When Participation Meets Empowerment: The WWF and the Politics of Invitation in the Chimalapas, Mexico

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Emerging out of radical theories about the uneven nature of power and underwriting practices that assist marginalized peoples in constructing their own development strategies, "participation" has recently come under fire for being co-opted and mainstreamed by governmental and nongovernmental agencies, part of a new development "tyranny" that betrays the concept's populist roots. The issues surrounding participation are nowhere more hotly debated than in the area of conservation, where the requirements of ecological sustainability often collide with the demands of indigenous people seeking to control their own natural resources. As we show in this article, the issues become even more complex when the ideals and practices of participation circulating within a nongovernmental organization (NGO) are met by indigenous forms of empowerment, based not only on the resources of a remote and biologically diverse forest, but also on a pool of knowledge about development discourses themselves, including those of participation. Our case study examines interactions between an affiliate of the World Wildlife Fund operating out of Oaxaca, a state capital in southern Mexico, and a group of indigenous Zoque-speakers living in that state's Chimalapas forest. We interpret the collision between the NGO's "participation" and the Zoques' "empowerment" by employing "progressive contextualization," an approach that leads us to identify and analyze the wider sets of conditions underpinning the encounter. We find that the Zoques invert a generic and aspatial politics of participation by insisting on a territorially-based, and thus intensely spatial, "politics of invitation" as they negotiate the complexities of participation within contemporary development. *Key Words: empowerment, NGOs, Oaxaca, Mexico, participation, World Wildlife Fund.*

The headquarters of the World Wildlife Fund's *Programa de Bosques Méxicanos* (WWF Mexican Forestry Program) is located in Colonia Reforma, an upscale neighborhood in the historic colonial city of Oaxaca de Juárez, in southern Mexico. From these offices, the Bosques staff oversees several forest conservation projects around the State of Oaxaca (WWF 2001b). One of the projects is in the Chimalapas region, a mountainous area in the eastern part of the state some nine hours by road from Oaxaca de Juárez, the state's administrative center and largest city. While conducting an organizational ethnography of Bosques, one of the authors (DW) was witness to a brief exchange between the NGO's staff members and a group of Zoque-speaking men who had traveled to the city by bus from their homes in San Miguel Chimalapa (see Figure 1). They had come to the WWF Bosques headquarters dressed in modern business attire, doubtless hoping the suits would lend weight to their request for one million pesos (approximately US$90,000) for the implementation of a natural resources and social development plan designed for the dense jungles of the Chimalapas. The Zoques came armed with documents in support of their request: a five-year regional development plan for the Chimalapas, a guide for the sustainable use of the region's wildlife and forest resources, and a blueprint for a nature preserve on part of their communal land.

The Bosques staff turned down their visitors' request, politely noting that the WWF's current programs in the region are oriented toward technical assistance rather than direct grants. As the visitors were leaving the office, DW asked for a few minutes of their time, attempting to secure an open-ended interview with the *comisariado* (community leader) and his associates. But the Zoques quickly inverted the process, asking DW whom he worked for and the purpose of his presence in the office. He explained that he was part of a binational research team studying the effects of globalization on NGOs in Oaxaca, after which the visitors began an extended interrogation of him: From where, they asked, does

Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 97(2), 2007, pp. 423–444
Initial submission, October 2005; revised submission, August 2006; final acceptance, September 2006
Published by Blackwell Publishing, 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, and 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, U.K.

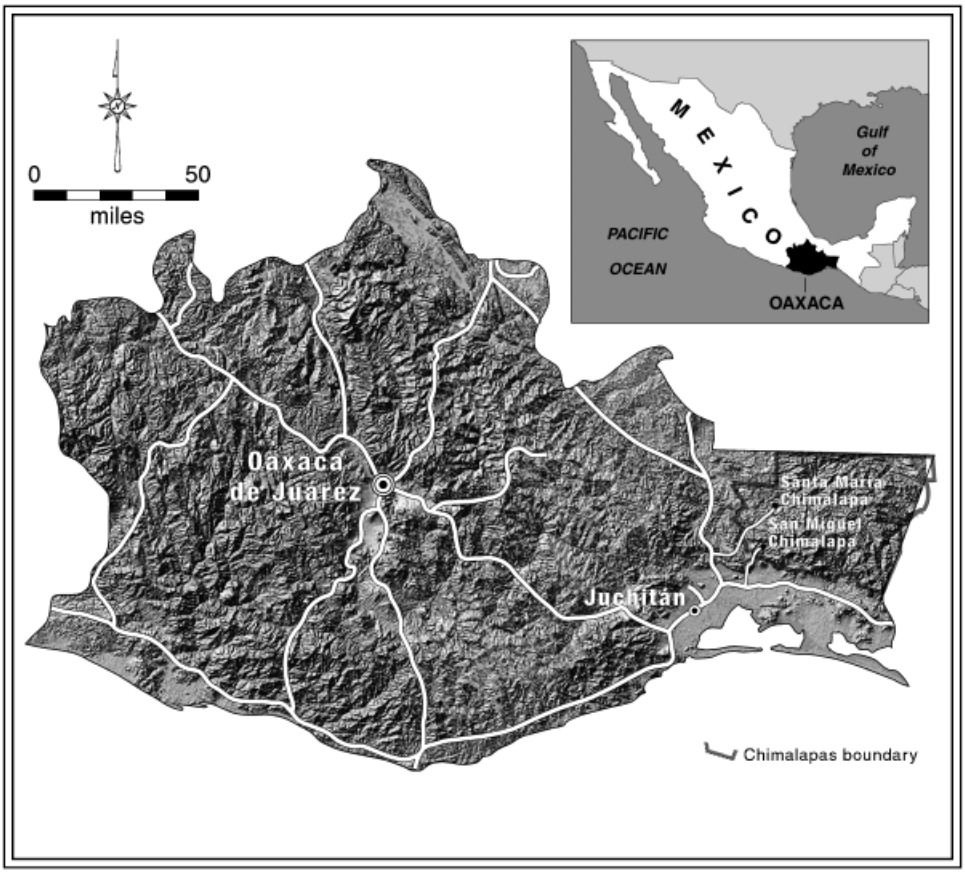

Figure 1. The State of Oaxaca, Mexico, showing the Chimalapas region.

Bosques receive its funding? Where does Bosques spend the money it receives from DFID (the U.K.'s Department for International Development) and USAID (the U.S.'s Agency for International Development)? What other agencies were supplying money to Bosques? Where and on what projects were these funds being spent? These questions, it turns out, were precisely the ones that DW was asking of the Bosques staff in the research team's effort to understand the networks of discourses, practices, and funds that flow through the NGO.

