

Migration and the environment

by Osvaldo Munguía

The most common causes of migration in the Mesoamerican countries (the region stretching from southern Mexico to Costa Rica) are conflict and the degradation of the natural environment. In this article we consider both situations and the effect on the region of La Mosquitia in north-east Honduras.



Non-sustainable practices have led to degradation of the land and local ecosystems.

Migration caused by conflict in the region

Civil wars in the 1970s and 1980s in the countries bordering Honduras, such as Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, forced the migration of several people groups into Honduras. The refugees who crossed the border from Nicaragua into the region of La Mosquitia belonged to the indigenous Miskito and Sumu Mayangna peoples. These people groups share cultural, ethnic and historical links with both countries. As a result, the refugees were initially welcomed into the communities and homes of the Honduran Miskitos. Soon, however, the number of refugees was so large that the Honduran Miskitos could no longer continue to take care of them.

The Nicaraguan refugees later received support from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) through the work of an organisation called World Relief. The refugees were gathered together in an assembly and distribution centre in the village of Mocolon. The population of the village grew from 200 to 30,000 people. UNHCR and World Relief provided support in the form of food, housing, water, sanitation and various types of technical assistance.

The refugees were free to live and farm as they wanted. Sadly, this had a severe environmental impact. The refugees began to use the natural resources without considering sustainability or good farming practices. Hundreds of hectares of forest were cut down. Many species of animals,

Land degradation has increased poverty and forced people to look for other ways of life

birds and fish started to disappear as a result of over-hunting and the loss of their natural habitat.

The civil war in Nicaragua ended in 1990 and the Nicaraguan refugees began to return to their country. Over the following years, the forest grew back in the areas that had been deforested and then abandoned by the refugees. Animals, birds and fish returned to the area.

Migration caused by degradation of the natural environment

Another major cause of migration in Mesoamerica is the degradation of ecosystems and a reduction in the fertility of the land. The National Geographic Society has compared vegetation cover in Mesoamerica between 1950 and 2000. The areas of forest have been greatly reduced over this period. In the country of Honduras itself, around 50 per cent of the forest has been lost over the same period.

Much rainforest has been cut down so that the land can be used for agriculture. For example, large areas of forest have been converted into land for grazing cattle. According to a recent satellite analysis by MOPAWI, the conversion of forests into land for grazing cattle has nearly tripled between 2000 and 2007 (see diagram). Forest resources have also been exploited. Trees have been cut down, mainly by wealthy companies, to sell as timber. Land has been cleared, usually illegally, in order to build roads to transport the timber. The non-sustainable practices used have led to degradation of the land and local ecosystems. This has increased poverty and forced people to look for other ways of life.

One of the main destinations for migrants is the tropical rainforest in the region of La Mosquitia. Unfortunately, the migrant families bring with them the

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non-sustainable environmental practices that originally caused them to move. The Mosquitia region itself has therefore suffered from degradation of the land and local ecosystems in recent years.

Migration to other areas

Environmental degradation has also encouraged migration to urban areas, and towards the United States of America. Many people go in search of the 'American Dream': employment, better educational opportunities and better access to health services for their children. However, migrants often end up living on the edges of towns which have limited or non-existent basic public health services such as water and sanitation, and energy supplies.

Migration over land towards the United States of America from Honduras means crossing the borders of Guatemala and Mexico. These crossings are very dangerous, with high risk to life due to the conditions in which the migrants are transported. Hundreds of road accidents have been recorded, which have left people, mainly men, with no arms or legs. There have also been frequent deaths due to falls from trains or suffocation when hiding in vehicles.

Responding to the situation

MOPAWI have identified three key ways of reducing environmental degradation and, at the same time, providing people with a sustainable livelihood.

- **Growing cocoa for markets** This provides families with an income as



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cocoa is in high demand. Parents are able to send their children to school. Growing cocoa also helps agroforestry as cocoa plants require shade from other trees and plants.

- **Export of cosmetics using local tree products** The export of these products has strengthened the traditions of the indigenous people to maintain the forests and the biodiversity found within them.
- **Crop rotation** Farmers plant the fast-growing Guama fruit plants. These are nitrogen-fixing plants and they improve the soil quality. This has improved the growth of other crops such as maize, kidney beans and pineapple.

A major cause of migration is the degradation of ecosystems and a reduction in the fertility of the land

Conclusion

There is a link between migration and environmental deterioration. Where migration is caused by conflict, the number of people living in a particular area increases very rapidly, and they are dependent on the natural resources available to them. Where migration occurs because environmental resources have been damaged or used up, people migrate to forested land and often take with them harmful practices regarding the use of resources, which affects the environmental sustainability of this new area. Although migration and environmental deterioration are linked, it is important to remember that there are ways of reducing the impact on the environment.

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