs. conquered, insider vs. outsider” (Hämäläinen & Truett 2011, p. 343), which was considered problematic, sometimes outright colonial. Given that the frontier suggests the transformation of power relations, we propose that such study needs to extend beyond comfortable binary oppositions and assumed colonial divisions, which were precisely the factors criticized in its original version. Transformation of power relations, by definition, challenges such assumptions by indicating that these struggles and unsettled relationships are under negotiation.

Therefore, in this article we address a particular phenomenon related to the environmental dimension of contemporary frontiers: nature conservation practices. This article fundamentally inquires: How is conservation related to the frontier? How do these conservation practices influence the power relations inherent in the frontier? Nature conservation, defined as human actions and instruments that intend to protect, preserve, or restore biodiversity, has developed into a significant phenomenon in the frontiers (McNeely, 2003; Geiger, 2008; Guyot, 2011). This article shows that conservation in the frontier is a negotiation over ownerships of nature.

We analyze the question of how conservation is related to the frontier using the case study of the Mexican southern border (MSB). It consists of the ancient Mayan civilization region, whose population dropped from over 5 million to less than 1 million during conquest and colonization, resulting in the re-wilding of the forests during colonization (e.g., Nations, 2006; Miller, 2007). Mexico’s border with Guatemala (see Figure 1) begins at the eastern side on the Pacific Coast in the state of Chiapas. On the Mexican side, which is our focus, the international border located in Chiapas includes the Lacandon rainforest. The next 365 kilometers of the border is fluvial, comprising the Usumacinta River between Chiapas and the Department of Petén in Guatemala, followed by the line between Petén and the Mexican states of Tabasco and Campeche. The last, western section of the border (ending at the Caribbean Sea) lies between Belize and the Mexican state of Quintana Roo. The most extensive protected areas in these borderlands include the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve (created in 1978), the Usumacinta Canyon Wildlife Refuge (created in 2008), and the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve (created in 2014; Haenn, 2005). As shown in Figure 1, the region also covers the intergovernmental Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (MBC), which ends in Mexico.

We focus on the post-1970s frontier dynamics, when the conservation of tropical forests—the primary landscape subject to conservation measures in the MSB—began to gain global and national attention (Anderson, 2003; Slater, 2003; Corlett & Primack, 2008). Prior to the 1970s, the



**Figure 1.** Map of Mexico's southern border with Guatemala.

tropical rainforests, often considered hostile places, had not yet been well recognized as worthy of conservation, despite the fact that by the 1940s Mexico had more national parks than any other country (Simonian, 1995; Wakild, 2011; Boyer, 2015). However, these were mostly located in the northern and central coniferous forests (Boyer, 2015). Currently, the humid rainforests cover only about 9.4 percent of Mexico's forests,

compared with 16 percent for the coniferous forests (CONABIO, 2020). Most rainforest cover is located close to the southern border—a fact that makes tropical rainforest conservation in Mexico likely to affect international border regions.

We explore conservation practices in the MSB in terms of two key components of the frontier. The first one focuses on the politics of nationalizing space—that is, of the state's

attempts to spread its institutional presence in the frontier. The second focuses on the local communities. In the MSB, power relations have transformed in three nationalizing stages: the formation of the international border in 1882; the modernization of the tropics (a concept introduced by Tudela, 1992, which refers to colonization, settlement, and governmental incentives for agriculture and cattle) in the 1960s; and the making of political and administrative rearrangements in the context of political unrest in the 1980s–1990s. Conservation efforts were related to these during the latter two stages, via the declaration of protected areas and economic incentives. Both of these measures fostered territorial control and increased institutional presence in the form of new conservation governance, which transformed many communities from settlers to nature stakeholders and rightsholders (Dudley & Stolton, 2020).

As a result, we identify three ways in which conservation practices relate to the frontier: resistance to conservation; adaptation to local needs; and counter-conservation dynamics favored by the transboundary condition. By resistance, we refer to tendencies that affect power relations by purposefully *avoiding* conservation. There is reluctance and ways of pushing back, even denial. Yet often conservation is already part of the daily sphere, especially in communities located within protected areas. The resistance may increase politicization and deepen contradictions in the landscapes (i.e., deforested protected areas). By adaptation, we refer to experiences that affect power relations through encounters between conservation

actors and communities, in which one or both parties change their actions and perceptions to collaborate and thus pursue a new set of power relations. By counter-conservation, we refer to those experiences that affect power relations from a more autonomous position that opposes government conservation efforts and seeks to set their own rules of governance, even superseding the government. In all of these, there are overlaps and deliberations over ownerships of nature, which is what we have also found about the relation of conservation to frontier.

This article stems from a three-year research project (2017–2019) that looked at the Usumacinta River Basin that spans Mexico and Guatemala. The research explored the main conservation laws, strategies, and incentives within the river basin from the 1950s onward. Extensive fieldwork along the international border between Mexico and Guatemala included approximately eighty interviews with key informants and community leaders from about thirty communities. We visited several locations for periods of a few weeks, often returning for deeper details to obtain a broader picture of conservation tendencies. The villages allowed hours-long semi-structured, qualitative interviews with their leaders. Sometimes these were group interviews with the communal authorities. This article focuses on conservation issues, but it is worth noting that the original interviews also dealt with land use, environmental conflicts, health, agriculture, cattle-raising, fishing, petroleum, and African palm plantations as part of local interactions. Here, we draw particularly upon research results regarding community experiences



concerning conservation. Because we deal with vulnerable communities, the exact locations remain anonymous.

Our project included conservation stakeholders from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), although here we focus on community results. We also interviewed representatives of the MBC, coordinated by the Mexican Biodiversity Commission (CONABIO) and the Mexican Commission of Protected Areas (CONANP). It must be stressed that about half of the visited locations did not collaborate with the conservation stakeholders involved in the research project. We presented ourselves in the communities as researchers involved in an Usumacinta research project. For this reason, many local actors identified us as pro-conservation.

Many political ecology studies have grown increasingly critical of conservation efforts (e.g. Duffy, 2006; Ybarra, 2018; Dudley & Stolton, 2020). While we consider the deep understanding of conservation challenges to be of utmost importance, we also acknowledge studies with different results. In our research project, the communities were engaged in complex negotiations with conservation efforts, depending on how these related to their sense of territorial ownership.

