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STORY

# Panamanian Indigenous People Act to Protect the Forest From Invading Loggers

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BY GUIDO BILBAO



Darien Gap on Pacific Coast. Image by David Broad/Wikimedia Commons. Panama, 2016.

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DARIÉN GAP, Panama—There is a land at the center of the Americas that is said to remain in the wild. It is the only place on the entire three-continent landmass where the 30,000-kilometer (19,000 mile) Pan-American Highway is interrupted, a distinction that gives the place its name: the Darién Gap.

The name connotes an impregnable 100-kilometer (62-mile) stretch of rainforest, rivers and swamps spanning the Panama-Colombia border and inhabited by ancestral peoples. Like a 21st century Old West or a tropical Siberia, the myth of the wild Darién has grown since ancient times. The Spaniards could never fully conquer it. The Scots tried to establish a trading colony there in the late 17th century, but it ended in misery and death. The outbreak of violence in Colombia in the later 20th century brought guerrillas, drug traffickers, and paramilitaries, endowing the wild myth with new barbarities. In recent years it has become a route for smugglers and migrants (<https://www.latimes.com/projects/la-fg-immigration-trek-america-colombia/>) of many nationalities heading north toward the U.S.

## The Defenders of the Darién Gap



This entrenched reputation helps keep the Darién shrouded in illegality and violence. Today it is subject to a chilling spate of deforestation as timber colonists and entrepreneurs advance across the region. The Darién's mythical wilderness is giving way to chainsaws and bulldozers. Even the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Darién National Park is at risk.

But despite the seeming indifference of the outside world, some among the Darién's original inhabitants—perhaps 35,000 people in Panama belonging to the Kuna, Emberá, and Wounaan indigenous ethnicities—are working to reverse this situation. Mappers, a drone pilot, a lawyer, bird-watchers, a journalist, and reforesters are carrying out ambitious projects to stop the degradation of the Darién Gap.

### **Lumber fever**

In the last 15 years, deforestation in the Darién has spread quickly. While the Panamanian public is continually surprised by news articles describing bloody conflicts between indigenous people and timber colonists, wood entrepreneurs continue to open roads and bring heavy machinery into the forest at will with little scrutiny. The forest is cut down, the wood is sold, and the land is burned to make way for livestock ranching.

Many Panamanians regard this expansion of the agricultural frontier into the forest as progress. Indeed, the National Assembly has incentivized the livestock and agriculture industries. The Panamanian government regards deforestation as an improved use of the land. If a farmer wants to secure title to a piece of forest, the government will deny his request. But if he chops down trees and builds a

house, the government gives him title to the land for a few dollars. This policy of massive land titling was promoted by the creation of the National Authority of Land Management (ANATI in its Spanish initials) through Law 59 of 2010.

Two events transformed the context and deepened the problem. First, in 2000, the Chinese government published a list of precious rosewoods, the most highly sought-after type of timber in its luxury furniture market. The list includes 33 species from Asia, Africa, and South and Central America, and ranks seven of them as high value. One of these is found mostly in the Darién: the cocobolo (*Dalbergia retusa*). In Panama, it sells for \$4,000 per cubic meter. In China, the value quadruples.

Next, in 2013, lobbied by loggers, Panama's National Assembly approved the export of cocobolo "as long as it comes from naturally fallen trees." Ostensibly this prohibited the felling of a protected species. But what came next was a tsunami of uncontrolled saws and bulldozers. Truckloads of cocobolo logs transit the national highways, passing police checkpoints and customs controls. They arrive in containers at the ports of the Panama Canal and embark for China without scrutiny.

The situation is such that, in 2015, the then-environment minister, Mirei Endara, told reporters that "almost 96 percent of the wood that leaves the Darién is in some way or another illegal, that is, it does not meet all the permits."

The chain of complicity and corruption that allows the looting of the Darién is so deep that Interpol's Panama bureau intervened, prompted by repeated complaints about containers arriving at Chinese ports that did not meet the protocols of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). In 2018, the agency seized 13 containers of cocobolo

(<https://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/sociedad/trafico-ilegal-de-madera-esta-creciendo-en-latinoamerica-1094942>), equivalent to 200 cubic meters (7,000 cubic feet) of wood, en route to Hong Kong.

“We have seen examples in the region of groups of drug traffickers who have swapped drugs for illegal timber,” Andrea Brusco, the U.N. Environment Programme’s regional environmental governance coordinator, told reporters (<https://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/sociedad/trafico-ilegal-de-madera-esta-creciendo-en-latinoamerica-1094942>) at the time.

