Negotiating the Tropical Forest

Colonizing Farmers and Lumber Resources in the Ticoporo Reserve

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Introduction

The last three decades have seen a worldwide surge in awareness and concern about the loss of natural forest environments, resources and wildlife. Simultaneously, man’s encroachment on unexploited or reserved areas has increased, with factors such as population increase, unrelieved poverty, and state agricultural policies contributing to scenarios where peasants resort to colonizing new lands in search of a living. In contrast to the optimism of the 1950s and 1960s, when peasant farmers were often portrayed as a positive force in opening new territories to agricultural production for the benefit of the nation, this sector has more recently been depicted as a threat to the environment and resources of not only particular nations, but the entire world, as deforestation and fires threaten the global climate.

This chapter discusses a farming community located in the foothills of the Venezuelan Andes, settled in what is known as the Ticoporo Forest Reserve. Since its declaration as a reserve in 1955, the face of the Ticoporo Forest has been radically transformed through the conflictive interaction of colonizing farmers, lumber interests and state policies, and the forest, a natural habitat of tropical birds, fish, and fauna, has deteriorated greatly. Perceptions guiding current programmes to regulate the situation view landless colonists as predatory and as a threat to the area, and consequently, state programmes seek to limit land use and commercial transactions within the reserve, with the aim of
restoring state control of the area. Occupants are encouraged to plant commercial species of trees on part of their holdings in exchange for permission to keep limited amounts of cattle on their land claims.

Here, I will argue that the practices of smallholding farmers in this region are ideally suited to land colonization and not necessarily anti-conservationist; rather, the programmes themselves and the legal and political situation compel people to undertake destructive survival strategies. Ultimately, there is a better chance of saving and augmenting lumber resources by negotiation, and by supporting existing colonizers’ land rights, than by implementing policies limiting occupants’ integration into national economic life.

**Background: Farmers, Lumber Companies and the State in the Reserve**

The Ticoporo Forest, originally 269,147 hectares of natural forest, is located at the southern base of the Venezuelan Andes, in the state of Barinas which lies in the western part of the country. It is bounded by the Andean foothills, or piedmont, in the north; and by a series of rivers that flow down from the Andes – the Anaro River in the east; the Quiu and Zapa Rivers in the west. The Suripá River forms its southern border. Other rivers that flow through the reserve from the Andes are the Bumbun, the Socopó, the Old Socopó, and the Michay.

There are few written sources available to provide information about the history of this particular area. The Andes were among the first areas of Venezuela to be colonized, because of their cool climate, which more resembled that of Europe, but the nearby plains towns of Barinas (founded 1577) and Ciudad Bolivia (earlier called Pedraza) also date back to early colonial times. These towns did not flourish early on, however, and were devastated by Indian warfare, Civil War, and tropical diseases such as malaria during the first centuries of their histories.

The Ticoporo Reserve is first mentioned in written accounts by Francisco Alvarado, who in his *Memorias* (1961) describes a trip he made in 1870 between Cúcuta, on the Colombian border, and the town of Barinas. Descending the Sierra Nevada from one of the southern villages in Mérida state, he arrived in Santa Bárbara de Barinas in two days, and there sought a guide to take him through the forest to Pedraza. He arrived in Pedraza after three days’ journey through a deserted and dangerous forest, with no inhabitants except a few nomadic Indians, and many rivers and streams that were difficult to cross. Alvarado describes the zone as an extensive area in which one would go hungry if one did not have provisions, although it would be possible to hunt the abundant wild pigs and turkeys (Tosta 1989, citing Alvarado 1961). Oral accounts I collected from some of the first colonizers of the zone contain similar elements. Settlers spoke of the many rivers, difficult to cross, but full of fish; the great quantities of wild game to be had in the region, which helped them survive in the period before first crops could be
harvested; and the profusion of enormous trees, called *majumba*, and considered to be testimonials of the great fertility of the land. Also, parts of the reserve are marshlands that flood with the yearly rains, serving as unique ecosystems for certain species of birds and fish.