The rest of this article is structured as follows: We first discuss the contemporary revitalization of the frontier concept in terms of the state's expansion, new resources, and human-nature relations. Second, after briefly describing the case study locations, we outline the MSB as a frontier subject to three stages of nationalizing space, to show

how conservation begins to be a part of these processes. Third, we analyze the ways in which conservation efforts relate to these frontier-transformation relations, based on our fieldwork results. Finally, we conclude that the conservation practices concern the frontier through complex negotiations over the ownerships of nature, which may also influence human-nature relations. "Nature" refers to the natural environment, landscapes, and wildlife, based on different sets of values granted by humans. We recognize that the frontier has a politicized, unsettled edge to it with a particular relation to nature. The notion of ownerships sharpens the focus on questions of rights, control, property, assets, and attachments, which are subject to contestation in the frontier. In other words, negotiations over ownerships of nature refers to contested deliberations about the control, access, rights, and attachments to nature.

### **REVITALIZING THE FRONTIER: TERRITORY, STATE EXPANSION, AND HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONS**

The frontier is often defined simply as an advancing front, in contrast to the concept of a border or limit, and occasionally is understood as a synonym for boundary. However, there is more depth to the concept of frontier than these definitions suggest. As indicated in the introduction, recent frontier scholarship has engaged with three particular aspects: (1) territorial transformations in the Global South, i.e. the spatial dimension; (2) the environmental dimension; and (3) the role of nation-states, i.e. the power rela-

tions dimension. In this article, we build on these three dimensions to explore the ways in which conservation is related to the frontier.

First, various scholars have specified that the contemporary, postcolonial frontier refers to a peripheral space—remote from political centers—that nevertheless holds strategic importance, for example, in the form of natural resources and their exploitation (Hall, 2002; Geiger, 2009; Rasmussen & Lund, 2018). Thus, frontiers connote space rather than lines. The perception of the frontier as peripheral space is crucial for frontier dynamics because it allows for the critical analysis of particular territorial transformations and their significant interactions with power centers. In addition, it assigns the frontier a spatial conceptual characteristic that is different from many other concepts that are also focused on power relations. Consequently, McNeely (2003) states that many tropical forests have become the remaining global frontiers—often in close proximity to international borders. Geiger (2008) has suggested that the contested and naturally rich postcolonial frontiers show that nation-states do not have uniform power across their territories, although the “greening” frontier does not sufficiently transform the existing unequal power relations. Importantly, these analyses shed light on particular contexts and their natural environments, which may seem peripheral but play an increasingly pertinent role in contemporary global politics.

The literature also extends the frontier concept by recognizing different territorially emerging types, such as settler, agricultural, and extractive frontiers, including the hollow frontier, which refers to the race for profits

from exports (Miller, 2007). Currently, territorial conflicts, particularly those related to Indigenous peoples, are at the core of frontier analysis, albeit occasionally portrayed in politicized, binary ways (Parker & Rodseth, 2005; Geiger, 2009; Guyot, 2011; Altenbernd & Young, 2014; Thaler et al., 2019).

Geiger (2008, 2009) has identified various characteristics of contemporary frontiers that integrate not just spatial but also environmental and nation-state-related characteristics. These run from relatively low population density to the absence of routine state control, to the heightened presence of non-native private actors (e.g., cattle ranchers, settlers, lumberjacks, dam-builders, missionaries, anthropologists, and adventure tourists). He also described the denial and exclusion of Indigenous peoples from ownership of lands and resources, and underlined wasteful and destructive resource management as typical for frontiers. As remote spaces with abundant natural resources, frontiers are attractive as havens for all sorts of fugitives and clandestine activities (Peluso & Vandergeest, 2011). These descriptions help identify the spatial dimension of the frontier, but they also suggest significant environmental characteristics and the multiscale role that states play in those spaces.

Second, the environment appears as a significant political, not just economic, dimension of frontier dynamics, although its extractivist character is often emphasized in the resource-focused perspectives. Rasmussen and Lund (2018), for example, have argued that frontiers deal with discoveries or inventions of new resources, which transform the power relations and even replace



the existing control and hierarchy. These authors refer to the latter as territorialization. For them, frontiers are not only about spaces but also about what happens *in* and *to* the spaces.

Conservation certainly can be perceived as a new resource (i.e., a frontier in its own right; Guyot, 2011). However, environmental historians—who have shown that conservation forms an important part of nature state building, especially in Latin America—have suggested that conservation dynamics are intertwined with both territorialization and the frontier, and have argued that state-led conservation is not only about raw exploitation, but also about managing and producing nature for state-building (Miller, 2007; Wakild, 2011; Graf von Hardenberg et al., 2017).

Third, environmental historians have examined the ways in which states engage with and construct nature in the frontier beyond resource competition. From our viewpoint, this conceptualization of environment and nation-state helps to explore frontier dynamics beyond the easy, given binaries often attached to the frontier concept and criticized in their original form, such as imperial/Indigenous, conqueror/conquered, insider/outsider, friends/foes, and state/communities.

The case of conservation, which inevitably involves power relations related to nature, pierces the frontier in the form of unsettled, contested relationships in both state and communal spheres, which deal with the control, rights and attachments to nature.

Following this line of thought, we examine conservation practices related to two key

aspects of the frontier: the government-oriented politics of nationalizing space (Baruah, 2003; Geiger, 2008, 2009) and the local-level communities in which these conservation practices take place. The governmental space, through which legislation is enacted and implemented, is often influenced by NGOs, scientists, or administrators of the protected areas. Yet, these actors can function as intermediaries in both spaces. Hence, the two spaces are not disjointed, but instead intermingled with national, regional, and local environmental efforts on multiple scales. Given the lack of full civil state presence in frontiers, the politics of nationalizing space refers to the states' attempts to extend their institutions and influence into frontier zones. The politics of nationalizing space is involved with strategies of settler colonization, resource exploitation, and—as will be shown in our local case study—border formation when the frontier is located at international borders.

Nevertheless, we also find it crucial to integrate into our analysis the local territories of communities where concrete conservation practices are carried out, and where the frontier power relations are transformed or politicized. We maintain that although the frontier is characterized by particular unstable power relations, the lands in which the frontier is found are simultaneously someone's homelands. Specifically, we show that the local communities are not just hapless victims of the frontier, as is easily emphasized by the extractivist and resource-oriented focus of frontier scholarship. Indeed, as noted by authors such as Geiger (2009), the frontiers often consist of Indigenous territories, which,

we suggest, necessitates broadening the environmental frontier to include more complex notions of ownerships and rights to lands, territories, resources, and nature.

## **APPROACHING THE CASE STUDY**

We start by discussing the case of the MSB as a frontier, which includes the characteristics outlined by Geiger (2009) and others, such as its relative remoteness from supposed power centers, an abundance of natural resources, the considerable lack of state presence, and the presence of Indigenous peoples and a variety of private actors. We focus on three stages of nationalizing space, from the formation of the international border to the project of modernization of the tropics (Tudela, 1992), and finally political-territorial reorganization to control insurgent unrest. These stages illustrate how the MSB is reformed as a frontier, including spatial, state, and environmental dimensions, resulting in transformed power relations.