Without programs that encourage or reward those who care for the environment, the deforestation of the Darién continues apace. The security of the forest is in the hands of indigenous people who believe that without territory, their culture will be lost. They are no longer waiting for the government’s help, but are beginning to fight for the land they claim (<https://news.mongabay.com/2018/08/panamas-indigenous-groups-take-land-fight-to-the-international-stage/>) as a matter of survival.

“The goal is to defend the territory because, as one slogan says, a native without land is a dead native. And we do not want to die,” said Yanina Carpio, leader of the community of Puerto Indio in the Emberá-Wounaan Comarca, a self-governing indigenous district with territorial land rights under Panamanian law.

## **The mappers**

Maps have always been essential to conquest. Once a territory can be rendered on paper, its control can be planned. Now, those tools of conquest are changing hands and becoming defensive instruments to wield in court to lay legal claim to the territories.

“Our grandparents keep the boundaries of the territory in their minds. They know the mountains as their own bodies, but lack legal validity,” Carpio said. “As far back as I can remember the issue of invasions has been a daily problem.” Although protected by a national law, the comarca bears regular intrusions by colonists.

With funding from the U.N. Small Grants Programme through the Panamanian foundation Almanaque Azul for mapping equipment and training to use it, “we found the momentum to begin this madness of the maps,” Carpio said.

The project in Puerto Indio is the first in a series to help communities with conflicts over land tenure develop their own maps.

The aim is, above all, to digitize the ancestral knowledge of Puerto Indio's elders. The team of mappers comprises 15 young people. But everyone participates, even children. The team makes long hikes through the jungle to mark the historical limits of the territory by GPS.

Carpio laughed recalling the faces of visiting officials as they watched the team working with drones, geolocators, computers, design programs, and geothermal mapping software. "They could hardly believe it. They have such a big prejudice against Darién," she said.

As he helped Carpio decorate the brand-new team office with maps, Aricio Cunampia, the mapping team leader, said that in addition to serving as evidence in court against invaders, the maps help the community better plan its activities.

"We needed to know exactly what we have," he said. "To know how much land is pasture, how much is virgin forest, helps us measure and implement our projects, understand the flow of water, delimit the water basin..."

The advantages, he added, "are innumerable."

"My dream is to leave our children this issue solved once and for all. Hopefully this mapping work will allow it so we can go to sleep peacefully," Carpio said.

### **The drone pilot**

Carlos Doviaza grew up near the headwaters of the Chucunaque River in Darién province. He remembers how the village's grandparents would bathe the kids every morning with medicinal herbs to protect them from the evil spirits living in the forest. "It was a way of making us aware and instilling respect for the forest," he said.

There was no electricity, no television, no cellphones. The only communication with the outer world was a public telephone. And the river. In summer, it always brought the same: people from afar who opened up roads and logged indiscriminately.

As a child, Doviaza experienced these changes positively, because deforestation opened spaces of light in the eternal night of the tropical forest. And the businessmen came with gifts and food. They organized cartoon projections for the children. It was a party. He was much older before he understood the consequences of deforestation. “It takes time to open your eyes and accept that they are taking advantage of you,” he said.

But above all, Doviaza paid attention to other types of visitors. “I remember that Europeans always came with their super big cameras to take pictures of us and film. I looked at them and I wondered what I would film from my own point of view,” he said.

That idea stayed with Doviaza throughout his childhood. After finishing school he decided to go to the city to continue studying. The first thing he had to face was discrimination, and overwhelmingly negative attitudes toward indigenous communities.

“I did not understand the news. Whenever they talked about indigenous peoples they spoke of poverty and sad news, but what I remembered from the forest was nothing but happiness and abundance,” he said. “There was more than enough love and food, the landscapes were beautiful. It is what they call now the good life, and it was all ours.”

While looking for a way to study filmmaking, Doviaza stumbled upon drones. “I realized that new technology allowed me to fulfill two roles at a time: on the one hand to document communal life and on the other to monitor the forests,” he said.

That was how Doviaza became an essential asset for the Darién communities: whenever there’s an invasion of territory, a burning, or a need to map inaccessible areas, Doviaza brings his equipment, flies the drones, and gets the necessary information.

“When the indigenous people began to go to court, the cases failed because they were not able to bring the supporting evidence,” he said. “But now we can take videos and prove what we denounce. Drones are a fundamental tool for the legal empowerment of indigenous communities.”

