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The man who inspired Mel Gibson's epic *Apocalypto*

Dr Richard Hansen spends six months a year in Guatemala, excavating the ruins of ancient Mayan cities. His adventures provided the inspiration for Mel Gibson's new £40 million epic Apocalypto.

Mel Gibson described me as a sort of Indiana Jones, says Dr Richard Hansen, director of the Mirador Basin Project. "Actually, my life is much more exciting than Indiana's. He jumps out of the aeroplane before it crashes? I stay on board."

Hansen spends six months a year in the Mirador Basin, a national park in Guatemala, excavating the ruins of ancient Mayan cities. He's been going there for the past 27 years. It was natural that Braveheart director Gibson would turn to him to flesh out his vision of the Mayans for his £40 million epic *Apocalypto*.

Filmed entirely in an ancient Mayan dialect, Gibson's follow up to his £320-million-grossing *The Passion Of The Christ* offers an unflinching view of a civilisation descending into madness. "I got a phone call from Mel after he had seen a film called *Dawn Of The Maya* on the National Geographic channel," says Hansen. "He was fascinated by the subject, and he flew out to the Mirador Basin in a helicopter and stayed with me in the jungle for a few days. This is one of the last wild areas of the world, and it's still very dangerous."

The real danger in the Mirador Basin is not venomous snakes (though there are plenty of those), it is people. Like Indiana Jones, Hansen is based at a Midwestern university (in his case, Idaho), and before leaving Guatemala for home, he has to re-bury much of what he has found, to prevent looting.

"If things go wrong we could lose everything," he says. "So to keep the camp safe, I employ local militia with automatic weapons. For decades, all the people there have known is poaching, looting, cocaine dealing and human trafficking for prostitution. I have to pay for armed guards on the camp at all times. In fact, I hire a lot of former looters. I have major problems with the local cocaine dealers? they don't want any outsiders to see them growing coca."

His camp comprises 22 PhD-level researchers and 220 workers. Between them they have forced a re-assessment of the rise and fall of Mayan civilisation, which flourished across Central America from 1800 BC until 1500AD.

Hansen also campaigns to keep the 525,000-acre Mirador Basin as a national park and save it from logging companies? a project to which Gibson has donated £250,000. With Gibson determined to make a film very different from the standard Hollywood portrayal of indigenous Americans, Hansen was involved as a consultant from the start.

"The set was flawless," says Hansen. "It was like a time machine taking me back to 1500AD. There are a few things that Gibson used that I advised he shouldn't? a nose ornament that didn't exist, for instance? but that is just splitting hairs."

Gibson's insistence that the cast use Yucatan Mayan on screen – still spoken today, but only in a tiny area of Central America – meant the untrained actors had to spend five weeks learning the language. (Gibson, who never learned the language, cast many of his 'actors' largely by watching the way they moved.)

Actor Jonathan Brewer, a Native American who plays the warrior Blunted, says, 'Yucatan Mayan is hard because you've got to make all these pops and clicks with your mouth. And it's another thing again to speak it wearing false teeth for the screen.'

Apocalypto was shot with 800 extras over eight months in Catemaco, near Veracruz, Mexico. 'There are a lot of poisonous animals there,' says Hansen. 'I helped pick out the type of venomous toads that could have been used to make blow-darts and pointed out the way the Mayans used hornets' nests against their enemies as a sort of bio-weapon.'

Gibson's film has faced controversy in the US over its level of violence. For example, the main character, Jaguar Paw, disembowels a pig and eats it raw, another man has his face savaged by a jaguar and others have their hearts ripped out on top of huge temples, while heads bounce down the steps to a cheering crowd.

'That's historically accurate,' says Hansen. 'The Mayans were pretty bloodthirsty by the 15th century. They didn't start off like that but they learned human sacrifice from the Aztecs. That's the story here – what happens to a society when it retreats from its values. That's what Gibson was fascinated by.'

Critics in the US have praised how the film – like *The Passion Of The Christ* and *Braveheart* – blends high-energy action with serious ideology. 'Mel is very astute,' says Hansen.

'He has read a huge number of publications on the Mayans and is intrigued by what makes civilisations collapse. Warfare is not the reason societies fall. We dropped atom bombs on two Japanese cities but within two or three years they were re-occupied again. You have to abuse the environment to make your society fall.

'The dig in the Mirador Basin has revealed a layer of fertile mud under nearly one metre of sterile clay. It was making cement for their temples that destroyed them. One pyramid required the removal of every tree from 1,600 acres of forest. You'd think you'd be aware you were destroying your own environment – but then, look at what's happening today around the world.'

Hansen is determined that history will not repeat itself – in the Mirador Basin at least. 'There are tremendous resources of wood in Mirador,' he says. 'But we shouldn't harvest it – that would be the equivalent of using the Grand Canyon as a landfill.'

Both Gibson and Hansen believe that preserving the area as a national park will provide jobs for local indigenous people. And Hansen is hopeful that the film will not only bring his vision of the daily lives of Mayans to a wider audience, but will energise his campaign to preserve the remains of a culture.

'This film works on two levels,' says Hansen. 'There's the guy who goes 'Whoa! That's pretty violent.' And there's another who says, 'What are the implications for our own society?''

Apocalypto opens on January 5

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