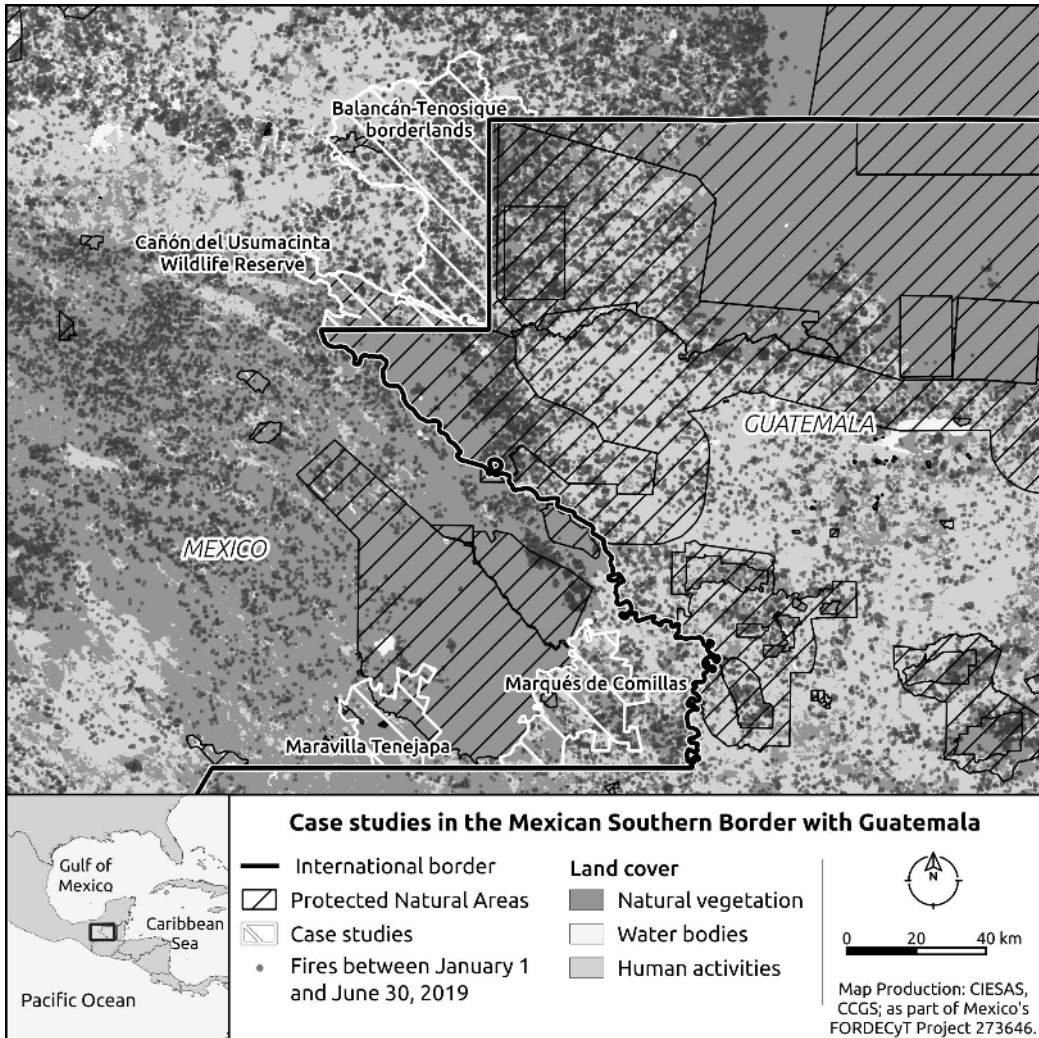
We then discuss the ways in which tropical conservation practices have arrived in this frontier, after long decades of being on the periphery of national interest. Nevertheless, the emerging conservation practices continue to transform the local settlers into stakeholders in their relation to nature.

The final empirical section analyzes fieldwork results in four different locations in which the settlers have become conservation stakeholders (see Figure 2). First, the Usumacinta Canyon Wildlife Refuge is located at the international border between the State of Tabasco (Mexico) and

Guatemala. The area represents a crossroads of many historical and nature-related borders and borderlands (Pinkus, 2010). In 2005 it was declared a state reserve, after which it became a wildlife reserve by federal decree in 2008. The reserve includes about twenty-eight settler communities.

Two other fieldwork locations are in the state of Chiapas, bordering Guatemala: in the municipality of Maravilla Tenejapa, with approximately thirty communities; and the municipality of Marqués de Comillas, with approximately twenty-eight communities, including settler villages. These surround the Lacandon rainforest, which was established as the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve (RBMA) in 1978. They are traditional lands of the Lacandon people—a relatively small Indigenous group that owns the most land in the RBMA. The two municipalities also include three voluntarily protected areas. Both have been of interest to scientists and conservationists, such as the NGO *Natura Mexicana*, which administers the Chajul Biological Station (established in 1982) in the buffer zone of the RBMA, which is rented from the Lacandon people.

Our fourth fieldwork site is in the municipality of Balancán, in Tabasco, which extends all the way along the stretch of the international border with Guatemala, where about 105 settler villages, towns, and ranches are located (Figure 2). This municipality is in a deforested area, and is covered with cattle ranches promoted by Mexican settlement/frontier policies in the 1970s. Consequently, no protected areas have been established on the Mexican side, although on the Guatemalan side the Maya Biosphere Reserve



**Figure 2.** Map of Fieldwork Locations.

was established in 1995. Yet, in the Balancán municipality several conservation efforts have been attempted, such as reintroduction of native species.

Within the fieldwork study locations, we identify three forms of conservation-related frontier dynamics: resistance, adaptation, and counter-conservation. The final empirical section will discuss these three forms.

### THE STAGES OF NATIONALIZING SPACE: FROM BORDER TO MODERNIZATION TO STATE EXPANSION

Here we discuss the MSB's evolution through three stages of nationalizing space that characterize it as a frontier both in terms of spatial-territorial characteristics and transformation and/or politicization of power relations, including nature. The stages are

(1) formation of the international border; (2) exploitative nature of the frontier, culminating in the idea of modernization of the tropics (Tudela, 1992); and (3) expansion of state presence to control political unrest. These stages encompass two principal ways in which nation-states exercise their influence within frontiers. The first is via territorial control, which often takes a military form, although—as argued by Geiger (2008)—states in many cases fail to solidly establish such control over the frontier. Second, governments also engage in nationalizing space in the frontiers by augmenting an institutional presence. The increase typically includes the extension of state institutions and policies such as colonization (Geiger, 2008). These mechanisms involve natural environments as borders and landscapes, and transform human-nature relationships from peasant and settler relations to conservation stakeholders, as analyzed in the last part of this section.