The Barinas piedmont, where the Ticoporo Reserve is located, is a somewhat special case among Latin American frontiers. Export market demand has not played a role in its colonization, nor have large-scale economic interests participated. The region was opened up to agriculture by smallholders, who primarily produced for their own needs. Cattle soon became an important part of their livelihoods for a variety of reasons: the fact that dairy farming and cattle keeping are usually part of the farming practices of their villages of origin, the suitability of the land for this activity, its profitability and flexibility, and their isolation and consequent difficulties in marketing agricultural crops. The relatively stable price for beef nationally was also an incentive for farmers to increase herds.4

The first settlers in the Ticoporo area were Andeans, who migrated down from the mountains, particularly from the Pregonero area of the Uribante district and from the southern villages of Mérida state. During the first decades of the 1900s, smallholders had cleared and planted land in the foothills for coffee cultivation, especially in the lower-lying parts of the Uribante, an important coffee-growing district. Although the remote Andean foothills were not viable for larger agricultural enterprises such as the coffee haciendas, for independent smallholding farmers the boom in coffee prices at this time was an incentive to colonization. When coffee prices fell irreparably with the Great Depression that began in 1929, however, the coffee farmers of the Uribante expanded their dairy farming and cattle fattening activities to supplement their declining income. In the most isolated areas with poor access to markets, cattle raising became the primary activity, which, with its demand for more land as the population grew and as herds increased, led to a successive colonization of lower lying plains areas.

Older colonizers speak of having worked while young herding cattle along the trade route that was used to bring wild bulls from deep within the plains states to the Uribante district for fattening. Through this activity they came into contact with the unsettled lands of the piedmont, and many of them eventually colonized land there. By the 1950s, this wave of colonizers had reached the Ticoporo forest, where the town of Socopó, just outside the reserve, was founded in the early 1960s.

Venezuelan dictator Pérez Jiménez (deposed in 1958), who invested a great deal in the modernization of the nation, declared the Ticoporo Forest a national reserve in 1955, with the aim of conserving its lumber resources for future exploitation. By then it was already inhabited, in the early stages of colonization, and with the decree the settlers in the forest suddenly found themselves transformed into illegal occupants of national lands. The new reserve regulations caused difficulties for colonists; it was no longer possible to register landholdings, as these were now prohibited within the reserve area, and the National Guard, who began to patrol the zone, tried to keep
colonists from deforesting or establishing housing. Harassment may have dis-suaded some families from staying, but was still largely ineffective against the influx of new colonists to the area, many of whom did not know about, or understand its changed legal status. The construction of a road into the reserve for the purpose of oil exploration in the late 1950s also provided easier access into the restricted territory.

The immense extensions of fertile, unoccupied land continued to attract both land-poor and landless farmers from the mountain regions, and they were aided in their colonization efforts by Colombian labourers from nearby border areas, who came to work for the higher wages being paid in Venezuela. The merchants and larger landowners of the growing town of Socopó, just outside the reserve, also fuelled the pace of deforestation. Their commercial activities provided them with the means to employ labour to deforest larger claims than those that the average peasant family generally undertook to clear. In this way, then, the inflow of occupants and deforestation of the reserve continued.

Faced with the fact that considerable portions of the reserve were occupied, had been cleared and were being farmed, the state legalized the colonization of two large extensions. After the fall of Pérez Jiménez in 1958, pressure for land resulted in 40,000 hectares near the town of Capitanejo being removed from the reserve and transformed into the Paiva-Capitanejo settlement, where land was parcelled out. In 1972, the National Agrarian Institute distributed another 43,000 hectares outside Socopó to occupants.5

Socopó expanded further when several lumber companies set up their headquarters there. As of 1970, the remaining 170,000 hectares of the reserve were divided into four units which were contracted to three different lumber companies, Contaca, Emallca, and Emifoca,6 for exploitation, with the responsibility for reforestation (Table 2.1). The Ministry of Agriculture received the fourth unit, earmarked for experimentation in tropical forestry, and this was eventually turned over to the Ministry of the Environment (MARNR),7 which loaned it to the Department of Forestry of the University of the Andes (ULA), for experimental use (Figure 2.1).

