

# Foreword

Kathmandu, Nepal 25th May 2014

When I woke up, I found myself at the Beijing International Airport Terminal 3. This location might be the highlight of all the airports, of transportation and of globalization itself (apart perhaps from London and as a strong indication of international air traffic and traveling gone awful); economic growth hits us here again in all its forms. It makes for an anthropological showcase indeed.

But that morning, I just came back from 12 months of international sabbatical work from my university, arranging various ongoing biodiversity projects and global climate change modeling research, with so many international conferences and open access data sharing projects for a global audience. At that bright morning, looking right into the roaring throat of the international conglomerate in front of me (trying to glare through the haze that makes Beijing's gigantic air pollution so obvious to everyone), the many conservation issues all came together somehow. It sunk in, and it all lay clearly in front of me. There was a general scheme, a line, and how it all applied to the tropics. Central America offers us a huge book subject just on that. Eureka.

But how to bring this across to the scholars and students, and when, at the field school site? And what has Beijing airport really to do with a text book about Central American biodiversity conservation in the first place? For that, I would just like to reply "Chengdu" and to people new or not so familiar with globalization yet. The tropical city of Chengdu makes for a classic reply to explain modern biodiversity issues: it's a giant urban centre most people in the western world have never even heard about (I just learned about it while working in the Himalayan regions last years). But it has around 20 million people (double or more inhabitants than London, Paris, Berlin, or New York), sits right off Tibet, and presents the visitor with endless housing fronts of giant sky scrapers reflecting economic growth beyond the boundaries. It is urbanization "gone south"; the yin and yang. While Chengdu is a mega city in interior Asia, it also affects billions of people and the environment elsewhere, in China, in Tibet, inside and outside of Asia (see Harris 2007 in next chapters). The Asian Brown Cloud (ABC) in the Pacific is already a good reflection of these cities,

their policies, and impacts. Similar to other nations with mega cities, the footprint of China is global by now, having a resource hunger to be satisfied from all corners of the world. And thus, the (carbon) footprint of Chengdu is global too. Of course, it reaches right into Central America, and affects its biodiversity, habitat, and fabric, as the scholar will hopefully appreciate it in the upcoming chapters of this book.

Central America can get easily linked with China, Japan, and Asia. Already in the 1970s, the Japanese virtually fished out Lake Ometepe (where one of the tropical field stations covered in this book is located); the “boom and bust” fishery was done for the infamous freshwater sharks. Even more, Japan and Korea also have a close eye on the coastal fisheries of Central America. Starting with the help for their “socialistic brother nations” like Cuba and Nicaragua, the Chinese entered the Central American landscapes a little later than the Japanese did, but now even more so and on a wider area throughout. It now turns into a dominant foreign policy to be reckoned with globally (see Hardy 2013 mentioned in subsequent chapters of this book). The other field school site covered in this book, La Suerte in Costa Rica, is partly surrounded by pineapples of Chinese ownership (plantations mostly bought out from the previous North American companies, etc.). And for decades, Taiwan (the other China) already supported the Panama Canal (for instance to boost their trade and influence in the Pacific and beyond, at the time when Red China was not yet open for the world). But now, modern China does similar to Taiwan with self-interest and with even more political power. While the shape and setup of Central America is so much driven by direct US and EU interventions, often done for the sake of neoliberal capitalism and self-interest (with Spain and Britain setting already the seeds and self-confirmation of such an imperialism in the fifteenth century), the Asian connection might still be somewhat hidden to most scholars, so far. But the Pacific side of Central America and its politics are already heavily driven by the Asian interest. This interest lies less in a global dominance, control, and warfare scheme (a policy that the USA more openly pursues), or for world peace and global democracy for that matter, but the Asian interest in Central America sits more directly in the natural resources (whereas, the spread of socialism and culture seems to be less pursued and promoted). Such policy style will not go away any time soon though. One must easily add here the ongoing EU influence into Central America, too. The question remains: How long can the resources last under such demands?