The first step in nationalizing space was more precisely defining the international border between Mexico and Guatemala in 1882. This new mapping was driven by the interests of transnational timber companies that had been exploiting the tropical forests for decades. Thus, the new mapping and bordering coincided with what historian Jan De Vos called “the golden era of mahogany” (De Vos, 1996, p. 11; see also Laako, 2016; Kauffer et al., 2019). This process can be considered the first cornerstone of the politics of nationalizing space, although this cornerstone—the border—existed more on paper (*de jure*) than in reality (*de facto*). The border remained open for transboundary

dynamics and, because of its distance from cities, even today the communities there are somewhat isolated from their national centers but communicate across the international border. In fact, our fieldwork indicated that this isolation begun to change only at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the Mexican government invested in road infrastructure and the region begun to suffer from deforestation effects. Until then, the main routes to the rainforest were the rivers, also used to transport precious woods. It was important that these natural elements, such as the Usumacinta River, could be included as part of the national landscape. On paper, the international border created a line, which allowed making national territorial and resource-based claims of ownerships, which then benefitted resource extraction during the golden era of mahogany.

#### COLONIZATION THROUGHOUT THE TROPICAL FORESTS

At the beginning of the twentieth century, tropical forests—the last untamed frontiers—became subject to global projects of modernization and development (e.g., Anderson, 2003). In the MSB, the trend began in the 1950s. Post-revolutionary Mexico, governed by the Revolutionary Party with its political orientation of land reform as its principal tool, shifted to modernization and development as the second cornerstone of the politics of nationalizing space. As part of the modernization of the tropics, agrarian reform supported extensive colonization in the rainforest region of the MSB (Tudela, 1992; Haenn, 2005).

The federal program Plan



Balancán-Tenosique was a key tool that transformed the power relations in the region by introducing new settler communities. The program aimed to transform the rural state of Tabasco into a modern cattle-raising success. This involved heavy investments in the two Tabasco municipalities bordering Guatemala—Balancán and Tenosique—which had previously served as routes for raw exportation from the rainforest. However, the Plan eventually failed, leaving behind eroded grasslands (see Figure 2; Tudela, 1992; Kauffer et al., 2019). Yet, as part of the Plan, many new communities were established in the municipalities of Tenosique and Balancán, where two of our case studies are located.

The same colonization process was repeated in Chiapas. Peasants from various parts of Mexico traveled by foot and canoe to establish villages in the Lacandon rainforest. Until the 1970s, the borderlands in what are now the municipalities of Maravilla Tenejapa and Marqués de Comillas (Figure 2) were largely inhabited. State-encouraged colonization to occupy lands and modernize the territory has been a tool for nationalizing space in the border, and created the settler communities in which most of the conservation efforts now take place. The power relations related to these settler communities are not straightforward. While some of the settlers identify themselves as Indigenous people from different parts of Mexico, others are mestizos. While claims to Indigenous rights have formed one of the most important mobilizations of the region during the past decades, the colonization process completely blurs the distinction made by Geiger (2009) of

the binary struggle between settler-intruders and Native/original inhabitants. In the case of Chiapas, as shown by Cano (2018), many settler communities were also careful about not disturbing the *monte* (mountain, forest, or wasteland) due to their experience of environmental destruction in their territories of origin.

The scarcely inhabited spaces of Tabasco and Chiapas, and of the Department of El Petén in Guatemala, have, importantly, served as refuges and hiding places throughout history. This was especially true during the Guatemalan Civil War (1960–1996), which drove Guatemalan refugees to settle close to the border in Mexico at the beginning of the 1980s (Kauffer, 2005; Ybarra, 2018), and during the Indigenous Zapatista uprising in Mexico in 1994. However, these events also encouraged militarization, increased institutional presence, and political reorganization as the third cornerstone of the politics of nationalizing space. For example, state control over political unrest included the government rearranging Chiapas' municipalities in 1998 (Leyva & Burguete, 2007), in parallel with grassroots demands for administrative reorganization of the previous settlement areas. As part of the rearrangement, three new municipalities were separated from the big municipality of Ocosingo, which had covered most of the Lacandon rainforest. The three new municipalities are right along the border with Guatemala. Two of them, Maravilla Tenejapa and Marqués de Comillas (Figure 2), are locations of our case studies. Thus, the latest stage of the politics of nationalizing space combined an administrative strategy with military control of the

territory, which allowed state expansion. Yet, it also transformed the power relations in terms of heightening international attention on Indigenous rights to lands, territories, and natural resources, and increased the violent human and political occupation and presence in the so-called hostile rainforest.

#### **CONSERVATION IN THE NATIONALIZING OF SPACE: FROM SETTLERS TO STAKEHOLDERS**

During the last two stages of the politics of nationalizing space, tropical conservation started to make its way to this frontier. While the environment was indeed already a part of the space for nationalization (in the form of border formation and the modernization of the tropics), conservation efforts were somewhat slow, given Mexico's focus on its pine forests. Government conservation measures mainly resulted from the efforts of scientists, influenced by international trends and engaged in government negotiations over ecosystem equilibrium (e.g., Simonian, 1995; Boyer, 2015). These measures can be characterized both as a new frontier resource and as part of territorialization. In other words, the frontier dynamics related to conservation blur the distinction between resource competition and territorial cohesion, yet unsettle the power relations locally. Conservation also drives the existing human-nature relations, in this case turning settler communities into conservation stakeholders. As part of nationalizing space, the territorial control related to conservation practices involves the creation of protected areas (bordered, geographical polygons along the international border) governed by new, different rules and regulations that vary according to

the type of protected area.

The institutional presence has taken the form of legislation, institution-building, and conservation incentives, particularly from the 1990s onward. Currently, the MSB is part of various global and transboundary conservation identifications, such as the Maya Forest conservation complex since the 1990s and as a biodiversity hotspot since 2000. They both refer to the MSB as part of the Mesoamerican humid tropical rainforest with exceptionally high but threatened biodiversity, which makes it a global conservation priority region. The principal transboundary conservation effort was the MBC (Figure 1; Finley-Brook, 2007). This corridor initiative consisted of an intergovernmental policy agenda focused on connecting forest reserves to control deforestation and the agricultural frontier (Godoy, 2003). The MSB is part of the intergovernmental and transboundary Jungle Jaguar Corridor, which aims to conserve the endangered jaguar. So far, there is little research about the impact of these corridor initiatives.