Reflecting on this interchange pointed the research team to a more general analytic: the flows under investigation in Bosques are not simply one way. They are not operating from the Global North "above" to the Global South "below"—that is, in this case, from the WWF's headquarters in Gland, Switzerland, through its partner organizations in the United States and the U.K., and on to national, regional, and local operations in Mexico City, Oaxaca, and the forests of the Chimalapas. Instead, the Bosques encounter reveals an NGO at the nexus of intersecting flows, one where participatory discourses and practices circulating through the WWF's network are challenged by indigenous insistence on a much more overtly political understanding of what is at stake in any participatory project. The Zoques from the Chimalapas are making their own demands on NGOs that work in their region, calling into question the terms of participation as understood by mainstream development and conservation practitioners: Exactly who is participating in whose project, and under what terms? Who invites whom to participate? The visitors to the Bosques office were demanding answers in large part through their strategic adoption and deployment of particular aspects of broader NGO- and development-speak (Mawdsley et al. 2002), using the languages and practices of participatory development that circulate through the NGO's extensive networks (Roberts, Jones, and Fröhling 2005). This article is about this state of affairs: What happens when "participation"—in parts development and conservation theory, NGO goal, and on-the-ground practice—is met by a form of indigenous empowerment, an insistent grassroots strategy configured out of the particular circumstances of Mexico, Oaxaca, and the forest communities?

As we discuss in the next section, the stakes behind these collisions are high indeed. This is so, first, because after some twenty years of participatory development, major actors, from the World Bank and United Nations

to USAID and major conservation NGOs such as the WWF, have been stung by a host of critics who see both theoretical and technical flaws in participation (e.g., Cooke and Kothari 2001). Second, indigenous communities like those in the Chimalapas are critically recrafting and redeploying the languages and practices of conservation and participation in effective and powerful ways (see Haenn 1999, 2002, 2005; Sundberg 1998, 2003a, 2006). Here we investigate what happens when these discourses and practices of participation, emanating from culturally distinct organizational contexts associated with the state and the Global North development machine (including, notably, NGOs), meet indigenous communities that are resolutely independent, emboldened, and professionalized after years of organizing autonomously and engaging in government and NGO programs that were in part aimed at engendering the very kinds of empowerment that now appear to be reconfiguring the terms of participation.

In what follows we offer an analysis of the faltering ways in which participation and empowerment met in the Chimalapas. We consider in particular two events of June 2004. The first is a workshop (*taller*) attended by representatives of the WWF and of various government agencies. The second is a community assembly (*asamblea*), to which the workshop attendees were invited by the Zoque-speaking leaders of the main municipalities in the Chimalapas. Our strategy is to interpret both meetings in terms of their wider settings and thereby produce a "progressive contextualization" of the events (Vayda 1983; Vayda and Walters 1999). Specifically, we consider the conditions of both the NGO and the Zoque people that form the larger context in which the events we describe were not only framed, but made possible. These contexts on the one hand embedded particular understandings and practices of participation within WWF's Bosques office and on the other hand helped produce a set of effective challenges to these understandings within the forests of the Chimalapas. Following that exposition, we provide an account of the workshop and the assembly. Empirically, the article relies on contextual analysis based on data gathered during a yearlong organizational ethnography of Bosques on the part of DW, including interviews with NGO personnel, Zoque leaders, and others, together with field notes from the workshop and the assembly (see Markowitz 2001 and Riles 2001 on ethnography of NGOs).[1] Before turning to the analysis, we first pause to reflect, as many are now doing, on the politics of participation and, in particular, on how it has become a lightning rod among academics, NGO professionals, and activists concerned with conservation and development.

Participation at an Impasse

We begin our account of participation in the Chimalapas by reference to an article in the bimonthly magazine of Worldwatch Institute, the thirty-year-old research and information organization founded by Lester Brown. The essay, "A Challenge to Conservationists," appeared in the November/December 2004 issue of *World Watch Magazine*. Written by Mac Chapin, an associate of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Native Lands, the essay castigates the world's three largest conservation NGOs—The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Conservation International (CI), and the WWF—for a "disturbing neglect of the indigenous peoples whose land they are in the business to protect" (Chapin 2004, 17). In issuing his "wake-up call" to these NGOs, Chapin first traces the development of participatory ideology and practices within the goals and projects of transnational conservation NGOs and the declarations and demands made by indigenous groups. As he narrates the story, participatory conservation policies emerged from the mid-1980s joint WWF/USAID program, Wildlife and Human Needs. They gained force through the 1989 declaration made by the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA), which urged conservation organizations to "work directly with our organizations on all your programs and campaigns which affect our homelands" (quoted in Chapin 2004, 19). And the participatory policies were further codified in the proclamation jointly issued by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the WWF in 1996, that indigenous peoples should be "recognized as rightful, equal partners in the development and implementation of conservation strategies . . . and in particular in the establishment and management of protected areas" (quoted in Chapin 2004, 20). Over the years participatory sustainable development has become a key practice of the NGO community, whether in the form of "grassroots conservation," "community-based natural resource management," or "integrated conservation and development," to name a few popular identifiers.

Chapin goes on to claim that attempts by transnational conservation NGOs to work with indigenous communities in establishing conservation areas have been, "with few exceptions, a string of failures" (2004, 20). In his wide-ranging critique, Chapin impugns (a) the top down management strategies and practices of large NGOs; (b) NGO preferences for "people-free" conservation parks that ignore the resource access needs of indigenous and traditional peoples; (c) a lack of social and cultural training on the part of the largely scientif-

ically-oriented staff (especially biologists) who populate conservation NGOs; (d) the increasing flow of funding from state, bilateral, and multilateral agencies to a few large NGOs (particularly the "Big Three" comprising the TNC, CI, and WWF), further concentrating their power; and (e) the uneasy partnering of these organizations with governments and large corporations. Particularly in regard to forests, Chapin notes, both governments and corporations have vested interests in extractive industries such as logging, oil and gas drilling, mining, cattle ranching, industrial agriculture, and bioprospecting, activities that not only run against NGO goals of environmental protection and sustainability on conserved lands, but also challenge the forest-based livelihoods of the indigenous people who live on them. Finally, Chapin asserts that, in light of the failure of many projects designed to include indigenous groups as participants over the 1990s, the Big Three organizations have begun to withdraw from their commitments, arguing that they are primarily conservation and not "poverty alleviation" or "social welfare" organizations. On this dichotomy, he writes:

> there is the presumption that biological science should be the guiding principle for biodiversity conservation in protected natural areas. This notion has produced a running debate between those who do not see human inhabitants as a part of the ecological equation, and those who argue for partnerships and the inclusion of indigenous and traditional peoples in protected area plans, both on human rights grounds and for pragmatic ecological reasons.
> —(Chapin 2004, 26)

Chapin acknowledges that working with indigenous groups can be difficult and at times even dangerous. He also qualifies his criticisms by recognizing that, for individual field workers, community-based integrative work is often the desired and necessary norm. Yet his article's stinging indictment of participation has become a cause célèbre in NGO offices across the world.[2]

World Watch Magazine published a number of responses to Chapin's article in its next issue (January/February 2005, 5–20), including letters from leaders of the Big Three conservation groups and those heading smaller organizations, as well as from field workers and academics. The tenor of these responses, unsurprisingly, tended to vary according to the institutional positions of the authors: the Big Three representatives reaffirmed their commitment to working with indigenous people and called out errors of both interpretation and fact by Chapin, whereas many of those writing from smaller "activist" NGOs praised Chapin's essay and offered further evidence of the deleterious "top down" management practices, corporate linkages, and scientifically-driven strategies of large conservation NGOs. Still, everyone agreed on two things: first, the issues raised are of worldwide importance; and second, with Chapin, "if we are to make any headway, cooperation among groups and sectors if crucial. There are still some among us who strongly believe that conservation cannot be effective unless the residents of the area to be conserved are thoroughly involved" (Chapin 2004, 30).

