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The New Berkshires: A western Massachusetts metamorphosis

From July, 2004

Unconventional Wisdom

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Can development actually save one of Guatemala's most important ancient Mayan cities? **David Howard** investigates

by David Howard

Richard Hansen has just scrambled to the top of Monos Pyramid and roosted on a bit of scree overlooking the buried Mayan city of El Mirador when the howler monkeys begin roaring. Halting in mid-sentence, he cups his hands over his mouth and returns the guttural call. The monkeys, visible in the treetops below, bellow back a little louder. "You can really whip them into a froth," he says, grinning. It's a perfect moment—Monos, after all, is named for monkeys—and if life weren't so arduous here in this vast, empty, and largely lawless swath of rain forest in the Petén region of northern Guatemala, I'd suspect some sort of elaborate primate choreography, set up to impress the few visitors who endure the trek to the site. But I had learned almost immediately that Hansen doesn't need any gimmicks. After 25 years in Petén, he knows how to talk to the jungle.

What I've come to find out is whether he has the power to transform it. Hansen, a renowned UCLA archaeologist, is leading the excavation of El Mirador, one of the ancient Maya's largest cities. No one disputes the magnitude of his findings—his work here, within the 822-square-mile Maya Biosphere Reserve, has overhauled history books—but beyond the realm of science, Hansen is inflaming far more than a band of monkeys. For the past few years, he's been fighting an ongoing, and virulent, battle with major environmental groups and some locals over the future of the site and of Central America's last stand of virgin rain forest.

Hansen believes the ruins should be excavated, designated as a national monument, and then turned into an outdoor museum, much like nearby Tikal National Park, currently Guatemala's top tourism draw. He envisions a luxury hotel, a collection of ecolodges, an airstrip, and a narrow-gauge railroad that would allow visitors to bypass the 40-mile hike to the site. It's likely that the place would stir enormous interest. El Mirador, an elaborate Mayan metropolis built centuries before Christ, is a vast complex of temples, causeways, and dwellings now buried under a dense layer of jungle. Some 100,000 residents mysteriously abandoned the city about a.d. 150, but many of their works remain intact. They include one of the world's largest pyramids (the 236-foot La Danta is shorter than the tallest Egyptian pyramid but has more volume); a 2,000-year-old wall, one of the oldest in Mesoamerica, rising 21 feet high behind a temple; giant stucco sculptures of jaguars and macaws; stone slabs on which the Maya recorded major events; and thousands of vessels and

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tools. "The more you see this unfold," says Charles Bieber, a former advertising executive who serves as Hansen's volunteer photographer, "the more you realize it is one of the last great excavations on the planet."

Hansen, a 50-year-old part-time Idaho potato farmer with a bulldoggish personality and a debating champion's acumen for polemics, says he would prefer to continue quietly digging, but that's no longer an option. Loggers and looters are gradually closing in on El Mirador, he says, decimating the jungle and stealing art to funnel into the multimillion-dollar trade in Mayan artifacts. Guatemala, a developing nation still recovering from a 36-year civil war, lacks the resources to protect the site. Shortly before my visit, a blaze thought to have been set by locals who get paid to fight fires wiped out 100,000 acres.

For now, Hansen is combating these forces on his own. The Foundation for Anthropological Research and Environmental Studies, a nonprofit organization he created to advance his plan, pays for year-round security. But in the long term, Hansen believes, up to 80,000 visitors a year could "save" the ruins and the forest by covering such expenses as well as providing new economic opportunity for residents. "You could spread 10,000 people out here, and there would be enough sites developed that you could walk all day and not see anybody," he says, noting that an El Mirador park would be nine times the size of Tikal. "We can double tourism in this country, and 200 years from now the property will look almost the same as it does today. Under the logging model, the entire rain forest would be gone."

And therein lies much of the debate: Hansen seeks to ban all area logging, including an ongoing sustainable forestry program, which has received support from the Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Agency for International Development, a federal organization that subsidizes economic growth in developing countries. Hansen claims these well-intentioned agencies have been duped into spending \$40 million on community-development concessions—essentially paying residents to selectively harvest local wood—that is denuding the surrounding forests. "I never would have raised my head out of the archaeological pit if I thought those guys were saving the forest," Hansen says. "These concessions didn't look at a scrap of science, not a single satellite image."

The green groups strongly refute Hansen's assertions, claiming that he exaggerates everything from tourism estimates to the logging's impact. "Mr. Hansen has quite a bit of misinformation circulating about the forestry concessions," says Anne Dix, a spokeswoman for usaid. "He has no idea what went into the planning. We know where every tree is located within the concessions."

The logging is certified as renewable by the Bonn, Germany-based Forest Stewardship Council, Dix and others say. Moreover, some argue that Hansen's plan would further disrupt a fragile region. "In terms of the Maya Biosphere Reserve as a whole, we think it would be disastrous," says Chris Fagan, program director of ParksWatch, a conservation organization focused on Latin America. "These are incredible archaeological ruins, and if [the site] is developed at all, it needs to be done very delicately. To put in a landing strip and five-star hotels is just ridiculous."

Despite formidable opposition, Hansen has made significant strides. He has lined up the support of Guatemala's new president, Oscar Berger, and his appointees in the departments of tourism, archaeology, and forestry. Hansen has representatives lobbying the Inter-American Development Bank, the largest lender in Latin America, for funding. And during my visit, he was wooing wealthy American investors—Brent Townshend, the inventor of the 56k modem, visited and made a donation—as well as the mayor and a group

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of teachers from Carmelita, El Mirador's nearest village.

The California-based Global Heritage Fund and other organizations donated \$880,000 last year to restore four of El Mirador's sites, but Hansen says he needs \$2.7 million annually for 13 years to excavate and protect the area while developers simultaneously build the tourist infrastructure.

All sides agree on one thing: the stakes are high. Looters are taking out millions of dollars' worth of artifacts monthly, and observers point to the plundering of priceless objects in China, Cambodia, and India in the past two years as an example of what can happen. "It's hugely complex, as if the project itself were mirroring the scale of El Mirador," says Roan McNab, a Guatemala-based official in the Wildlife Conservation Society. "Dr. Hansen is quite right that the area is spectacular—a world wonder—and needs to be protected. We may be talking about the single most ambitious conservation and development project related to protected areas proposed in the Americas."

If Hansen is to be believed, time is short. "We're in danger of losing a saga of humanity within the next year," he says. "This is a story about early human history—the rise and fall of a highly advanced culture—that we may never know, or understand, or benefit from. If I fail, it all goes."

David Howard is a senior associate editor at Backpacker magazine.

The information in this story was accurate at the time it was published in July, 2004, but we suggest you confirm all details and prices directly with the service establishments before making travel plans.

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