Tropical rainforest conservation in the MSB began with the protection of the Lacandon rainforest by declaring one of the country's first biosphere reserves, Montes Azules (RBMA), in 1978. Mexico took this step simultaneously with the colonization processes derived from the modernization of the tropics (Tudela, 1992), and just before the political upheaval related to the surge of Guatemalan refugees in the 1980s. Consequently, the RBMA became the scene of serious socio-environmental conflicts among different groups and communities regarding their respective land rights, which have been



revoked in recent years (e.g., Calleros, 2014; Durand et al., 2014).

Currently, two sets of protected areas lie along the international border (Figure 1): areas protected by the federal government itself, and areas protected by private or communal parties at the federal government's encouragement. The rainforest area of Chiapas contains two biosphere reserves, two national parks, two natural monuments, and thirteen voluntarily protected areas. The state of Tabasco shares one biosphere reserve with the neighboring state of Campeche and contains a wildlife protection area, plus two voluntarily protected areas. Campeche, in addition to sharing a biosphere reserve with Tabasco, has two wildlife protection areas and thirteen voluntarily protected areas.

From the 1980s onward, as a result of emerging Mexican environmentalism, conservation has been firmly institutionalized at the national level. Following the 1992 Convention of Biological Diversity, Mexico created CONABIO in 1992, followed by CONANP in 2000 and the Forestry Commission (CONAFOR) in 2001. In 1991, Mexico ratified the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), now coordinated by CONABIO. Mexico enacted its first major environmental law, LGEEPA, in 1989, followed by the Wildlife Protection Law in 2000. From 2003 to 2016, the Mexican government also implemented two types of conservation incentives: payments for ecosystem services (*pagos por servicios ambientales*, PES) for rural localities surrounding the protected areas, and wildlife management units (*unidades de manejo de vida silvestre*; e.g.,

Ortega et al., 2016).

Our fieldwork locations include border villages that have received conservation incentives. For example, approximately 50 percent of the localities in Maravilla Tenejapa received PES for biodiversity conservation between 2008 and 2017. In Marqués de Comillas, approximately 80 percent of the localities received PES between 2008 and 2017. Maravilla Tenejapa received ten wildlife unit incentives between 2008 and 2015, mainly for the conservation of *tepezcuintle* or paca (*Agouti paca*), armadillo (*Cabassous centralis*), and wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), plus one for cedar trees. Marqués de Comillas was granted seven incentives between 2003 and 2015, mainly for the conservation of fauna such as deer and the red macaw. In Tabasco, most PES were granted to communities surrounding the Pantanos de Centla Biosphere Reserve, close to the Gulf of Mexico. However, many were also granted for communities in the Usumacinta Canyon Wildlife Protection Area.

It is noteworthy that the subsidies granted for cattle-raising are much greater than those for conservation. Yet, the incentives indicate how the settler communities have become actors—or stakeholders—for conservation via governmental incentives. This again changes the way in which the communities relate to the state and to the nature around them, which now must be managed for conservation purposes. The settler communities are involved in negotiations about the control of, rules, rights, access, and attachments to their *montes-reserves* (Cano, 2018). Next, we draw from our case studies to discuss three different ways in which these

negotiations take place: resistance, adaptation, and counter-conservation.

### NEGOTIATING NATURES IN CONSERVATION: RESISTANCE, ADAPTATION, AND COUNTER-CONSERVATION

In this section we examine the ways in which conservation practices are related to the MSB frontier and transform power relations in our four case study locations: Usumacinta Canyon, Maravilla Tenejapa, Marqués

de Comillas, and Balancán. The previously mentioned processes of nationalizing space through conservation have been sponsored and implemented by the federal government. Previous frontier policies included border delineation at the end of the nineteenth century, followed (since the 1950s) by modernization and development based upon resource extraction and colonization of the studied areas. Consequently, these different ways of nationalizing space created deep contradictions that are now reflected in multiple forms of receiving, interpreting,

Fieldwork location	Villages	Location	Conservation practices	Main characteristics: from settlers to stakeholders
<b>Usumacinta Canyon</b>	About 28 settler communities	Within the wildlife refuge declared in 2008	Wildlife refuge with many conservation projects, such as PES scheme	Despite several examples of conservation interest, also resistance to some conservation projects, continuing cattle ranching and forestry
<b>Maravilla Tenejapa</b>	About 30 settler communities	In the buffer zone of the RBMA declared in 1995	Active participation in many conservation projects, such as MBC, PES scheme, and two voluntarily protected areas	Many examples of adaptation and using conservation as a tool to defend land ownership; some resistance in the buffer zone and autonomous counter-conservation in close proximity to the Guatemalan border
<b>Marqués de Comillas</b>	About 28 settler communities	Bordering the RBMA declared in 1995	Participation in several conservation projects, such as MBC, PES scheme, Chajul Biological Station, and one voluntarily protected area	Several examples of conservation adaptation but also resistance and counter-conservation in close proximity to the Guatemalan border, including biodiversity trafficking
<b>Balancán</b>	About 105 settler communities, ranches, and towns	No protected areas, but borders Guatemala's Maya Biosphere Reserve declared in 1995	Various initial projects, such as the introduction of native bees, and an attempt to establish a Ramsar Wetlands site in the transboundary San Pedro River area	Initial interest in conservation practices but strong processes of counter-conservation related to the border condition and biodiversity trafficking

**Table 1.** Main Characteristics of Case Study Locations.

and reacting to conservation measures at the local scale—in other words, a complex negotiation over the ownerships of natures. At our four fieldwork sites, we found three types of responses that, in our analysis, underline how conservation transcends the frontier in terms of negotiating the ownership of nature, which influences the transformation of power relations and human-nature relationships: (1) resistance of local villagers who are settlers (Kauffer et al., 2019); (2) adaptation of conservation initiatives to local needs; and (3) traditional peasant activities and counter-conservation dynamics favored by the transboundary locations of the sites. The key characteristics are synthesized in Table 1, after which we will detail the main experiences and factors related to the negotiation of ownership of nature in the three modalities of resistance, adaptation, and counter-conservation.