Many of those who responded to Chapin's article endorsed his call for evaluative studies of "conservation programs in the field," of "what is really happening in the field," and of "what works and doesn't work in what circumstances"—studies not done merely as internal assessments by the NGOs involved (Chapin 2004, 30). Our research takes up this challenge but, we should add, is not aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of the Bosques program. Nor do we address whether conservation or sustainability can be said to be occurring in the Chimalapas forest. Instead, we offer insight into how participation is thought of and enacted by Bosques, and how it is confronted and redeployed by people living in the region.

Chapin's article is just one recent, and quite dramatic, contribution to long-running academic debates over the politics of participation, not only in terms of the work of conservation NGOs, but of development more broadly. There are many surveys charting the rise of participation in development policy and practice (Rahnema 1992; Nelson and Wright 1995; Bastian and Bastian 1996; Chambers 1997; Gujit and Shah 1998; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hickey and Mohan 2004; McKinnon 2004, 2006), so a very brief overview here will suffice for the analysis that follows. Theorized, popularized, and radicalized by Freire (1970, 1972, 1973) and then taken into the methodology and technology of development with the emergence of Participatory Action Research (PAR) by Hall (1975), Chambers (1983, 1997), and others, participation soon became an institutionalized orthodoxy, with its own standardized methods (such as Participatory Rural Appraisal; see Chambers 1994; Francis 2001; Hailey 2001). Critics, both internal and external, have noted that the actual implementation of participation and the fostering of empowerment can be unsuccessful even on their own terms, and have offered numerous suggestions as to how to increase the effectiveness of participatory development programs. Simple alterations in practice, however, do not guarantee the inclusion of the most dispossessed indigenous people, especially women, a point noted by several observers (e.g., Laurie, Andolina, and Radcliffe 2002; Molyneux 2002; Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2004; Radcliffe, Laurie, and Andolina 2004). Others have been

moved to mount a broader critique, arguing that participation has become "the new tyranny," allowing an unjust exercise of power in the name of development (Cooke and Kothari 2001, 4; Kothari 2005). More recently, attempts have been made to (re)claim the radical political and transformative possibilities of participation (Hickey and Mohan 2004; Kesby 2005).

The emergence of "empowerment" follows a similar trajectory. A term with radical origins in social struggle, it was tamed and mainstreamed as it was taken up by NGOs and by development institutions such as the World Bank (see Friedman 1992; Charnovitz 1997; Townsend, with other authors 1999; Narayan et al. 2000). In its technical deployment in development projects empowerment was often found linked to participation (see above and see Rahnema 1992). The term's discursive impact grew alongside the neoliberal state rollback (Peck and Tickell 2002) commencing in the 1980s, during which the number of NGOs worldwide increased dramatically. Many observers were to interpret their rise optimistically, as a sign of a strengthening civil society that could do the work of development (Hyden 1997; McIlwaine 1998), in part by nuturing "social capital" (see Harriss and De Renzio 1997; Stewart 1997; Fine 1999; Mohan and Stokke 2000; Goonewardena and Rankin 2004). Obviously the very category "NGO" is somewhat chaotic and the position of an NGO is not always unambiguously in the domain of something labeled "civil society"; nevertheless in the broad neoliberal frame the rise of NGOs was interpreted as a social good valorizing the apparent empowerment of civic actors and institutions, particularly in relation to the state (Feldman 1997; Hulme and Edwards 1997; Hudock 1999). In the best-case scenario, the politically transformative meaning attached to empowerment goes hand-in-hand with the organizing tactics of activist NGOs and their networks (see Townsend, with other authors 1999; Routledge 2003; Townsend, Porter, and Mawdsley 2004; Bond 2005). Designed specifically to consolidate diverse groups, to press their claims, to argue for resources, and so on, such organizations are often explicit about exercising a politics of empowerment that necessarily entails a reconfiguration of the relations of power (Nelson and Wright 1995; Townsend, with other authors 1999; Hickey and Mohan 2004, 14).

On the other hand, many large NGOs and international NGOs (INGOs), as well as agencies such as USAID, have adopted the language of empowerment, but not as radical political praxis. Many mainstream conservation and development organizations frame their projects and programs in terms of empowering poor and marginalized people. In practice, a major vehicle for empowerment is "technical assistance." Typically offered in the form of workshops designed to impart certain information or methods (e.g., of forest management), technical assistance is the on-the-ground practice many NGOs enact to "strengthen civil society" or "build social capacity" (Fox 1997; Hudock 1999; Lewis 2001); so too in the case of Oaxaca, where we have found that NGOs situate and justify technical assistance in terms that are allied to broader discourses of empowerment and participation (Roberts, Jones, and Fröhling 2005). Given that Oaxaca is an ethnically diverse state where, as elsewhere, the politics of indigenous identity has grown sharper, it makes sense that many NGOs active in Oaxaca (even those aimed at conservation rather than development per se) include the empowerment of poor, marginalized, and often quite remote indigenous communities as part of their work (Centro de Encuentros y Diálogos Interculturales 2001). Also, since most of the land that NGOs in Oaxaca seek to conserve is communally owned by indigenous communities, an approach configured in terms of participation and empowerment seems strategic and even necessary in order to obtain access. Thus, since the 1980s many NGOs have come into the Chimalapas armed with programs and projects for which "participation" and "empowerment" are key defining terms. As Hickey and Mohan (2004) and Kesby (2005) have recently pointed out, although there is much to be said about the deleterious effects of elements of such programs, they have at the same time afforded marginalized people opportunities to acquire the knowledge needed to press claims on their own behalf.

