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# In Guatemala, A Battle Over Logs And a Lost Kingdom

Mr. Hansen Aims to Preserve Vast Mayan Ruin as Park; Skeptical, Villagers Fight

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EL MIRADOR, Guatemala -- Deep in the Guatemalan jungle, Richard Hansen uncovered huge Mayan carvings in the 1980s that were sculpted well before Christ, evidence that Mayan civilization flourished hundreds of years earlier than historians had believed. A decade later, the archaeologist discovered the likely reason for the civilization's collapse: The Maya had poisoned their wetlands by denuding the forests.

Now he is excavating what may turn out to be the grandest Mayan city of all, a 15-square-mile collection of buried temples and pyramids, called El Mirador, or "The Lookout," in Spanish. El Mirador, Mr. Hansen believes, was linked by limestone causeways to dozens of smaller cities, which at times battled other Mayan regions for supremacy.

Today, the archaeologist is in the midst of his own battle. He fears the region will be destroyed if local villagers, who have won the right to log the rain forest, concentrate on the Mirador area. Just carving logging roads would be enough to wreck the place, he says, because farmers and city dwellers inevitably follow, burning down the woods to make cattle ranches.



Bob Davis

Richard Hansen with a tamale bowl his crew recovered at Mirador.

So he is harnessing archaeology, politics and Mel Gibson to convince Guatemala to create a 525,000-acre Mayan national park -- nearly the size of Rhode Island. He faces fierce opposition from some of the country's poorest residents, who need the logging revenue to pay for teachers and telephones.

Sitting on a Mirador pyramid summit, Mr. Hansen pointed to mounds of trees on the horizon that he believes are graves of lost cities. Given the go-ahead, he would excavate the sites, and help build a railway to link them all for tourists who backpack or helicopter to the remote setting. "It's a kingdom," he said. "We can save a kingdom."

The 52-year-old Mr. Hansen is as much entrepreneur as academic. He splits his time between his family's potato farm, which he built into a significant enterprise in Rupert, Idaho, and his archeological fieldwork in northern Guatemala. To finance his Mirador activities, he has loaned the project at least \$285,000, according to a foundation he created to fund his archaeological work. (For years, Mr. Hansen was affiliated with the University of California at Los Angeles, but he recently switched his academic ties to nearby Idaho State University.)

The 6-foot-4 archaeologist, who wears a signature blue bandana as a sweatband, can be very persuasive. In 2002, Alfonso Portillo, then Guatemala's president, helicoptered to Mirador, bought Mr. Hansen's vision and issued a decree declaring the expanse a protected area, a first step toward a national park. When opposition arose, Mr. Hansen recruited influential patrons, including Mr. Gibson, whose popularity has soared in Catholic Latin America with the success of "The Passion of the Christ."

The Hollywood star is contributing money to Mr. Hansen's project and jetted to El Mirador this spring to check out the site for a new historical picture he is filming, "Apocalypta," about Mayan warriors. Mr. Gibson tried to keep his visit a secret, but word leaked out anyway, adding a dose of glamour to the Hansen project. A photo of the star with his arm around a cafeteria worker now hangs in a local airport, where a scrapbook of the Gibson visit is also on display.

Opposition to the Mayan park runs along class lines, as does much everything else in this battered, violent land where even soda delivery trucks are accompanied by guards with shotguns. After a 36-year-long civil war ended in 1996, Guatemala awarded destitute villages the right to log the forest, so long as they agreed to limit their take to a level where the forest could regenerate itself. The government believed that by giving villagers an economic incentive to preserve the forest, they would be less likely to burn it down to create ranches and fields.

But logging would be banned in Mr. Hansen's Mayan park, and the villages closest to Mirador would lose a big source of income. Two of the main villages, Carmelita and Uaxact'un, were carved out of the jungle early last century, to provide housing and landing strips for workers who tapped trees for chicle, the main ingredient in chewing gum, then a boom market. That business died 40 years ago, as gum makers turned to synthetic substitutes.

Logging money is once again providing a glimmer of prosperity in the old "chiclero" towns. In the past few years, Uaxact'un, with a population of 900, bought its first communal satellite phones, started a junior high school and built two evangelical Protestant churches. Residents call the one where alcohol is permitted, "the sinners' church"; the other, where alcohol is banned, is "the saint's church."

Mr. Hansen worries that the towns won't be able to hold out against pressure from ranchers and drug traffickers to torch the forest. He also argues that the people here would be better off economically if they worked as tourist guides or as hotel and restaurant workers. One version of his plan even envisions paying villagers to protect trees rather than log them. But his arguments have fallen flat among villagers who are so suspicious of outsiders that they refer to the capital of Guatemala City as "Gringolandia."

"When high-class tourists come, they won't want to use us" as tourist guides, says Floridalma Bo, the secretary of Uaxact'un's logging cooperative. After complaining that Mr. Hansen doesn't meet with villagers, she quickly declines any interest in his coming to town. "It would be best for him not to come," she says. "It

could be like when the Spanish people came here and fooled the Maya by giving them trinkets."

Aided by a media-savvy German spokeswoman, the villagers have adeptly turned Guatemalan public opinion against Mr. Hansen. Their lawyers sued to reverse the 2002 presidential decree. This spring Guatemala's current president, Oscar Berger, repealed it, while his chief of staff, Eduardo González Castillo, warned Mr. Hansen to butt out of Guatemalan affairs. "I have spoken to him in American terms," says Mr. González. "He should interpret [warning] letters as two strikes."

Mr. Hansen and his supporters have worked hard to make amends. He's scheduled to receive an award from the president next month for his archaeological work.

Now he is turning to wealthy Guatemalans to politick for him. Every Thursday, Francois and Nini Berger, who are cousins of President Berger and who own big stakes in cement and agricultural businesses, meet in their Guatemala City villa with allies to plot strategy. Over sausage snacks, the Bergers, who contributed \$10,000 to Mr. Hansen's foundation in 2004, explained how their two-day jungle trek to Mirador helped them understand the importance of saving the ruins and rain forest, populated by howler monkeys and rare birds. "We want to convince the president to leave his legacy on Mirador," said Mr. Berger.

They are counting on Mr. Gibson's help, too. The actor recently donated \$500,000 for Mr. Hansen's work at Mirador and agreed to serve on the board of Mr. Hansen's foundation. He also plans to be a spokesman for the Mayan park project, say Mr. Hansen and another board member. Mr. Gibson's agent, Alan Nierob, says the actor won't comment on his precise role.

During the summer, Mr. Hansen lectured on Mirador to a group of would-be tour guides from Carmelita, and flew to the Mayan ruin of Yaxha to talk to the cast and crew of the "Survivor Guatemala" TV show when it was being filmed. In January, he plans to meet with the mayors of some of the towns that have rights to log the forests. "Politics is more difficult than archaeology," he says. "Archaeology is all on the surface."

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