The division of the reserve into concessions sparked off a series of conflicts between the lumber companies and the occupants, who were determined to keep and cultivate their land claims. In the mid-1970s, a census was made of all the occupants, and they were compensated by the government for the value of their holdings or bienhechurias,8 and expelled to put an end to the conflicts. For a number of years, there was stricter control of the borders, but with time, controls were relaxed, resulting in a reoccupation of many parts of the reserve.9 The concession holders took different approaches towards occupation: while privately-owned companies managed to keep their holdings free through careful vigilance, state-operated entities were unable to do so for political reasons, and eventually began to undertake programmes designed to foment co-existence between lumbering interests and the farmers. By the end of the 1980s nearly all of ULA’s and Emifoca’s concessions were reoccupied, and Emallca had recently won a legal struggle against an organized occupation.
It should be pointed out that government policy has contributed substantially to the deforestation of the reserve. While on the one hand supporting the land use ordinances of the zone which declare it unconditionally closed to habitation and agriculture, on the other hand, the government frequently fails to enforce these ordinances. Neither the Guardia Nacional in charge of patrolling the zone, nor MARNR officials stationed there have adequate resources to keep insistent peasants out. However, peasants’ accounts of how they pay off the guards so that they will allow them to bring in cattle, motor saws, and housing materials reveal another aspect of the local reality.

Table 2.1 Concessions Granted within the Ticoporo Forest Reserve

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Hectares</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Emifoca</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>45,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Contaca</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>40,775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Emallca</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>60,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>24,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.1 Lumbering Concessions in the Ticoporo Forest Reserve
Although large areas of the reserve have been colonized spontaneously by migrating peasants, organized occupations have also played a role in the occupation of the reserve, particularly since the end of the 1970s. Peasant organizations with links to important national political parties, such as the Federación Campesina and the Liga Agraria, have been agents in such occupations. Particularly in the year prior to national elections, such organizations attempt to distribute land to peasants, and in this context, parts of the reserve have periodically been demarcated and lots of 20 to 40 hectares allocated to peasant families, while the National Guard and Ministry of the Environment turn a blind eye. Should the concession-holder undertake to evict occupants, they are faced with a time-consuming juridical process. Each individual family must be cited and proceeded against before they have occupied a plot during one year, after which it becomes much more difficult, if not impossible to legally oust them. Frequently, occupying families consist of a young couple and several school-age or infant children, with the mother and children living in a shanty on the plot while the husband works as a day-labourer to earn income to invest in the colonization venture. The eviction of women and their small children creates particularly bad press during election years, making government-backed concession-holders less inclined to take action: a fact of which organizers and occupants are both well aware.

Hence the Ticoporo Reserve can be seen to serve several opposed functions. To some extent it remains a reserve for the nation’s lumber needs; it has provided, and continues to provide wood for national industry. But additionally, it is a source of land that can be distributed to peasants as an incentive to party loyalty prior to national elections; providing a way for organizations with political agendas to maintain power. The national government serves its own needs by putting forth one policy publicly and allowing another to be followed surreptitiously; ignoring forest invasions while nonetheless maintaining its rhetoric about the need for conservation of forest resources and biodiversity.