Finally, we note that Chapin's summary of the impasse now facing the NGO community after a decade-plus of policy statements, projects, reports, and self-assessments about participation and empowerment is mirrored in ongoing and often heated debates within the environmental science community that studies conservation parks and nature reserves. At issue in much of this literature are the relative ecological values of "people-free" parks versus "low-impact" resource harvesting (see Redford and Mansour 1996; Stevens 1997; Brandon, Redford, and Anderson 1998; Gray, Parellada, and Newing 1998; Terborgh 1999, 2000; Redford and Sanderson 2000; Robinson and Bennett 2000; Schwartzman, Moreira, and Nepstad 2000; Colchester 2001, 2004). As mentioned earlier, our work was not designed to shed light on these scientific debates, which tend to revolve around such questions as, for example, what population density forests can support before they become depleted of large game animals (Robinson and Bennett 2000). Nevertheless, even the most vocal advocates of strict conservation through people-free

areas (Terborgh 1999) acknowledge that indigenous people have rights to self-determination. In light of these debates, we address the following questions: How is one NGO's office—in practice rather than in their mission statements—working with indigenous and traditional peoples in the area of nature conservation? And, what happens when staff from the NGO meet indigenous people who are equipped with their own understandings of the possibilities for negotiating the very terms of participation?

To answer these questions, we proceed by "progressively contextualizing" how and why (a) the WWF-Bosques came to understand and implement strategies of participation, and (b) the Zoques became empowered, such that they could counter the terms of participation as presented by the NGO. The methodology we generally follow was first suggested in an influential article by Vayda (1983), and was later supplemented by a more extensive treatment under the name "event ecology" by Vayda and Walters (1999). It involves beginning with "actions and interactions"—in our case the encounters between the officials of Bosques and various state agencies, on the one hand, and the Zoque-speaking indigenous people of the Chimalapas, on the other hand—and proceeds to "put these into contexts that make [them] intelligible by showing their place within complexes of causes and effects" (Vayda 1983, 270; quoted in Robbins 2004, 72). Vayda's and Vayda and Walters's methodological injunctions have been the subject of debate within human-environmental research (see Robbins 2004; Vayda 2004; Walker 2005).[3] Where we follow Vayda and Walter is in our adoption of an inductive strategy that employed a measure of theoretical agnosticism as we successively sorted through layers of context that came to make sense to us based on lengthy interactions with informants in Oaxaca. We treated these contexts as historical, extensively networked, and concrete, thereby refusing to hoist them onto either theoretical or spatial abstractions (i.e., to broader structures such as capitalism or to scalar hierarchies; see Gibson-Graham 1996 and Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005). Finally, although we reflected on the ordering and impact of these contexts in providing the conditions through which the events unfolded, given the nature of the qualitative data and the limits of the case study we admit to lacking the counterfactuals that might result in one or more contexts being dropped or reinterpreted. As a result, in the two sections that follow we tread lightly on explanation (or "causal history"; see Vayda 2004), seeking instead to situate events rather than wrestle them into any determinative schemata.

WWF, Bosques, and Participation

The Bosques parent organization, the World Wildlife Fund, was formed in 1961. The WWF has grown to be the largest environmental INGO in the world, with offices in ninety countries and more than five million "family members" worldwide. International management occurs through the WWF International in Gland, Switzerland, which acts as an umbrella organization. The major WWF National Organizations operating in Latin America are WWF-UK, WWF-US, WWF-Netherlands, and WWF-Brazil. The organization's mission is to conserve biological diversity, ensure sustainability in the use of renewable natural resources, and reduce pollution and wasteful consumption (WWF 2001b, 4). The WWF focuses its work on six priority areas: forests, freshwater ecosystems, oceans and coasts, species preservation, toxic wastes, and climate change.

The WWF has been active in Mexico since 1968. In 1993 the organization turned its Mexico City operations into a country Program Office. It currently manages four of WWF's 200 global priority ecoregions through: the Mexican Forestry Program (Bosques), the Chihuahua Desert Program, the Gulf of California Program, and the Meso-American Reef Program. Each of these ecoregions has a local office that works with communities to promote environmental protection. The WWF opened its offices in Oaxaca in 1990, part of a trend of NGO expansion in the state throughout the decade (Moore et al. 2007). The Bosques program's main objective is to "contribute to the conservation and sustainable use of Mexican Forest Ecosystems" (WWF-México 2004; our translation). Bosques projects are divided into three priority regions, each of which aims to conserve distinct flora and fauna in selected communities: the dry tropical jungles and pine forests of the coastal region, mostly populated by Mixtec, Zapotec, and Chatino speaking indigenous peoples; the high altitude "cloud forests" of the Sierra Norte, north of Oaxaca City around Guelatao and Ixtlán, occupied by Zapotecs, Chinantecs, Cuicatecs, and Mixes; and the Chimalapas. The organization's projects primarily involve the provision of technical assistance and training through community workshops. It also funds travel for community members to participate in national and international conferences on sustainable development and conservation; its work in the Sierra Norte supporting sustainable logging has earned worldwide recognition.

The priority regions are the basis for the internal organization of Bosques, with different professional staff being assigned primary responsibility for each region. On a day-to-day basis this arrangement provides a certain

amount of autonomy to individual staff persons, giving them discretion to determine where and with whom to work within each region. Oaxaca's Chimalapas program has been run by David Ortega, a biologist with a graduate degree from Mexico City's Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, the nation's premier university. Ortega and the other project managers are responsible for securing funding for their regions, and they do so by writing grants.

During the period of this study, Bosques received roughly 70 percent of its funding from WWF-UK and about 30 percent from USAID, with a small amount of additional funding coming from other Mexican NGOs and the State of Oaxaca. The bulk of funding for Bosques' projects in the Chimalapas comes from USAID, with a 2004 budget of over $500,000. The U.S. government's interest in the region is interpreted by many as due in part to the geopolitical and economic importance of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, except for the Chimalapas a relatively low lying area that constitutes the narrowest point between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific (see Figure 1). The area has drawn the attention of developers and government officials as part of the larger Plan Puebla Panama project (PPP), a series of infrastructural and other investments designed to facilitate trade and industry from the city of Puebla, close to Mexico City, to the country of Panama to the south. The project, launched in 2001, was supported by President Vicente Fox's Mexican national government, multinational corporations, and international development agencies, such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). The PPP's regional development plan for the Isthmus is aimed at improving port facilities on the Pacific and Gulf of Mexico coasts and constructing new transportation infrastructure, including both highway and rail, across the flatter portion of the Isthmus to the west of the Chimalapas (see Gómez 2002; IDB 2005). With containerized shipping the norm and the Panama Canal's limitations in servicing the larger classes of oceangoing carriers, the PPP's port and highway/rail developments could, if completed, substantially reduce shipping costs for Pacific-Gulf-Atlantic routes.[4] Adding to the strategic significance of the Isthmus is that for many decades it has been a concern to U.S. and Mexican authorities for its role as a passageway in the transshipment of narcotics. All told, and in the view of one of the Bosques technical staff, USAID is interested in funding projects in the Chimalapas because it is a cost effective way to gather data on land tenure disputes, local politics, classification of flora and fauna, and other information that may be useful in assembling an inventory of the region (Interview with Bosques technical staff member 2004). NGO professionals in Oaxaca are well aware of the potential political risks of working with USAID but, as one asked rhetorically,