With support from the New York-based Rainforest Foundation U.S., he travels through the Darién communities, monitoring the health of the forests. As he does, he spreads a message that wealth is not within the forest—it is the forest itself. It grows not by taking valuable goods out of the forest but by spending time there to enrich life.

## **The lawyer**

Leonides Quiroz is the first lawyer from the Wounaan ethnic group. He was born in the Darién Gap, in the community of Cémaco Taimatí, where his family arrived escaping from the violence in Colombia. He did not have an easy life. He grew up with his grandmother and his aunt, away from his parents. He left his community when he was seven to live with a family in Panama City. His tutor there used to tell him that he was destined to be the voice of his people. He managed to go to university and earn a bachelor's degree in business administration.

When Quiroz returned to his village in 1998, the Wounaan communities' situation had worsened noticeably. “The lack of protection was total, the territories were invaded, the conflicts were permanent,” he said. “The most difficult part was the lack of legal recognition of the territory. But what could I do?”

Quiroz began to contact lawyers and jurists to try to defend the territory in court. “But it was incredible: nobody wanted to help us and those who were interested asked us for too much money,” he said. “I understood that what we needed was an indigenous lawyer. And that's how I went back to university and began studying law and political science to work on priority number one of my people, which is the claim of territorial law as a means of survival.”

After graduating in 2003, Quiroz set about convincing the indigenous leaders to try the legal way. The skepticism of the communities was absolute. They expected nothing from the Panamanian government. But ultimately they supported him.

One of his first big triumphs came in 2012. After a seven-year legal process, the communities of Puerto Lara, Caña Blanca and Arimae secured legal title to their lands. Although the territories had already been emptied of precious woods,



legalization brought the communities a sense of calm they had long forgotten. The settlers' intrusions ended and the forest slowly began to regenerate.

Since then, Quiroz has been a headache for the environment minister, Emilio Sempris. In March 2018 he joined an occupation of the ministry building in Panama City that ultimately forced the ministry to allow inspections to go forward (<https://news.mongabay.com/2018/08/panamas-indigenous-groups-take-land-fight-to-the-international-stage/>) in eight territories, the first step toward their legal recognition. These inspections were completed just last month, in February 2019.

## **Bird-watchers**

Wounaan dances imitate nature, mainly birds. They show that culture is linked to the land and the life of the forest. The people dance to celebrate, to heal, and as an offering. The sacred cycle has leaped from generation to generation for centuries.

In recent years, however, that cycle has been interrupted. Some bird species have disappeared due to deforestation and forest disturbance. A small, brown ground-dwelling bird local people call the *kokodrit*, for example, has not been seen for a long time. Not only do dancers imitate its movements, but flute players also imitate its song. Without the *kokodrit*, the reproduction of the Wounaan dances is in danger.

As a result, a group of seven Wounaan men and two women in Puerto Lara decided to start monitoring and recording birds in their forests. With training and specialized binoculars from the U.S. nonprofit Native Future, they formed the Oropéndolas Negras in 2017, a kind of indigenous bird-watching brigade named after the black oropendola (*Psarocolius guatimozinus*) that lives in Darién. After that, 10 women formed another group, the Tangaras Azules, named after the blue-gray tanager (*Thraupis episcopus*).

They understand that the diversity and abundance of birds are a measure of a forest's overall health. The Darién's intact tropical forests shelter about 600 species of birds. Even its recovering forests, like those in Puerto Lara, can host more than

230 species, as the Oropéndolas Negras have observed. The disappearance of birds—which control insect populations and disperse seeds—prevents the forest’s sustenance and regeneration.

“It was a revolution in the community,” said Chenier Carpio, a spokesman for the bird-watching groups, which participate in international bird counts, including the U.S.-based National Audubon Society’s Christmas Bird Count in January.

The children’s attitude to the birds has changed. In the past they threw stones at the birds for fun. But since their parents have become so attentive, they have thrown their slings in the trash and now walk around with books, learning the birds’ scientific names and characteristics.

And of utmost importance to the Wounaan birders is learning the birds’ names in their native language, Wounaan Meu, and the birds’ significance to their cultural practices. Like many indigenous peoples around the world, the Wounaan are losing their language to acculturation.

Along the way, the communities also discovered that there is a large market for bird-watching tourism, and began to organize tours for that purpose, bringing in jobs and income.

## **The journalist**

Born in Ecuador, Ligia Arreaga arrived in the Darién at the age of 20 and left only to save her life. In 2008 she started working as a Darién correspondent for SERTV, Panama’s state television and radio broadcaster, and the RPC-TV television network, both based in Panama City. She was the first to denounce the negotiations around the Matusagaratí Lagoon and its surrounding wetlands, one of the most important freshwater reserves in Central America, where one-quarter of flora and fauna species are endemic.