Central America appealed to me as a great study option to learn from, when I was a beginning scholar and new PhD student in Canada in the late 1990s; but by then, the world actually was still “American.” Globalization was just starting, communism crumbled favoring capitalism, the US dollar dominated the global scene, and certainly Central America was subordinate to most of that. The cold war just ended, and Eastern Europe, and parts of Asia, were on the rise, so was the great “western concept” (conflicts like Kosovo, Iraq, and Ukraine were not on anybody’s mind yet, nor that Asia will be globally so dominant).

But during the past 30 years I had seen and experienced firsthand, the wholesale failure and collapse of many ideologies and global systems; so what will fall next? For Nicaragua I just remember it as a frequent but depressing news item in the early 1980s. The revolution filled our romantic western German 8 p.m. governmental TV

program with concepts and words we had no clue about. It sounded all rather exotic and showed scary images of tanks and warfare far from home. Once the TV was turned off for bedtime though nobody cared in real terms. In West Germany we just liked the bananas and pineapples (which were hardly available on the eastern side). What does ideology and warfare has to do with it?

Over time, I was very lucky then to work in Central America and to make it one of my bases, and to see things there firsthand. My efforts started in Venezuela in the late 1990s with a self-paid field school participation, and it continued with Nicaragua as a teaching assistant in a primate class, and then as a postdoc with teaching an entire class there. I got my introduction to Costa Rica in 2003, and liked it, came back, and we were able to stuck at both places for many years. So here we were. It was fun, but also hard work to set it all up each time and while our home, institutions, and families had many other ideas.

But apart from biodiversity, many social and political subjects can hardly be differentiated from the hardcore western science ones. Much can be said here, and the reader will hopefully be able to pick up many of these details throughout this book. But the reoccurring number one mistake in Central America seems still to remain: “We want to be like the West; so let’s follow them blindly.” We saw all of these things in our research firsthand, and it is described here in the book in more detail.

Well, what has that to do with Central American biodiversity conservation?

A lot.

While I was busy with the Steady State Economy and The Wildlife Society (TWS) working group, dealing with the linkage of the three schemes of economy, sociology, and biology it became the center in our thinking. It came to us so clearly that for a meaningful and modern science, all three features need to be achieved for a valid sustainability, but currently they are not. It is not well promoted with the relevant Academies of Sciences and their large funding bodies (NIH and NSF for instance); microscopic progress still rules (so-called high impact journals promote those views a lot). Central America and its huge diversity and rich history offers itself as a giant study object to learn from for just that, and which is changing its tune all the time and consisting of many things, like a chimera.

This book tries to shed light on these questions. Just looking at Mexico makes already for a great showcase of the Central American situation. Visconti et al. (2011; see it discussed in Chap. 2 of this book) describe it as the country with the highest rate of declining terrestrial mammals in a global context; it is also a country predicted with high levels of habitat loss by 2050 due to increase in food production, consumption, and population growth. Mexico City has already approximately 15 million inhabitants, and it is also the nation with the richest man in the world (!), as well with civil war like situations, and an estimated 45,000 people have been killed in recent fighting (mostly related to drugs). So what is going on? Well, Mexico’s oil and drug business makes for a major economic power house either way.

In contrast, the richest man in Nicaragua is probably President Daniel Ortega himself. The country is now relatively peaceful and catching up with other nations, namely, with its shining neighbor Costa Rica (but which is so highly indebted). Clearly, Nicaragua has a huge workers fleet operating in Costa Rica as well as in

the USA and elsewhere, primarily helping to make these nations richer (which then have the power to impose policies and impacts back onto Nicaragua). But with that, Nicaragua will not be able to recover quickly and be independent any time soon.

Well, in such an environment and context we did 12 years of Central American field work, mostly with field schools. Together with the photos and data in this book it now becomes a documented history. Here the reader and field school scholar will hopefully understand most issues we worked on, why we tackled them, and how to handle them well in the future and for a good outcome (as long as that is still possible). That's the purpose of this book and our efforts. If this book helps you and beyond, then even better.

The mind leads the body.

Falk Huettmann

Central American Biodiversity  
Conservation, Ecology, and a Sustainable Future  
Huettmann, F. (Ed.)  
2015, XXVIII, 805 p. 259 illus., 80 illus. in color.,  
Hardcover  
ISBN: 978-1-4939-2207-9