> What are we supposed to do? We have to jump on the bus (*subirse al camion*) to get the funds from USAID. If we do not submit the applications for the funding, they are just going to give them to some one else. I know that the information and data I share with USAID they may use for political reasons. But I believe that I can do a better job in the Chimalapas than other organizations. That is why I work with USAID. No, you have to jump on the bus.
> —(Interview 2004)

The bulk of the funding for Bosques work in the Chimalapas comes from USAID; however, the office receives the majority of its institutional directives from its parent organization, and its staff tends acknowledge those priorities and practices (Field notes 2004). In particular, the WWF considers itself a leading proponent of participatory conservation (WWF 2005). As mentioned above, it was an early adopter of the "Statement of Principles: Indigenous Peoples and Conservation," a document whose Article 23 states, in part:

> When WWF conservation activities impinge on areas where historic claims and/or current exercise of customary resource rights of indigenous peoples are present, WWF will assume an obligation to:
>
> - identify, seek out, and consult with legitimate representatives of relevant indigenous peoples' organizations at the earliest stages of programme development; and
> - provide fora for consultation between WWF and affected peoples, so that information can be shared on an ongoing basis, and problems, grievances, and disputes related to the partnership can be resolved in a timely manner.
>
> In addition, consistent with the relevance and significance of the proposed activities to the achievement of conservation objectives, WWF will be ready to:
>
> - assist indigenous peoples' organizations in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of conservation activities, and to invest in strengthening such organizations and in developing relevant human resources in the respective indigenous communities . . .
>
> —(WWF International 1996)

Given this policy, in place now for over a decade, it should not surprise anyone that the organization took great exception to Chapin's accusations (see their rebuttal, WWF 2005, titled "Setting the Record Straight").

WWF-UK in particular is cognizant of the inseparability of social and economic development on the one hand, and conservation on the other (Interview 2004). This is illustrated by the mission statement for Bosques developed by the WWF-UK: "WWF-UK's Mexico Forests Programme aims to reduce the loss of forest resources, increase the area of protected forests, promote sustainable forest management and improve the livelihoods of people who depend on forests" (WWF-UK 2005b). This declaration fits in well with the goals of WWF-UK's larger multiregion Forest Programme, which has five overarching priorities, the first of which is: "to secure effective management of existing forests, through measures such as legal protection and community ownership" (WWF-UK 2005a). Further, WWF-UK has recently been encouraging the practice of working directly with communities rather than, say, going through local NGO partners. They see direct relations with the communities as lessening the potential for political missteps and as more effective in securing grassroots "capacity building" (Interview 2004; for a discussion of capacity building see Roberts, Jones, and Fröhling 2005). Certainly, as we discuss below, working through other NGOs in the Chimalapas is no longer considered prudent, and the WWF Bosques program now communicates directly with communities instead.

The Bosques staff responsible for the Chimalapas are not only committed to ensuring participation in social development and conservation because of the official positions of their parent organizations, they also resolutely believe that without it, no conservation plan is likely to be implemented (Field notes 2004). Such a pragmatic approach is driven by a realization that the Zoques will not permit anything that is not participatory on their terms. As one informed observer reported to us, it boils down to a question of Realpolitik: "Who has the guns?" That the Zoques do indeed have guns and have threatened and used violence against other outsider groups, well-meaning or not, has implications for how Ortega and other Bosques staff approach the forest communities. First, their work is currently not modeled on a reserve or biosphere approach (see Sundberg 1998 for the contrasting case of the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Guatemala). Bosques staff members are certain that establishing from the "top down" any kind of natural reserve or park in the region would run aground on the complex and volatile politics of land ownership and control, alienating the region's inhabitants, endangering NGO staff and their allies, and ensuring the failure of any conservation efforts (see also Umlas 1998). Second, armed with the rhetoric of participation and devices such as Log Frame Analysis (a form of reporting and analysis wrapped up in accountability and regularly reinforced through visits to Oaxaca by members of WWF's U.K. partners; see Roberts, Jones, and Fröhling 2005), the Bosques strategy has been to stress communication, collaboration, and, through workshops and planning meetings, the development of sustainable forest management practices that recognize the economic needs of the local people but prevent uncontrolled commercial logging and other destructive practices. Representative of this communicative understanding of participation is a joint WWF-CI proposal to USAID, which was written by Ortega with assistance from other Bosques staff. It shows an office cognizant of the need to employ a participatory approach in their efforts to protect a Chimalapas watershed:

> This program aims to change the current dynamics of institutional work in the region, improving communication between communities and institutions while strengthening local capacities for horizontal decision making processes. It is expected that improved communications between the communities, institutions and groups that implement projects in the area will lead to the development of programs that answer to real needs and demands in the area. Ultimately, this will lead to the implementation and adoption of resource management practices that will allow for the conservation of Selva [jungle] Zoque in the long term. . . . A participatory approach will be used to ensure that relevant stakeholders collaborate and that the program is integrated across geographical scales.
>
> —(WWF-México Program and Conservation International 2004)

Yet here too we can see that participation has been essentially reduced to improved communication among interested parties, with the hope that sound resource management practices will follow. In other words, for the biologist Ortega, participation is collaborative dialogue, and a means to an end.

Empowerment in the Chimalapas Forest

The Chimalapas is a region of about 600,000 hectares of mountainous land, with elevations ranging from 200 to more than 2,400 meters above sea level. It contains various rare montane cloud forest ecosystems, including montane mesophile forests, pine forests, and pine-oak forests. Its rugged topography and diverse climatic conditions have produced a complex ecology that supports one of the world's highest levels of biodiversity, including many endangered flora and fauna (WWF 2001a; WWF-México Program and Conservation International 2004). Serious stressors to this ecology began to emerge in the

1960s (Staton 1992/93). Those focused on by conservation agencies include commercial logging and the clearing of land for agriculture by a wave of in-migrants (Russell and Lassoie 1998; Umlas 1998; Asbjornsen and Blauert 2001; Payne 2002; WWF-México 2005a; WWF-UK 2005b; Anonymous n.d.; Caballero n.d.). But many other problems have plagued the Chimalapas over the past several decades, including recurring fires, some connected to agrarian conflicts; illegal logging, poaching, and bioprospecting; major infrastructural projects, such as roads; and the violence that accompanies traffic in narcotics—all enveloped in a continuous conflict over the demarcation of the state line between Chiapas and Oaxaca. Still, it is the biological richness of the forests that has led to the area's designation as a priority ecoregion by the WWF and by the Mexican National Commission on Biodiversity (CONABIO n.d.; and see Arriaga et al. 2000).