The Peasant Economics of Land Colonization

The process of land colonization underway in the Ticoporo Forest has changed during the years because of the shifting nature of its incoming occupants. In the piedmont and plains during the first half of the 1900s, colonization was undertaken by groups of men who deforested new farms during certain months of the year, departing from a fixed land base or income in another zone. An area attractive for settlement would be discovered or sought on hunting or fishing expeditions to the hinterlands, for example, and a stake marked off. During the following dry season a small group of men would clear an area, and, supporting themselves by hunting and fishing and with provisions they brought, they planted foods such as yuca and a grove of bananas. A hut might also be constructed, and clearings fenced with barbed wire. This signalled occupation to others who might have their eye on
the area, and provided food and shelter for a larger undertaking the follow-
ing year, when several hectares would be cleared for corn cultivation. At the
end of the autumn rainy season deforestation would begin, continuing until
the clearing was burned and corn planted just before the spring rains. Corn,
the main staple of many Latin American peasants, is, as noted by Ortiz, the
crop that civilizes the wilderness (Ortiz 1980: 200). Often improved pasture
seed was also spread as the corn was planted, so it would grow in the clear-
ing after the corn harvest, producing the first pastures for cattle. When the
area was considered safe from predatory animals and a measure of comfort
existed – a rudimentary dwelling, an easily accessible water source, staple
foods – a man would bring his family, if possible, to make colonization faster,
easier and more pleasant. With the family came domestic animals – cows,
pigs and chickens, all of which fell within the wife’s domain.

In Ticoporo, the original occupants followed a similar pattern as they set-
tled the lands outside of Socopó; departing from a base in the mountains or
in a different area of the plains. Generally it was not the poorest families that
undertook colonization ventures, because of the necessity of maintaining the
family during the first years. The colonizer (or his wife) needs to have some
income, savings, or another piece of land that can provide for them during
the initial stages of the process. It should be noted, however, that many col-
onizers do not actually stake a claim, but buy a claim that already has a small
clearing, stable crops and a hut, thereby shortening the process. Also, areas
undergoing settlement in this way differentiate socially. While the original
colonists may be of about the same means, inevitably some of them are
unable to continue or decide to sell their holdings, and financially better off
colonists take their place. Some of these may employ local labour, thus pro-
viding a niche for the poorer to enter as wage-labourers or caretakers.

As years pass and bienhechurias grow, these lands increase in value. A
common practice, documented by Delgado de Bravo (1985, 1986) is to sell
the original landholding and move further into the frontier, repeating the
process; the sale of the land providing capital for seed, fencing, and most
importantly, more cattle. The economic nature of colonization can hardly
be sufficiently emphasized. In opening and ‘civilising’ new lands, peasant
families put their major resource – their labour – to use in a very efficient
way. They both produce crops for their own sustenance and for sale, and as
they work, improve the land, enhancing its value. If land titles can be reg-
istered, prices rise further, and in colonization zones the state eventually
invests in roads, schools, and other infrastructure such as electricity, further
heightening the land values. Consequently, although farming in the forest
is difficult and dangerous, it often pays off richly.

Gudeman and Rivera (1990) have discussed in detail the economy of peas-
ant farmers similar to those now inhabiting the reserve, and describe how
practices of thrift and keeping resources ‘within the house’ allow these mar-
ginal family farming enterprises to flourish. Virgin land is particularly attrac-
tive because agricultural yields are higher, and on a frontier there is plenty of
space to maintain expanding herds of cattle, as well as smaller domestic ani-
mals such as pigs and chickens. Capitalization through animals and land value is important for peasant families, because it is often the only way in which they can accumulate enough savings to provide them with a measure of economic security, and obtain a base on which the next generation can reproduce itself.

In the Ticoporo Reserve, it is plain that providing a base for future generations is an important motivation in colonization. As one drives along the Kimil, the now-paved road that leads from Socopó to the present entrance of the reserve, one passes about forty sizeable family farms, with few exceptions still owned by the original colonizing families, or by long-time secondary settlers. Of these colonizers, the majority also hold land claims deeper within the reserve, often overseen or worked in cooperation with offspring.

The time and manner of colonization makes a difference in chances for success. Having arrived at an auspicious moment, staked large claims, and having profited when their holdings were removed from the reserve regimen in 1972, many of the original colonizers on the Kimil were able to completely clear their original farms, make them produce, and repeat the process further in the reserve without ever selling any land. Subsequent settlers have seldom been as fortunate. Later claims, made when the influx to the area accelerated, are smaller, and still in the ‘illegal’ part of the reserve. Those who have obtained land through land distributions seem to fare the worst of all for a number of reasons. Such lots are smaller, 40 or sometimes only 20 hectares; insufficient to support a family well. Also, as the land is distributed to party supporters, neighbours are usually strangers, making the cooperation needed in colonization efforts more difficult. Settlers in these areas tend to be poorer, and are often without the family labour resources needed to make the venture work, and sometimes even without sufficient knowledge and experience in agriculture. Such colonization is misery indeed, with isolated nuclear households barely subsisting, in the most primitive conditions, forced to take local wage labour to survive, but without the hope of ever capitalizing sufficiently to become independent producing units.