Since then, her work has focused on Agricultura y Servicios de Panamá S.A., a company led by Colombian entrepreneurs that began planting rice and oil palm within the boundaries of a protected area surrounding the lagoon. Over the last 15

years the company has dug extensive canals that have slowly drained the lagoon and has applied agrochemicals to monocultures that have poisoned its waters, according to Arreaga and other activists.

Her writing put her in the eye of a storm. Her news stories narrated how the company, allied with local politicians, managed to title the supposedly protected land. Until violence, like a wind, blew into her life.

One afternoon in 2009, the community priest arrived at her house. Without any explanation, he forced her to get in his car and drove her out of town. Once they reached a safe place, he told her that a Colombian hitman had revealed to him in holy confession that he had been hired to kill her and make her body disappear.

“Have you made any complaints in recent times?” Arreaga recalled him asking.

“I’ve been denouncing them for years, father. What I did now was to file a judicial complaint,” she responded.

The police assigned bodyguards to protect her, but that lasted only a few days. She learned that the repentant hitman had been beaten and hospitalized. So Arreaga doubled down. Together with other activists, she founded the nonprofit organization Alliance for a Better Darién. In 2015 she was threatened again with an anonymous message, and in 2016 her pursuers let her know they were going to kill her by simulating an accident.

“I went to the justice system, to the media, and these businessmen seemed untouchable. I then understood what impunity is about,” she said.

Fearing for her life, Arreaga decided to leave the country. The Irish NGO Front Line Defenders provided the resources to ensure her security outside Panama. She did not want to be another Berta Cáceres (<https://news.mongabay.com/2018/12/7-convicted-of-killing-honduran-indigenous-activist-berta-caceres/>), the indigenous Honduran activist murdered in 2016. “Forests are being defended with life. That is our reality,” Arreaga said.

While she was gone, in 2017 a court sentenced two company officials ([https://www.tvn-2.com/nacionales/condenan-empresarios-sembrar-permiso-humedal\\_0\\_4798020159.html](https://www.tvn-2.com/nacionales/condenan-empresarios-sembrar-permiso-humedal_0_4798020159.html)) to 32 months in prison as a result of a lawsuit by her group and another. After the government issued the company a light fine for environmental damage to the lagoon in 2018, Arreaga returned to Panama after two years abroad. “Why am I back? Because I have to fulfill my responsibility as a journalist and a citizen of the world in this century: to stand for nature,” she said.

## **The reforesters**

The community of Piriati is relatively young. In the 1970s the government of Omar Torrijos built a large dam that created Lake Bayano, displacing the local Emberá community. They were promised improvements, schools, houses and more. But they received nothing. The government moved them to an immense field by the side of a road that had long been used for cattle ranching. The earth was dead. This was Piriati.

Raquel Cunapio, age 30, was born there. In 2017, she decided it was time to take action and recover her culture. But if she wanted to organize a cultural festival and asked her grandparents how they used to paint their bodies, they talked about seeds that were no longer available there. “If I wanted to put a stand on the road for handicrafts and wanted to make pots, the same thing: plants in the forest that produced that kind of fiber were not available,” Cunapio said. If she had a cold and the nurses at the health center recommended ibuprofen, she remembered that her grandmothers had told her about teas and herbs she couldn’t even identify.

She soon realized the only way to achieve a community rebirth was to rehabilitate the forests.

Then the big question emerged: Who knows how to build a tropical forest? Her grandparents had no answers. They had never faced that question. The forests had always been there and they had learned to live without affecting them.

And so last year Cunapio and other people from Piriati began searching for agronomists and conservationists to learn how to proceed. They built a small greenhouse where they now produce hundreds of seedlings to plant in the

devastated areas. A forestry engineer agreed to help and advised them on different planting methods. They hiked the forest looking for seeds, and obtained those they could not find from other provinces.

“By denying us the forest they denied our culture. And for decades my people were afraid to fight for what is theirs. But that’s over,” Cunapio said while potting seedlings in the nursery.

In the future, she said, she hopes a robust forest will grow back and give her children and grandchildren the possibility that she was denied: to live according to her own culture. In the forest, with the forest, and for the forest.

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Guido Bilbao was born in Argentina where he majored in journalism. He has worked in his home country, Spain, and in Panama, where he has lived for 15 years. His writing has appeared in *El País*,...

## PUBLICATION



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