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**Narcotics traffic destroying Central American rainforests in globally-recognized biospheres, fueling climate change; studies argue U.S. should invest anti-drug funds in local communities**

***New studies show indigenous and local communities, with strong rights and strong say in fate of forests, can resist drug cartels; other findings argue carbon-rich community forests offer region chance to quickly meet Paris climate promises***

**SAN JOSE, CR**—(8 October 2019) Drug trafficking and, paradoxically, efforts to slow it are rapidly driving the deforestation in Central America's most precious tropical rainforests, according to a trio of major studies being released today at the Pre-COP, an event sponsored by the Government of Costa Rica in the lead up to the Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP25) in Chile in December.

The studies by researchers in Texas, Oregon, El Salvador and Costa Rica find the U.S.-funded war on drugs has pushed traffickers into remote forest areas, where the shadowy underground economy they have built is devastating the environment, directly causing more than \$214.6 million in natural and cultural resource loss in the region's protected forests each year.

"Narco-deforestation now affects large tropical forests in Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and is beginning to affect Costa Rica as well," said Jennifer A. Devine, an Assistant Professor of Geography at Texas State University and co-author of two of the studies released today on cocaine trafficking in Central America.

"Our findings suggest the best way to address drug-fueled deforestation, violence and insecurity in the region is to invest in community land management and to recognize community land rights. Doing this will also help to save the region's remaining forests and address climate threats. But we have to move quickly."

A third study, by the El Salvador-based Prisma Foundation, also released today at the Pre-COP, reveals that community forests in southern Mexico and Central America contain enough carbon to more than meet the region's commitments to the Paris Agreement on climate—if governments recognize and enforce the rights of local and indigenous communities and allow them to participate in decisions that impact land and resource management.

"Taken together, these papers confirm just how vital it is to ensure that local forest communities have long-term control over their land and forest resources," said David Wrathall, Assistant Professor of Geography, Environmental Sciences and Marine Resource Management at Oregon State University. "If we are to reduce the risk of emissions caused when forests are destroyed and to safeguard the carbon in forests, such rights will be key for avoid dangerous human interference in the atmosphere."

The paper on cocaine trafficking and conservation efforts in Central America concludes that drug traffickers increasingly are seeking remote landscapes, often in protected areas,

to ensure physical transit routes for cocaine. But the local impact goes far beyond mere trafficking and leads to the undermining of systems of governance, the researchers argue, except where indigenous and traditional peoples have strong rights and a role in deciding how the land should be managed.

### **Cocaine traffickers turn to ranching, agriculture to launder money**

“The desire to launder vast sums of money, in addition to establishing physical control over key territories, has led the narco-traffickers to rapidly expand into industries that contribute to both of these goals,” said Wrathall. “This translates into vast deforested tracts for cattle ranching, African palm, and extractive activities. The presence of the narco-traffickers thus often leads to a dramatic transformation of the local landscape. It redefines boundaries and territories around new extractive economies that are run by illegitimate authorities associated with violence and the threat of violence.”

Supported with grants from the Pegasus program at Colorado State University, the National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center (SESYNC)<sup>1</sup> and the Open Society Foundations, the two studies of cocaine trafficking were produced by researchers at Texas State University, Oregon State University and Fundación Neotrópica in Costa Rica, with contributions from researchers at other US institutions.<sup>2</sup>

In looking at the impacts of drug trafficking, the researchers sought to identify the causes of deforestation in protected areas across the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, with a particular focus on the Mosquitia in Honduras, the Osa Conservation region in Costa Rica and the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala.

One of their conclusions is that funds provided by the United States for militarized counter-drug policies, “have ultimately pushed drug trafficking and the laundering of spectacular profits into remote, biodiverse spaces, where they threaten both ecosystems and people, and undermine conservation goals and local livelihoods.”

“In this way, the War on Drugs is working directly at odds against the billions of dollars invested in conservation by donor countries, international conservation NGOs, advocacy groups, and local communities,” Wrathall said.

The researchers found that the multinational drug trafficking organizations, driven into remote forest areas to elude law enforcement, have cleared vast areas of trees in Central America to launder their drug money. By striking deals with cattle, logging and fishing interests, the narco-traffickers cause the destruction of forests that have stood, sometimes for centuries. Representatives of large transnational cartels partner with cattle ranchers, for example, with Mexican cartels in particular able to leverage their local influence to embed themselves in the landscape, acquiring territory and fomenting violence.

“We now know that narco-trafficking is a prime driver of ecosystem service losses in protected areas of the Central American Biological Corridor,” said Bernardo Aguilar-

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<sup>1</sup> These grants were funded by the National Science Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> This research began with work led by scientists at the Fundación Neotrópica, with contributions from the Landscapes in Transformation in Central America group, supported by a SESYNC grant. Contributors also included Erik Nielsen, PhD (Northern Arizona University), Steve Sesnie, PhD (United States Fish and Wildlife Service) and Kendra Mc Sweeney, PhD (Ohio State University).