Settlers and Lumber Companies: the Limits of Cooperation

Since the lumber companies obtained concessions within the reserve, there has been continuous animosity between occupants and the companies. The Guardia Nacional stationed at the borders of the reserve has the difficult duty of keeping new occupants out, and of making it impossible for those already within the reserve to continue deforestation as they would like. Since cattle-ranching is colonists’ preferred activity, cattle are forbidden within the reserve, and must be smuggled in and out by the occupants, along with permanent building materials such as cement blocks, and other materials and tools of colonization. Occupants have, over time, discovered ways of overcoming such difficulties; and a system of clandestine paths, contacts, and networks exists which allows families to overcome the restrictions to which
they are formally subject. Still, the prohibitions make farming and ranching within the reserve time-consuming and costly. Many colonists reason that since the lumber companies and the guards want, and are out to protect, the trees, then the sooner they get rid of the trees on their claims, the sooner they will be left to farm in peace. Naturally, such beliefs increase the pace of deforestation, with colonists sometimes even setting fires in the unoccupied parts of the reserve with the aim of pushing the companies out of the area. Rather than protecting the reserve, the effect of the vigilance and restrictions is to encourage needless destruction.

By the late 1980s, both Emifoca and the ULA’s experimental unit were nearly completely occupied. A census of the settlers in these areas was made, and Emifoca administrators and representatives from the ULA were conducting dialogues with occupants in the hope of gaining support for silvopastoral programmes. The basic content of these programmes was to offer families concessions in allowing limited cattle-keeping and building in the reserve in exchange for colonists’ commitment to planting trees on 20 per cent of their holdings. Families were also given assurances that they would be allowed to stay on their claims, but were refused the right to sell them. If they left the area, the holdings would immediately revert to the concession.

Occupants were less than eager to accept these programmes. Legal title to their land was a fundamental goal for all of them, including the right to sell. Most were managing to enter and leave the reserve, and to bring necessities in and out by negotiating with the Guardia; and thus the programmes offered them rights which they already had acquired in practice, if not on paper. Few were willing to plant trees on 20 per cent of their holdings. The majority had small claims, and asked themselves, on which part of my holdings? The areas that flood in the rainy season, or the drier areas, where I built my house and plant my crops? And how will my family and I benefit from these trees, which take 20 years to mature, if we cannot sell the land? Only occupants with larger holdings, or who already owned land outside the reserve, could see any merit in these programmes. Altogether, only a fraction of the occupants agreed to take part, and most of these only paid lip service to the regulations of the schemes. The rest ignored them, until they came to an end, as Emifoca left its concession in the early 1990s, and as the ULA increasingly withdrew personnel from its experimental station.

Having worked hard to design the programmes, and dependent on their success in order to replant and manage their concessions, the ULA and Emifoca felt that the settlers were obstinate and ungrateful. They were, after all, illegal occupants, and were being offered a way to legalize their situation and to participate in a lucrative agricultural scheme. Tree cultivation, the forestry engineers calculated, would bring in several times as much income in the long run as raising cattle on the same area. The seedlings would be very inexpensive, and technical assistance would be provided. It was completely unreasonable for occupants to demand land ownership, they felt, for what would remain of the reserve, then? The devastation wrought by uncontrolled colonization was already more than evident.
The Colonization Process, Capitalization, and Land Consolidation: New Alternatives?

Indeed, cultural and political factors and a variety of actors have combined to make the Ticoporo Reserve an excellent example of how not to manage a forest reserve. But given the current situation, with Emallca’s and Contaca’s concessions also having been affected by spontaneous and organized invasions during the late 1990s, how might the situation possibly be improved?