Several groups of people live in the Chimalapas ecoregion, including established communities of Zoque speakers who claim to be the heirs of the original inhabitants of the region. They see the above-mentioned problems less in ecological terms than as threats to their territorial claims. Although the area is officially recognized as communally owned by the Zoques, the waves of agricultural in-migrants, loggers, ranchers, and drug traffickers, together with the conflict over the eastern boundary, have led to the rise of a fierce territorial politics on the part of Zoque leaders (Umlas 1998; Doane 2001). Their pragmatic response has led them either to expel or to strategically incorporate in-migrants as *comuneros*—community members with rights of access to land—and to always evaluate the utility of any alliances with state agencies and NGOs in terms of how such alliances may or may not assist them in cementing their territorial claims (Umlas 1998; García 1999). From this general milieu, the Zoque-speaking communities' leaders bring three empowering experiences with them to Bosques' participatory table: a history of involvement with state institutions and programs, a changing legal framework fostered by the rise of indigenous politics and regional autonomy, and negotiations with NGOs in the region. All of these are key contexts implicated in the emergence of actors variously positioned to negotiate with and challenge the WWF's attempts at establishing a conservation program for the Chimalapas.

State Programs as Vehicles for Empowerment

In a 1996 article, Jonathan Fox analyzed the "recursive cycles of interaction between state and societal actors" in rural Mexico, and proposed that any understanding of interactions between the state and society would have to examine the many, often contradictory and contingently organized, elements in each (1996, 1090). In understanding how state actors have affected and continue to affect the possibilities for action on the part of the Zoque leaders, we need to recognize that there are many diverse agencies of the federal and state governments involved in the Chimalapas. They overlap, in various ways, with the machinery of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), which remains important in the Isthmus despite having lost power at the national level in 2000 after seventy years (Fröhling, Gallaher, and Jones 2001). The multiple state actors in the region are largely uncoordinated, and it cannot be assumed that they will not work at cross-purposes (Fox 1996). As we shall see, the workshop we examine was in part set up to encourage collaboration, but it faced considerable difficulty in building trust, much less a coalition.

If the state cannot be treated as a unitary actor, it stands to reason that various aspects of the state apparatus, at different levels and in different types of agencies, can and will be played off one another by oppressed groups intent on making claims—sometimes even against neighbors (Haenn 1999, 2002; Radcliffe 2001). For example, at the federal level, recent (2004) agrarian decrees over the Chimalapas issued by former President Vicente Fox have had the effect of consolidating control of communal lands in the forest in the hands of the two male *comisariados* who now administer resources for the region's two municipalities: San Miguel Chimalapa (*municipio* pop. 6,000) and Santa María Chimalapa (*municipio* pop. 7,000) (see Figure 1). This consolidation effected a change from the previous arrangement, which had provided power to scores of smaller villages and settlements in the region. Fox's move was intended to end violent intervillage disputes over logging and agricultural encroachment, but it also had the effect of centralizing decision making within the two Zoque municipalities, making their *comisariados* the region's most credible representatives to state agencies, NGOs, and other outside groups (Doane 2001; on the complex relations between agrarian conflicts and conservation efforts in the Chimalapas see also Russell and Lassoie 1998; Umlas 1998; Asbjornsen and Blauert 2001; Payne 2002; Anonymous n.d.; Caballero n.d.). Groups from the outside are no longer able to work directly with people from the many smaller settlements in the region, as they are required to (or are supposed to) first consult with the leaders in San Miguel and Santa María. A resident of San Miguel described the new spatial consolidation of power this way: "If you want to come into our house, you have to come in through the

front door. You cannot come in through the back window" (Interview 2004).

Another key political change affecting empowerment in the forest was the rise of Natural Resource Committees (NRCs). The birth of the NRCs dates to the 1980s, when communities in the Sierra Norte region of Oaxaca, northwest of the Chimalapas, organized communal forest-management programs after having successfully stopped the federal government from granting concessions for commercial logging on their land to private and parastatal companies. In 1996, Mexico's Secretariat for Environmental and Natural Resources (formerly SEMARNAP, now SEMARNAT), working in collaboration with NGOs and other state agencies, formally established eight NRCs in the state of Oaxaca, modeled on the successes of similar programs established in the Sierra Norte. One of the NRCs was in the Isthmus, the region that includes the Chimalapas. Bosques staff were involved in several of the NRCs (especially those in the Sierra Norte, the coast, and the Isthmus), and Zoque-speaking men from the Chimalapas were active in the Isthmus NRC.

The NRCs functioned as organizational spaces where community members discussed land and other resource management strategies, including ways to guide and thwart development schemes. Their skills in the "modern" administration of natural resources grew through these encounters (Interview 2004). Several men from San Miguel traveled to the NRC meetings in Juchitán, the nearest commercial center to the forest, learning the languages and practices of government- and NGO-sponsored conservation and development planning. They also learned how to make public presentations in formal institutional settings, and they sharpened discussion and negotiating skills through their participation in community assemblies (cf. Eden 1996; see also Mawdsley et al. 2002; Kothari 2005; Laurie, Andolina, and Radcliffe 2005; and Nightingale 2005 on professionalization). This rise of professionalization has been, in turn, an important factor in the consolidation of power on the part of the Zoque political leaders in the Chimalapas.

Shifts in Legal Spaces and the Rise of Autonomy

The increasing recognition of self-governed, autonomous, indigenous municipalities is a second factor that has prepared the ground on which the Zoques stand in their encounters with WWF-led conservation efforts in the region. Under the far-reaching devolutionary reforms instituted during the neoliberal *sexenio* of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994), the discussion of the significance of 1992 as marking 500 years of discovery and conquest or 500 years of genocide led to a constitutional recognition of indigenous peoples and their rights, as well as the signing of the International Labour Organization's Convention 169, which among other things obligated the government to consult with indigenous communities about any development activities affecting their territory. In Oaxaca, these changes foreshadowed alterations to the electoral code, which in 1995 recognized traditional communal electoral practices, so called *usos y costumbres* (or practices and customs; see Maldonado 2002), laws that govern everything in the municipality from agrarian reform to water rights. This recognition of traditional decision-making procedures outside of the political party system was overlaid by sweeping constitutional changes in favor of indigenous communities and peoples (Oaxaca State Legislature 1998a, 1998b; see also Sieder 2002b; Rodríguez-Pose and Gill 2004). As a result, roughly four-fifths of Oaxaca's 570 municipalities select local authorities based on local customs legally sanctioned under the *usos y costumbres* system and are considered to be indigenous municipalities (or *comunidades de bienes comunales*; Bailón 1995; Flores Cruz 2002). This transformation of the legal landscape in Oaxaca has reconfigured the relations between municipal officials and state and federal authorities, granting the municipalities substantial powers and permitting them considerable autonomy in formulating conservation efforts (see Rodríguez and Ward 1995; Ward and Rodríguez 1999; Haenn 2005, 182–88).

