

The Future of Panama's Omar Torrijos National Park:  
Land-Use Conflict or Sustainable Development?

An Abstract of

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## Abstract

In Central America over the past twenty years, numerous national parks have been created to protect natural resources vital to national economic development. However, the majority of these newly protected areas have not resolved conflicting issues of human occupation. This thesis reviews the multitude of factors that have pushed subsistence farmers or *campesinos* to clear marginal forested lands, focusing specifically on Omar Torrijos National Park (OTNP) and the affects its creation has had on local groups. In an attempt to ascertain the problems and ways to conserve the forests of OTNP, surveys and interviews were conducted with four identified stakeholder groups: Panamanian Park Service employees (ANAM), Park residents (*campesinos*), ranchers and farmers living in the towns adjacent to OTNP. Survey results were used to formulate several conclusions regarding Omar Torrijos National Park and the stakeholder groups.

Overall, it was found that *campesino* Park residents had the most significantly different opinions from the other stakeholder groups regarding OTNP. *Campesinos* are geographically, socially, culturally and educationally isolated and hence it may be more difficult for the Park Service to work with, to relate to, and to change their lifestyle. However, *campesinos* were found to be more supportive of the ideas of sustainable development than other local stakeholder groups.

There appears to be some varying views on what is sustainable. While ANAM employees appeared to think that slash/burn agriculture is the most damaging activity for OTNP, local stakeholder groups believed that ranchers have a more negative impact on the Park than *campesinos*. Stakeholders also believed that ranchers have been the most negatively economically affected by the creation of OTNP because the Parks' creation

halted the expansion of pasturelands. There is no clear consensus whether or not there is more or less pasture in OTNP and such a conclusion can only be reached through more scientific research.

Factors negatively affecting the relationship between Park Service employees (ANAM) and local groups include; little or no contact, frustration with changing environmental laws and policies, and high fines for environmental damages done by locals unaware of environmental laws. ANAM's focus on improving infrastructure in the Park has been viewed by some local groups as a competitive move to capture tourist revenue for themselves. The Park Service's construction of lodging for tourists may hurt independent local ecotourism efforts.

All stakeholder groups expressed interest in different sustainable development projects. *Campesino* Park residents expressed interest in agroforestry projects, while ranchers were interested in planting shade coffee, and farmers in adjacent towns expressed interest in ecotourism projects and small loans. Several communities adjacent to OTNP will receive funding for sustainable development projects through the MesoAmerican Biological Corridor Project, although Park residents have not yet taken advantage of this opportunity. The greatest obstacles appear to be government bureaucracy and a lack of community unity.

The author suggests that the relationship between the Park Service and local stakeholders could be improved if Park revenue (such as entrance fees, fines, inspection fees) was re-invested in the area. ANAM hopes that in the future a percentage of Park proceeds will go to local environmental education while the author suggests that such funds go to local sustainable development projects benefiting the community.