González, Executive Director of Fundación Neotrópica and an author with Devine and Wrathall of the conservation paper.

“Narco-related activities undermine traditional forest uses and resource governance, producing significant social and ecological costs. We also identified nine conflicts in the biodiversity hotspots we studied, with most of the burden carried by indigenous peoples and other local communities.”

Most vulnerable to the drug traffickers, the authors said, are areas with strict conservation policies like national parks, where absentee states or private sector actors monopolize governance and exclude the participation of indigenous and other local communities.

“Both the War on Drugs and a conservation model that excludes local communities are driving this problem,” Devine said.

### **Invest in indigenous and local communities to resist criminals, conserve forests**

As alarming as their findings are, the researchers argue they posit an attainable solution: Their work also revealed that the rights of indigenous forest communities to govern themselves and control their land can deter trafficking and slow deforestation.

“Investing in community land rights and participatory governance in protected areas is a key strategy to combat drug trafficking and climate change simultaneously,” Devine said.

But land titling alone is not enough, the researchers were told by local community leaders. Success also requires support for long-term planning and financing for community organizations, an observation confirmed by Levi Sucre, a Bribri from Costa Rica and general coordinator of the Mesoamerican Alliance for Peoples and Forests (AMPB).

“This is a series of studies that demonstrate in detail what science has shown globally,” Sucre said. “When governments invest in Indigenous peoples and local communities, and when they recognize and protect community rights to our territories, we are the best guardians of the forests – not just for us, but for the entire planet.”

In a separate technical report, also released today at the Pre-COP, Aguilar-González calculated the loss in natural and cultural resources of the trafficking activities at \$214.6 million each year, across Central America’s officially “protected” forests.

“That is more than double the conservation budget the region’s governments allocate to the forest areas,” Aguilar-González said. “Given that the War on Drugs is driving traffickers into protected areas, and the role communities could play in resisting them, we would recommend investing counter-narcotic funding in supporting community land rights and participatory governance. This is a solution that works, and it has no downside.”

### **Granting communities control over carbon-rich forests to meet Paris climate goals**

And there is a second significant benefit to strengthening community control over the remote forest regions and protected areas of Mesoamerica. The Prisma Foundation’s analysis of the plans of governments in Mexico and Central American governments for meeting the goals of the 2015 [Paris Agreement](#) found massive amounts of carbon in community forests.

Yet the study also shows governments are failing to include community land management in their plans for reducing carbon emissions, according to economist Andrew Davis, Director of the Forest and Territorial Governance Program at the San Salvador office of the PRISMA Foundation.

“There is a broad consensus that the rights of indigenous peoples and forest communities are central to saving forests and fighting climate change,” Davis said. “Our research shows governments in the region are ignoring a solution that would help them slash carbon emissions, protect the region from the scourge of narco-trafficking and support sustainable development.”

After a decade of monitoring and reporting on climate change mitigation initiatives by forest communities in Central America, Davis says the common thread running through his data should be alarming to governments and scientists, given the climate crisis and the growing concerns of a newly-awakened global public.

“Governments tend to focus on big-name projects, new technologies and have essentially taken their eyes off of these simple ways to mitigate climate change and slow deforestation, and that is available at a large scale,” Davis said. “They are missing the empirical evidence that stands before them, that contributing to cooperatively managed lands is an effective way to protect land and increase security.

“We have seen for years what works in places where communities are allowed to manage local land and resources. Their lives and livelihoods rely on it,” Davis added. “They take care of it. And they will do whatever they can to make sure their land remains secure and sustainable.”

Devine noted in particular the plight of the community concessions in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, which are waiting for their government to act on a request for renewal of concessions that were granted to local communities in the aftermath of Guatemala’s deadly civil war, which ended in 1996.

“Despite their globally-recognized success in reducing deforestation, the community forest concession system is under threat from multiple, competing interests,” Devine said. “Renewing those concessions is among the most pressing needs to avoid further losses.”

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[Fundación Neotropica](#) is non-governmental, private and non-profit organization, which has been working since 1985 for a balance between human well-being and nature conservation. It promotes social cohesion and grassroots-based management for the conservation of ecosystems and their fair and sustainable equitable use and access. Its work today extends throughout Central, South America and West Africa focusing on critical topics facing climate change today such as environmental justice, ecological debt and damage valuation, ecological conflicts and community-based conservation of coastal wetlands.

[The PRISMA Foundation](#) is a regional non-profit think-tank focused on environment and development. Its main areas of work currently focus on the region stretching from Mexico and Colombia. Its research and dialogue programs bring together multiple stakeholders to

address the problems of resource degradation and development, in order to contribute to more equitable, just and sustainable societies.