The Ticoporo Forest has been seriously damaged as a natural reserve, and only minor portions of it remain relatively untouched. The rest is in varying stages of colonization and agricultural production. Certain areas can only be described as farmland. In others, now being gradually deforested, the lumber companies long ago took out the largest, most valuable trees, leaving smaller trunks to grow, and other species untouched. Colonists say that they leave the valuable species when they deforest their plots, but the considerable amount of wood being taken out of the reserve under cover of night and sold as contraband at a fraction of the market price attests to the fact that a good deal of this wood is being exploited. Additionally, MARNR authorities complain that the areas once reforested by the lumber companies, hitherto respected and untouched by occupants, are now also under attack.

‘A ésta reserva, la llamaría la reserva de los negocios,’ (I would call this reserve a reserve for doing business) a long-time area resident said one Sunday afternoon, as we sat discussing the reserve on an occupant family’s front porch. Indeed, he had a good point. The reserve has provided many actors with a good income of one kind or another. Occupants, ranchers, guards, lumber contrabandistas, local carpenters, peasant leaders, regional politicians – all have profited illicitly from the reserve; while the state (via taxation of concession holders), the lumber companies, and their workers have made legal profits. Out of the reserve flows a steady stream of agricultural products: cattle, milk and cheese, considerable harvests of corn and sorghum, yuca and plantains, all of which are technically illicit but nonetheless commercialized, reaching the national markets. What would happen if everyone were allowed to do their business legally in the reserve?

To legitimize and register occupants’ holdings as their private property would, I believe, have a beneficial impact on the current situation, if occupants were to progressively pay for the holdings, and if such a scheme were to go hand in hand with agricultural incentives for silviculture, and investment in local industries in the wood-working sector. The special status of the area as a reserve of lumber for the nation should be maintained, but with the occupants integrated into a programme encouraging and supporting lumber production, and local industrialization, operating through market mechanisms. In other areas of Latin America, such as in Chiapas, peasants are planting trees to trap carbon in planned schemes in which polluting companies in the developed countries offset their emissions by funding pollution-reducing projects in other countries. Such new incentives in the growing carbon emissions trade may also be of interest to the peasants of the Ticoporo region.
Peasants should come to view the trees on their lands not as a threat to be done away with, but as a possible source of income and a fund for their futures. The trees on a landholding should constitute a part of its commercial value, which would gradually encourage reforestation; and forest products could be sold at market prices, profiting peasants more than is the case today. The growth of local woodworking industries – already underway, as many small carpentry shops have sprung up in Socopó in recent years – could serve as a source of much needed employment alternatives. Such a strategy would eliminate lumber smuggling overnight, and enable the Guardia Nacional and MARNR to concentrate their energies on keeping vigil over the much smaller area of the reserve which has not yet been disturbed, in the hope of keeping it as a true reserve. The cost to the state would be reduced; and the money could instead be invested in encouraging reforestation and woodworking industries.

The farming families of the Socopó community located outside of the reserve do not belittle the value of the forest they have cleared from their fields. It is not uncommon for them to complain that now they must purchase even the least bit of wood they need. ‘If I was to do this all over again, I’d leave a big lot uncleared in the middle of my farm,’ one farmer commented. Along the Kimil, many of the legal farms have invested in ‘living fences’, as the teak trees that are planted along the borders between fields are called. There are also a number of hectares of teak and other tropical trees planted on some larger farms, even inside the reserve. On passing such plantations, peasants will frequently comment on their monetary value, even referring to them as being ‘better than a bank account’. Respect for private property is strong in this farming culture, while the property of the state belongs to no one, and can be appropriated by those strong enough to take it.

With the legitimization of occupants’ landholdings, one obviously gives up the idea of somehow restoring the area to a forested wilderness. There is no hope of that at this point: the biodiversity and fauna of the zone have suffered far beyond repair. One should recognize the fact that the state has failed in its attempt to protect the reserve, that its borders are highly permeable, and that no administration is likely to enforce the reserve regimen in practice. Making the occupants stakeholders in silvicultural schemes in which it is easy and inexpensive to plant trees, and which guarantees them the right to their land and its resources, might avoid the area becoming a purely cattle-breeding or agricultural zone, as has happened in nearby frontier areas.