Of particular relevance to the politics of conservation in the Chimalapas, the communities have written their own laws (*estatutos*), many of which concern natural resource management and conservation. For example, Chapter Six of San Miguel de Chimalapas' *estatuto*, titled "Community Natural Resource Conservation, Maintenance, and Benefits," discusses sustainable logging practices, the protection of endangered species (both flora and fauna), reforestation programs, controlled burning for agricultural production, and ecotourism, among other topics (*Estatuto Comunal San Miguel Chimalapa* 2000). Such locally-generated statutes frame any potential actions of NGOs, such as the WWF, in the municipality. The very process of writing the *estatutos* involved local officials in actively linking community priorities with their considerable knowledge of wider discourses of conservation and resource management (some of which was likely acquired through the NRCs, as described in the preceding section). It is therefore no surprise that a number of conservation NGOs like the WWF take a very active interest in the process of writing

these *estatutos*, as in the case of the Sierra Norte (WWF-México 2005b).

The strengthening of autonomy via the recognition of *usos y costumbres* has occurred during a time when political claims on the basis of indigeneity have been powerfully articulated in Mexico and elsewhere (Brysk 1996, 2000; Levi 2002; Maybury-Lewis 2002; Sieder 2002b; de la Peña 2005; Jackson and Warren 2005), whether in terms of social/economic justice or human rights (Blaser, Feit, and McRae 2004; Oaxaca State Government 2005). Nowhere was this force made more apparent than in adjacent Chiapas, when, in January 1994, just as the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect, the *Ejército Zapata de Liberación Nacional* (the Zapatista Army of National Liberation or EZLN) seized control of parts of the state (Collier and Quaratiello 1994; La Botz 1995; Esteva and Prakash 1998; Harvey 1998; Esteva 2005). The Zapatista rebellion stands as the most visible recent event in long-standing and widespread struggles by indigenous groups in Mexico, but it had the effect of catalyzing what Alejandro Anaya Muñoz identifies as the "politics of recognition" at the federal and state level in Mexico (Anaya Muñoz 2004; also Taylor 1994; Sieder 2002b; Esteva 2005). This politics sharpened in Mexico, leading to political reforms that formally recognize cultural diversity and indigenous peoples' rights, as it did elsewhere in Latin America—although not with unambiguously positive repercussions for indigenous peoples, much less other marginalized ethnic groups (Van Cott 2000a, 2000b; Hale 2002; Laurie, Andolina, and Radcliffe 2002; Radcliffe, Laurie, and Andolina 2002; Sieder 2002a; Warren and Jackson 2002; Zibechi 2004; Hooker 2005).

In Oaxaca, as Anaya Muñoz details, groups in the state arguing for the recognition of ethnic diversity and indigenous rights found their "indigenousness" reaffirmed by the EZLN's successes and the PRI regime newly open to responding to their claims by permitting the adoption of *usos y costumbres* (Stephen 1997; Levi 2002; Anaya Muñoz 2004). The efficacy of articulating claims in terms of ethnicity meant that "the emergent political actor in Oaxaca was no longer peasant but indigenous, and . . . ethnicity more than class . . . [became] crucial in the mobilization of political identities" (Anaya Muñoz 2004, 427; see also Escobar 1998, 63; Levi 2002). The "actor" though remains overwhelmingly male (Cornwall 1998; Sundberg 2004), and while we want to avoid characterizing indigenous women as somehow especially victimized (Newdick 2005), with some exceptions the political identities of indigenous women have not been mobilized in ways as obvious as those of indigenous men in Oaxaca.

The uneven but increased leverage accorded to indigeneity in Mexico parallels international efforts that have affirmed indigenous identities (see Brysk 1996, 2000; Stavenhagen 2002; Yashar 2005) and has proven useful to the Zoque-speaking leaders of the Chimalapas, who have become comfortable making claims in these terms (Oaxaca State Government 2005). As a member of the San Miguel municipal authority put it, "the Indian was humble and this is why we have been exploited. But now the Zoques are taking off their bandanas from around their eyes and are waking up to not only manage their own communities but to take over the management of their own resources" (Interview 2004). The Zoque leaders are able explicitly and implicitly to invoke the power of what Pramod Parajuli calls "ecological ethnicity," whereby indigenous identity is aligned with a distinctive ecological history and ethos (1998, 2004; see also Varese 1996; Reed 1997). Notwithstanding the long-established and often essentializing association between indigenous people and the environments in which they live (see Willems-Braun 1997; Mayo 2000; Sundberg 2004), Parajuli (2004, 254), among others, is optimistic about the assertion of such claims:

> Ecological ethnicities do not appear merely as the victim of the last 500 years' onslaught. They are actually endowed with a combination of historical and cultural repertoires that are in their favor. For example, their territorial claims are still active and are increasingly recognized. . . . They have customary institutions of governance still operating that can be the basis of a new democracy.

In accord with this view, community members in the Chimalapas were often heard telling the Bosques staff that, in the absence of the indigenous peoples in the forest, it would by now quite certainly have been cut down and that conservation of the forest has to be paired with preservation of the indigenous inhabitants. As Cuauhtémoc Martinez Gutierrez, the *comisariado* of San Miguel, pointed out, if NGOs "want to preserve the forest, [they] have to work to preserve the different ethnic groups found in the forests" (Interview 2004). On the other hand, despite the signing of the San Andrés Accords in 1996 by the Zapatistas and the government of Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000), the federal government has failed to implement the Accords and to make good on its promises of greater consideration for indigenous communities. This, plus the ongoing and deep rural crisis in southern Mexico, with consistently low prices for key crops such as coffee, dampens optimism about the possibilities inherent in a politics of ethnicity.

Learning from NGOs in Oaxaca

Although Mexico has a long history of social movements, tied to political reform, labor organizations, and the Church (Knight 1990), the post-1982 period ushered in major political and economic changes that brought forth significant growth in the number and diversity of NGOs (González de la Rocha and Escobar Latapí 1991; Cortés Ruiz 1994; Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998). Specifically, in the wake of the 1982 national default on debt service payments, Mexico instituted International Monetary Fund–mandated structural adjustment policies, sold many state-owned industries, decreased funding for social programs, devalued the peso, dismantled agricultural subsidies, and privatized some formerly communal rural landholdings (Aitken et al. 1996; de Janvry, Gordillo, and Sadoulet 1997; Cockcroft 1998; Fox 2000). In this, Mexico is typical of Latin America, where, as observers have noted, there has been a rapid rise in the numbers of NGOs in response to neoliberal political and economic restructuring during the 1980s and especially the 1990s (Bebbington, Theile, and Davis 1993; Pearce 1997; Meyer 1999; Gwynne and Kay 2000; Union of International Associations 2003/4). Many of these are environmental and conservation NGOs, often connected to transnational NGO networks (Price 1994; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Umlas 1998).