#### **RESISTANCE TO TOP-DOWN CONSERVATION POLICIES**

Our fieldwork findings indicated that resistance to conservation appeared particularly in those communities that were already inside protected areas. There was denial and tensions over preferred traditional and more lucrative cattle-raising, agriculture, and forestry activities. The present deforestation in the MSB (Figure 2) resulted from new resource activities, such as cattle-raising (1950–2000), road-building (1970–2010), and (more recently) extensive cultivation of African palm (2000–2020). All were promoted by government policies during the peaks of settler migration and in subsequent decades (Kauffer et al., 2019). In this context, two

forms of resistance and conservation negotiations exist in relation to the local top-down mechanisms: continuation of traditional activities linked to previous colonization, and denial of the federal protected areas.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, depending upon the location, conservation efforts have met indirect resistance in the form of persistent agricultural and resource-extraction activities for the settlers' sustenance. Previous research has shown that poverty and land issues drove peasants in frontier areas to adopt a subsistence-based agricultural system for their daily livelihood (e.g., Leyva & Ascencio, 1997; Ford & Nigh, 2015). Starting in the 1990s, deep contradictions between agriculture and conservation appeared when conservation efforts increased in the region. The first period of government conservation efforts saw considerable friction between conservationists and rural peasants. Conservationists condemned peasants for destroying the rainforest, particularly via slash-and-burn practices, which often caused forest fires that burned out of control. However, the local people needed to feed their families, and the government enacted land policies and maize subsidies that contributed to deforestation in tropical forests, where soils are not suitable for agriculture. Slash-and-burn agriculture thus became traditional in the MSB, along with the resulting wildfires in tropical forests. The fires were especially severe in 1998, 2005, and 2019 owing to long, acute springtime droughts (see Figure 2).

Our case studies clearly showed cattle-raising as one of the principal productive activities in the MSB. It serves several different

functions locally: income-generation by families, small-scale economic activity, and intensive farming. The latter is prominent in three sites: Marqués de Comillas, Balancán, and Usumacinta Canyon. The state continues to offer incentives for cattle production—a policy that is often counterproductive to conservation initiatives within the same localities.

Our interviews found that the colonists who settled in our case study locations came from places that no longer had sufficient land (see also Cano, 2018). Extraction of resources from the tropical forest was—and is—part of the settlements' creation and consolidation. The settlements were also promoted as part of the state's strategy of nationalizing spaces, together with the building of infrastructure, public services, and administrative offices. During earlier plans for nationalizing space, top-down and bottom-up perspectives often aligned. Nowadays, aligning these plans with conservation is arduous, leading to complex negotiations and claims over nature; this historical cycle of farming, livestock, and monoculture plantations—mainly palm—that is characteristic of frontiers is a conflict-ridden issue.

Our research results signaled that one sign of the grassroots' direct resistance to conservation efforts is the simple denial that the protected areas exist. In relation to these areas, the contrasting geographical situations of our four fieldwork sites are instructive. Balancán occupies the space between the Guatemala border and the San Pedro River, and Marqués de Comillas is located on the other side of the Lacantún River, which delineates the RBMA. They are *bordering*

municipalities, although free of protected areas in their territory. The whole Usumacinta Canyon, again, lies within a wildlife protection area, while a northern portion of the Maravilla Tenejapa site is inside the RBMA. For the people living *inside* protected areas, resistance also translates into adaptation strategies consisting of relocating the activities that are not compatible with the existence of the protected areas.

This is also evidenced in our other fieldwork location in a small border village within the Usumacinta Canyon, which is dedicated to carpentry. The village's fifteen woodworking shops are in plain sight. Locals told us that they obtain their timber from the Guatemalan side, since "cutting precious woods is not permitted here anymore because this is a protected area" (interviews with community authorities, July 2018). Residents do not mention that the border region on the Guatemalan side is also a protected area: the Sierra del Lacandón National Park, decreed in 1990 (Figure 2). According to a local authority, around 70 percent of the population is dedicated to the timber and carpentry trade and smuggles wood from the Guatemalan side, since "it is not permitted here in Canyon of Usumacinta anymore" (interview, July 2018). He told us he is not very concerned about conservation because it does not permit his family to grow economically. He was disturbed because a local ecotourism project was closed recently due to allegations of illegal fires in the area. For the inhabitants, conservation brought increasing state surveillance and control in the region, which was considered more of a nuisance than the international border itself. Such resistance

may deepen contradictions both between actors and their relationship to the nature around them.

Community members interviewed at another site in the same wildlife area mentioned that at first they were unaware of the decree that created the protected area. After they became aware of it, they felt it threatened their production systems and the possibility of applying for more lucrative incentives for cattle-raising. According to these community members, “We cannot live from nature protection.” Even in cases where the community members had received PES for reforestation, the threat of renewed deforestation loomed as incentives ended. In some locations that are now oil palm plantations or grasslands for cattle, we still saw the old reforestation and conservation signs provided by the Forestry Commission. However, in the higher parts of the canyon, mainly in proximity to Indigenous communities, the natural landscape had managed to recover and regrow, and reintroduce native species. Indeed, in the case of the Usumacinta Canyon, where deforestation still threatens relatively primary tropical forests, some previously used landscapes have regrown, thanks to conservation initiatives.

Among the studied locations, the newest protected area, the Usumacinta Canyon, is less effective than the others (Gallardo et al., 2019). Consequently, cattle are abundant, along with recent palm fields and timber plantations (e.g., for teak). Local inhabitants clearly asserted that the wildlife protected area was established decades after their settlement via a top-down state initiative that remains controversial. As literature on

protected areas evidences, top-down state conservation policies tend to be contentious in the south of Mexico, and provoke direct and indirect resistance as a modality of conservation negotiation at the local scale (e.g., Legorreta et al., 2014).

Hence, our research indicated that the formal status of protected areas on both sides of the international border is of little significance in daily livelihoods, although many reserves are still quite a recent development. The federal decrees that protected these areas generated some resistance and politicization among the local population, who see them as an intervention. Resistance to conservation, in this case, refers to the denial of the existence of protected areas, and the continuity of traditional settler practices, such as forestry, carpentry, or cattle-raising. This resistance forms part of the negotiations over ownerships of nature, with complex implications for biocultural landscapes.

#### **BETWEEN CONSERVATION ADAPTATION AND GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES**

Since the 1990s, and particularly in the aftermath of the Latin American Indigenous emergence (Bengoa, 2000; Brysk, 2000), conservationists have embraced livelihoods and Indigenous rights as part of a new, more inclusive conservation paradigm. Certainly, these developments were not limited to Latin America (Stevens, 2014). Yet, Indigenous rights can also be perceived as a new resource that transforms frontier relations and is linked to conservation efforts in an unsettled way. In parallel with federal measures such as declaring protected areas, which resulted in territorial interventions, other tools and

concepts were introduced and transformed at a local scale.