A reflection on what might be called the ‘natural history’, or life cycle of frontier areas provides an indication of the likely outcome of granting private property rights to reserve occupants. Legalizing land claims in the reserve will raise land prices, and encourage some families to sell out and move on. Their holdings are likely to be acquired by neighbours seeking to enlarge their farms, the first step in a series of land transactions leading to the gradual consolidation of small farms into larger, more economically viable agricultural enterprises. Such larger entities are more readily able to invest in silviculture than smaller farmers, who need every bit of land to provide income for immediate consumption.
Providing small farmers with viable alternatives to colonization is another way in which state authorities can help protect what remains of the reserve, as well as other forested areas. This is more difficult, but one suggestion is to establish agricultural or industrial schools in the area, where farmers’ offspring can learn a commercial trade. Colonizing new land is very hard work, and requires great sacrifices from settlers, who live isolated lives, for many years without the benefits of the more civilized world, such as roads and transportation, electricity, telephones (although cellphones have recently provided alternative communication possibilities), education, medical facilities, shops, meeting places, churches. It is not a life one chooses if there are viable alternatives at hand, and the children of farmers seldom go on to colonize other areas unless they have direct financial and logistical support from their parents. Rather, the offspring of the usually large farming families tend to gravitate towards towns, and entrepreneurial or unskilled urban jobs, unless they inherit or otherwise gain access to land. Education of a practical nature can expand this second generation’s possibilities, and with time, also raise the standard of living in the region as a whole, as successful farmers seek to diversify their economic activities.

Here, then, I have suggested a solution for the continuing crisis in the management of the Ticoporo Forest Reserve. Unfortunately, I do not think it is a solution that would meet with much approval from the current Chávez administration, with its paternalistic stance and distrust of the free market. But in the end, no government can care for its people, but must provide them with the means to care for themselves: clear legal rights, education, information, efficient institutions and a transparent and functioning market. The importance of the market is obvious: the reserve, as we have seen, is permeated with business transactions of different natures. The goal of future plans should not be to limit these, but to channel them in ways that can serve the reserve’s original aims.

Notes

1 In Latin America, some such schemes have been the construction of the Transamazon highway in Brazil (Moran 1980, 1989), projects sponsored by the IDB in Peru and Bolivia in the 1960s (Schuurman 1980: 107–8) and colonization projects such as the San Julian settlement in the eastern lowlands of Bolivia (Painter 1989). In Venezuela, the Turén agricultural colony (Llambi 1988: 72–101) is an example of a planned agricultural scheme, although undertaken on a limited scale.

2 This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted in the area of the Ticoporo Forest Reserve between 1999 and 2001, for the project ‘The Tropical Forest as Frontier: Processes of Colonization and Smallholder Integration in Western Venezuela,’ financed by SAREC (Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries). Earlier research in the area was carried out between 1987 and 1990; see Montoya (1996).

3 At this time, then, the reserve was uninhabited. However, archeological finds indicate that the area was at least temporarily inhabited by indigenous peoples, who built the raised walkways and mounds which can still be seen within the reserve. Little is known about the purpose of these, but they may have provided a refuge and means of transport during the annual periods of flooding (Zucchi 1965–6, 1969).
4 See Llambi (1988: 168–204) for a discussion of government policy (price regulation, subsidies and imports) and the production of meat and milk in the frontier region of Perijá between 1948 and 1983.

5 These occupants were allowed to buy their land claims from the National Agrarian Institute by paying for it in quotas over a number of years.

6 Contaca is privately owned and operated in the reserve until 1998. Emallca has mixed state and private capital and was, as of January 2001, reducing personnel and restructuring its operations. Emifoca, a state company, functioned (with some interruptions) in the reserve until 1991. All companies were required to run reforestation programmes, in addition to making rational use of their concessions.