For example, our interviews with representatives of CONABIO (September 2017 and December 2019) showed that the MBC in Mexico, executed by CONABIO, changed its concept of connectivity in the mid-2000s. Instead of connecting the existing protected areas by creating new ones, CONABIO focused on measures that improved their connection by enhancing landscape sustainability. Because this new concept required collaboration in the communal lands, local NGOs were revitalized to coordinate these projects. The projects included silviculture, fire fences, reintroduction of native species, and regrowth of old pasture lands. In this way, conservation actors modified their approach to adapt to the communities during the past two decades as communities and conservationists learned from one another. In this case, the power relations changed toward notions of landscapes, rights, and access as part of the frontier negotiations, and the negotiations evolved around rights and autonomy but also reaffirmed the communities now both as stakeholders and rightsholders.

We found this dynamic to be a prominent feature of the most consistent conservation efforts, and was favored particularly by the following conservation tools: (1) community or voluntarily protected areas (which became one of CONANP's main conservation strategies in 2019); (2) community territorial ordering (CTO), introduced especially by the Mexican conservationist organization Natura Mexicana; (3) sustainable agricultural projects carried out by MBC with local organizations; and (4) environmental education.

We argue that the more consistent implementation of these measures at the local scale is because of their adaptability to local conditions.

For example, in the mountainous municipality of Maravilla Tenejapa in Chiapas, lands suitable for farming and cattle are already occupied; thus, a great majority of the communities there have become interested in conservation, especially in the form of PES and MBC projects. Our fieldwork revealed a strong discourse in favor of conservation. Cano (2018) found similar results, but argued that the communal change of discourse from "the mountain" to "a reserve" illustrates precisely the ways in which conservation practices influence human-nature relations and the possibilities of making territorial claims or of adjusting to new state expansion mechanisms.

However, the inhabitants were sufficiently committed to conservation to confront the then-apparent increase in wild fauna on their lands, which they attributed to conservation projects (interviews with community authorities, December 2018 and January 2019). Some of this fauna was considered harmful to the *milpas* (the traditional Mesoamerican crop-growing system), while others were truly dangerous, like the Bothrops asper, the viper called *nauyaca* in Mexico, whose poison requires an expensive antidote that residents cannot afford or even obtain in a region lacking adequate health care services. Locals also established rules that prohibited the use of fire in agriculture and restricted shooting of wildlife. During the past decade, the municipality has founded two voluntarily protected areas. Specifically, a local



mobilization successfully prevented a hydro-electric company from building a plant on the river that borders the polygon. Some villages in this part of Maravilla Tenejapa not only enacted vehicle speed limits and strict regulations on alcohol use, but also instituted nightly patrols to control smuggling. Conservation, in this context, seems to foster these communities' local territorial control and serve as a tool for negotiating against extractivism and for communal cohesion. The frictions that existed between different conservation groups did not diminish the projects' efficiency.

Of the conservation tools for defining and planning land use at the local scale, our fieldwork revealed that few generated as much interest within the communities as the CTO, which includes agreeing about which communal lands to conserve and which to dedicate to productive activities (see also Castro & Ortiz, 2015). Ecotourism projects that came on the heels of the CTO process gave positive results, in this case particularly for groups in the municipality of Marqués de Comillas that collaborated with *Natura Mexicana*. Although these projects faced serious challenges, including an arduous process of transforming peasants into business managers, they tended to reduce local dependence on governmental incentives (e.g., PES). Importantly, they also gave locals a reason to resist converting the conserved lands to cattle-raising, while gaining some autonomy from the governmental institutions—although this may, again, augment dependence on private actors and tourists.

Hence, the communities, as conservation stakeholders and rightsholders engaged

in negotiations over ownership of nature, have found a tool to resist other territorial and resource-based appropriations and to manage communal lands as ecological landscapes. Simultaneously, the conservationists have transformed their role in the complicated management of territorial rights related to communities and their landscapes.

#### **TRANSBOUNDARY DYNAMICS AGAINST CONSERVATION**

Our discussion thus far of the dynamics related to conservation in the frontier has dealt almost exclusively with territories on the Mexican side. The dynamics become even more complex when they involve transboundary entanglements related to local activities and to the situation on the other side of the border, in Guatemala. In this article, we refer to this complex negotiation over ownerships of nature related to the border situation as counter-conservation, which emphasizes the claims made to support territorial and communal autonomy over nationalizing space. However, our term counter-conservation does not mean that these communities do not have their own autonomous conservation measures. Here, we draw from the most complicated conservation experiences in our case studies.

In the Chiapas municipality of Marqués de Comillas, whose settlers are of diverse origins, local participation in conservation projects related to the MBC and *Natura Mexicana* is minimal, as are conservation agreements. As a natural lowland corridor, Marqués de Comillas has long been a favorite trafficking and smuggling route for products, animals, and people—activities that blur the

line between the licit and the illicit. Nowadays, the government is focusing more on such serious issues (including migration and cattle-smuggling), after decades of treating the corridor as a no-man's-land. Our fieldwork results suggested that at the local scale, biodiversity smuggling is often a matter of territorial rights. Similarly, the communities assert that the natural resources previously extracted by the government and private companies "belong" to local inhabitants, who want to be in charge of selling (for example) their precious woods. Other studies have suggested similar results. For example, a tree known locally as Mexican ebony (*Swartzia cubensis*), which is currently on the Mexican CITES list of endangered species, has drawn increasing attention from the international timber trade (Natura Mexicana, 2019). This caused several incidents during 2012 in Marqués de Comillas and the neighboring municipality of Benemérito de las Américas. Some 540 trucks were caught illegally transporting 19,500 trees, harvested from 15,000 hectares. Responding to public pressure, Mexican authorities eventually controlled the smuggling (Natura Mexicana, 2019).

During our fieldwork, one of the villages involved—in which at least three conservation organizations in the region have been active—readily acknowledged that its villagers had made use of their precious woods to improve their economic condition. The communal authorities considered the "controllable" sale of their timber legitimate because their tree species are renewable and therefore not as endangered as the mahogany that has "just disappeared" from the region due to excessive exploitation (interviews

with communal authorities, January 2019). In the village authorities' view, selling their renewable timber did not necessarily contradict their sincere interest in conservation. Natura Mexicana discovered similar viewpoints about smuggling with the endangered red macaw (*Ara macao*).

Meanwhile, our interviews with local communities showed that they cannot interdict smuggling themselves because they are not capable of controlling the clandestine armed groups that hunt and smuggle in the forests at night. Occasionally, villages apply sanctions on community members whom they catch in such illicit activities. The local communities' knowledge of their environment is usually deep but not necessarily guided by the same values and priorities as those that guide global conservation efforts, and these values and sense of ownerships are in complex negotiations in the frontier, given that many previous nature-related activities have now become illegal and semi-clandestine.