7 The Ministry of the Environment is called the MARNR, the Ministerio del Ambiente y Recursos Non-Renewable (Ministry of the Environment and Non-Renewable Resources).

8 Bienhechurias are the improvements which an occupant makes on a land claim. Since the land cannot be bought or sold, it is these improvements which are negotiated in land transactions. In Ticoporo they typically consist of cleared land, fencing, semi-permanent crops (bananas, plantains, and yuca) a dwelling, wells, and corrals.

9 Contributing to the new inflow of settlers were families who had been compensated for the loss of farms affected by the construction of the Uribante-Caparo hydroelectric scheme in the neighbouring Andean states. Those with low indemnities could not afford to buy new farms, and turned to buying bienhechurias in the reserve, where prices were substantially lower. Montoya (1996) discusses the migration routes of farming families compensated by the Uribante-Caparo hydroelectric project, and the social consequences of the dam scheme.

10 Land invasions led by pseudo-leaders with political agendas have been frequent in periods prior to and just after elections in Venezuela, since the death of dictator Juan Vicente Gómez in the 1930s. See Sandoval (2000).

11 The many small carpentry shops located around the town of Socopó also make use of lumber from the reserve.

12 Colonizers are ideally groups of related men or acquaintances from a particular farming area; for example, a man might undertake to colonize with his brothers or teenage sons, or with nephews or other family members also in search of land.

13 Yuca is the Venezuelan term for sweet manioc, and is a food staple throughout the country.

14 Cattle are often a part of land colonization processes because of their very suitability; they provide nourishment (and company) for humans, and are flexible investments: when need arises they can be herded to market. Agricultural crops are, on the contrary, difficult to bring to markets from isolated areas, hard to sell locally where everyone cultivates, and spoil (are lost) if not sold or consumed.

15 Teak trees were the main tree crop to be planted.

16 Nugent (1991) has noted some of the limits of the type of environmental management that Emifoca and the ULA were attempting. Reacting to ideas about the environmental management of forest resources, and citing Peters (1989), Uhl and Jordan (1984) and Uhl and Buschbacher (1985), he points out that a simple demonstration of the profitability of forest exploitation alone will not in itself generate the conditions providing for the reproduction of a peasantry in the long term, and ensure the future of forest resources. More than profitability per se is needed for such programmes to function in practice – such as agrarian reform, stable markets, and a larger agro-strategy.

17 Kottak (1999) points out the importance for ecological anthropologists to study how different levels of analysis – local, regional, national and international – link and vary in time and space and impact on the environment.

18 The current Chávez administration does not sanction land invasions, in the belief that solutions to these must be negotiated; a stance that has led to increasing numbers of rural and urban land occupations throughout the nation (Regalado 1999).

19 For more information about carbon-trapping schemes, see The Financial Times Weekend section, 11–12 November 2000.

20 Turner’s thesis on the importance of the frontier in American history contains a valuable description of frontiers undergoing settlement that also proves accurate for the Barinas pied-
mont. Quoting Peck’s *New Guide to the West*, published in Boston in 1837, Turner described a distinct series of three waves of settlers to arrive in western frontiers. The first were the pioneers, who seldom owned the land, depended greatly on the natural vegetation, hunting, simple agriculture, and a few domestic animals. When these pioneers began to lack ‘elbow room’, they sold their holdings to a second wave, who increased the fields, built roads and bridges, better houses, schools and courthouses. The final wave were the ‘men of capital and enterprise’, who brought the trappings of civilization: ‘orchards, gardens, colleges and churches’ to the frontier. They bought out the second generation of settlers when their holdings had risen in value, enabling these to move further into the interior to become ‘men of capital and enterprise in turn’ (Turner 1962: 19–21). A similar succession of settlers can be observed in the Barinas piedmont: the first who make a rough clearing, sell it and move on, the second wave, which settles down and improves the farms. The third wave are the successful settlers who gradually buy out the second, and develop agricultural enterprises that are well integrated into the national economy, and with time, diversify their business in other directions.

References