Similar fieldwork results emerged from municipalities in the eroded grasslands of Tabasco. A Mexican drug cartel controls the area in Balancán between the San Pedro River and the international border. In a community bordering Guatemala, a former professional hunter and smuggler and his family now dedicate themselves mainly to cattle-raising, resulting in vast burned grasslands during the dry season. The family considers the transborder hunting for bush meat as a traditional way of obtaining food in their homelands. Now, due to expansive cattle-raising, the wildlife border has been moving farther and farther away from their immediate

community and deep into Guatemala, which is only about 2 kilometers from their home. Nowadays, according to the family, fauna provides food only for their own consumption. However, back in the 1980s hunting wildlife was also a lucrative business and important to the survival of local communities. Similarly, timber smuggling was sufficiently lucrative back in the 1980s, which made the family susceptible to threats and blackmail from parties that included government officials. The dangers and uncertainties related to smuggling eventually made the family withdraw from the business. However, like all residents in nearby communities, they are well aware of the licit and illicit trade passing through the borderlands. Thus, our case studies indicated that local territorial control overrides conservation when needed and is closely related to the nearby international border.

A final example emerges from a village near both the international border and the municipal capital, which has been charging fees for passing through that village's lands to cross the border. The village authorities told us that as the municipality provides only scant public services, the villagers cut and sold mahogany (*Swietenia macrophyllia*) from their lands to pay for the construction of their own dirt road and for laying cables to bring electricity. By selling *their* precious woods, they built *their* road, which is now being used for transboundary traffic of all kinds. To recover their costs, the villagers started to charge the Guatemalans who trespassed through *their* community on that road. Municipal authorities then became interested in helping a neighboring community

that lacked sufficient water. According to the village leaders, the authorities negotiated with the Guatemalan authorities, who agreed to provide water free of charge to the water-deficient community if the road-building community would waive the trespassing fee for Guatemalans. The road-building community refused to comply, insisting that it would continue charging fees for having constructed the road by themselves without municipal help, and at the sacrifice of *their* precious woods.

As can be seen, and as Berke (2018) also evidenced, control of the international border in this case is *de facto* in the hands of the local communities rather than in the inter-governmental parties who administer the locality *de jure*. Conservation practices now highlight, incite, and change these relations, with each side making claims to their lands, territories, and natural resources. The negotiations over ownerships of nature involve contested issues over licit and illicit practices, autonomy in determining what constitutes conservation, and the very bordering of the communities themselves, which governmental representatives need to include in their deliberations about natural resources.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the ways in which conservation relates to the frontier. Our principal finding is that conservation relates to the frontier by means of opening and provoking negotiations over ownerships of nature, which includes renewed human-nature relationships. However, these negotiations are not just binary oppositions but complex

deliberations about claims and appropriations about territories and nature. In this sense, our results transcend resource competition as a key element of the frontier.

During the past decades, the concept of frontier has been revitalized to illuminate complex power relations, particularly in the remote and naturally rich peripheries of the Global South. New scholarship on frontiers has brought about increasing emphasis on territorial-spatial, state, and environmental dimensions. In this article, we have deepened the analysis of those elements in the case of conservation, which has become a process that is deeply embedded in contemporary frontier dynamics. Our case of conservation in the MSB blurs the distinction between resource competition and territorial cohesion and reveals complex and unsettled power relations.

In this article, we found that the human-nature aspect is also crucial for frontier analysis, as power relations fundamentally include natural environments and their politicization, especially where conservation provokes negotiations over ownerships of nature. In other words, the frontiers involve power relations among humans not only in a physical space but also in their relationships to lands, territories, resources, and nature. Negotiations over ownerships of nature are about contested access, control, rights, and attachments to nature in the frontier.

As shown, conservation practices might challenge in many ways the concept of frontier as an overarching, multiscale process that is embedded both in governmental institutions seeking to expand their influence in the frontier, and in the local institutions and

people engaged in complex power relations. These conservation efforts, which are institutional, legislative, and concrete projects in local communities, transform the frontier spatially and in terms of the relations among actors, but also in terms of the deeper human-nature relations. As our case study suggests, these include the transition from modernizing settlers to conservation stakeholders and rightsholders. In the process, the rainforest landscape also shifted from a hostile place to a timber resource and river route, to be modernized, militarized, and colonized. Finally, the same landscapes have become subject to Indigenous rights claims and objects of conservationist stakeholders as landscape managers.

To this end, we have suggested that the concept of frontier is not limited to mere discovery and struggle for a new resource; rather, it opens and challenges power relations, which are subject to complex negotiations. This is important, because as shown here, the settler communities, some Indigenous and some not, are far from hapless victims of the expanding state or conservation actors, who, again, introduce and negotiate far more complex understandings of nature than just as a resource.

In the case of the MSB, contemporary conservation practices penetrate both the politics of nationalizing space and the local communities. First, there is resistance to the way in which protected areas are decreed and spatially controlled, and to the way in which previous, traditional activities, such as species hunting for bush meat and carpentry have become illegal. Second, there is adaptation, both by the government and

the communities. In some cases, conservation actors and communities have managed to negotiate and settle on new concepts and relationships that benefit them both. Finally, there is counter-conservation and/or community conservation, characterized fundamentally by the community's own decision and autonomy to manage their natures. Communities can also use conservation as a tool for making territorial claims against state expansion.

While conservation certainly may form its own frontier as a new resource, our study suggests that it is appropriated both by the frontier and by territorialization tendencies. It is a tool for governments interested in strengthening their control over the frontier space, particularly in international borderlands. To illustrate this aspect, we analyzed the state's politics of nationalizing space through conservation policies. We identified three cornerstones (or stages) of the politics of nationalizing space in the Mexican southern border: formation of the

international border; modernization of the tropics through colonization; and strengthening of institutional presence through territorial control. Since the 1970s, conservation efforts of tropical areas have related to these stages in two forms: first, territorial control via bordered protected areas, along with the associated regulations; and second, institutional presence via legislation, incentives, and institution-building. While these measures have managed to repair some environmental damage and delay the deforestation caused by previous and current government policies, such mechanisms have also caused institutional dependence and spawned resistance among local people.

Conservation practices "conserve" the frontier, because inevitably, these practices become part of the existing power relation transformations. However, in the process, conservation also becomes a tool for claiming rights, to gain control, and to resist—to negotiate over ownerships of nature—that changes the nature of those relations.

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