The emergence of NGOs in Oaxaca has built on this general pattern. Oaxaca's poverty, second only in Mexico to neighboring Chiapas (Clarke 2000), combined with the relative accessibility of its capital city and the human resources available there, has made the state a prime location for INGOs and NGOs. A large number of North American and European foundations, agencies such as the Inter-American Foundation, and institutions such as the World Bank, are presently active in the state, almost always in conjunction with local NGOs. In collaborative work with others involved in the larger research project of which this article is a part, we estimated that as of 2000 there were some 400 NGOs operating in the state (Moore et al. 2007). The pattern in the Isthmus of Tehauntepec, where the Chimalapas forests are located, reveals an active civil society sector: of the 292 NGOs in Oaxaca for which we have individual data, eighty work in the Isthmus. The region's organizations are not only plentiful, they also tend to be of the "grassroots" variety: among the state's eight regions, the Isthmus has the highest proportion of NGOs working locally, it has the second lowest proportion of legally incorporated NGOs, and it has the lowest proportion of NGOs headquartered in the state's capital city (Moore et al. 2007). Although we do not have data on the number of organizations working directly within the Chimalapas, there has been a vibrant history of NGO involvement in the region, beginning in the mid-1980s and accelerating in the 1990s (Umlas 1998).

The story we are telling, centered on events of 2004, has an important precursor in the work of conservation NGOs involved in the Chimalapas in the 1990s. In 1991 a small forestry management NGO, Maderas del Pueblo Sureste, A.C. (MPS), began work in the region, as part of a WWF Bosques project funded by USAID's Biodiversity Support Program. MPS's goal was to plan and implement a locally managed ecological reserve in the Chimalapas forest. Though populated at the top by urbane Mexicans, MPS was known for its close participatory work with *campesinos* living in small settlements within the forests (Umlas 1998; Doane 2001). MPS's efforts, however, were soon caught up in political disputes between the two powerful Chimalapas municipalities (San Miguel and Santa María) and other communities (Caballero n.d.). Further, as Doane (2001) elaborates, MPS's reputation as a largely left-leaning organization created tensions between it and state- and national-level authorities (both PRI-dominated at the time), and the government's ability to rely on long-established systems of patronage turned the local authorities of San Miguel and Santa María against the NGO. As a result, the local authorities threw MPS out of the region, thwarting the NGO's attempt to set up an ecological reserve and threatening MPS staff with hanging were they to return. In a powerful communiqué published in the national newspaper, *La Jornada*, the authorities took control of the terms of participation in the formation of any ecological reserve in the Chimalapas:

> [We] roundly [reject] the divisionist politics that the ecologists carry out in the . . . name of Chimas and force them to declare their leaving in the light of the fact that they had not justified with work and deeds the application of the huge sums of money that they obtained using our name and the pretext of safeguarding our natural resources . . . We want to live in peace! We want to speak for ourselves, therefore we will not accept . . . anybody [speaking] for the Chima people.
>
> —(quoted in Doane 2001, 371; her translation)

It became obvious in interacting with the Zoques that their prior dealings with conservation-oriented NGOs, and especially with MPS, would not be forgotten. A municipal leader described the situation: "it is not healthy for a child to spend his whole life with the mother. . . . We in San Miguel have become well trained to manage our own affairs" (Interview 2004). As the

case illustrates so clearly, and as the WWF Bosques staff and the government officials who traveled to the assembly in San Miguel learned, they were not responding to the invitation of a naïve group. Rather, they were the guests of empowered, organized, knowledgeable, and highly skeptical people.

The Juchitán Workshop and the San Miguel Assembly

In June 2004, the WWF collaborated with SEMARNAT and the National Commission for Indigenous Development (CONADEPI) to organize a workshop to improve interorganizational coordination in the Chimalapas as part of its goal of building a coalition of governmental and nongovernmental institutions to work with the forest communities (see WWF-México 2005a). The workshop participants, all men with one exception, were representatives from two NGOs and eight federal and state government agencies with programs in the Chimalapas.[5] They met with the goal of "forming a solid strategy among the distinct institutions and NGOs who are working in the Chimalapas" because, as one of the organizers noted, "each institution has its own financing for a determined project but there are no interactions among the different agencies" (Interview 2004). According to handouts distributed to the government and NGO delegates, the specific goals included the establishment of a permanent interinstitutional group to coordinate the programs in the Chimalapas and discussion of a development plan for the Chimalapas (the "Master Development Plan of the Chimalapas").

David Ortega, the WWF Bosques staff person responsible for the Chimalapas region, spearheaded both the organization of the workshops and the drafting of the comprehensive development plan for the Chimalapas region. As the chief representative of the WWF in the region, Ortega brought his training and professional experience as a biologist, as well as extensively developed personal relationships with networked operatives in the NGO and government domains. Ortega was a federally appointed Oaxacan state delegate for SEMARNAT, and has held other politically-appointed positions in the PRI-dominated State of Oaxaca, and is thus very knowledgeable about state politics and was in a good position to initiate and organize the workshop.

The workshop took place over two days in June 2004, in the Isthmus city of Juchitán (pop. 78,000), the nearest major urban center to San Miguel. Held at the only hotel in Juchitán with central air-conditioning, the workshop opened with a session run by the representatives from CONADEPI and SEMARNAT, in which they highlighted the large number of independently operating, but sometimes overlapping, programs under way in the Chimalapas. There are twenty-four different state and federal programs in the Chimalapas with an aggregate expenditure of $45 million pesos (over US $4 million), a considerable investment in a region with 13,000 inhabitants. Every workshop participant agreed that there was a distinct lack of interinstitutional cooperation among groups working in the Chimalapas and that this was causing communications problems between the groups and the local communities. They acknowledged that their disparate and uncoordinated efforts were hampering plans to develop a comprehensive development program for the region, and that the lack of organizational coordination hampered efforts to negotiate with the Chimalapas communities. They also saw the wider political dangers of their fragmented approach; as one participant put it: "the Chimalapas is a match that we have next to the flames of Chiapas."[6] Should the various organizations work at cross-purposes and lose the goodwill of the local communities, the costs could be very high for the workshop participants: any hope of controlling the terms of development and conservation in the region would be lost.

In recognition of the strategic pitfalls of working autonomously, one session at the workshop required participants to share how each of their agencies operated in the Chimalapas. They were asked to fill out a chart delineating funding flows to their different programs. At this point, late in the afternoon, the workshop disintegrated into internecine squabbling. The congenial agreement to cooperate established in the morning evaporated within minutes and the representatives from the government agencies refused to participate. This lack of cooperation among the various officials can readily be interpreted as reflecting traditional PRI-style *Priísta* politics, whereby each participant belongs and owes his career to a distinct *camarilla*, an informal political circle or cabinet aligned with a powerful party leader (Fox 1996). On the other hand, in today's Mexico it might equally signal the breakdown in federal control over various agencies, and the jockeying among them for power, and among officials concerned to best position themselves in advance of a then-uncertain electoral outcome in 2006. In either case, the lack of cooperation, while possibly presenting some difficulties for municipal leaders in the Chimalapas, ensured there was no unified opposition to the Zoques at the forthcoming assembly.

Although the government representatives could not agree to cooperate with each other, they did tend to put

forth a common diagnosis of the region's problems, many of which focused on the Zoques themselves. Thus, delegates openly complained that, as far as they could see, the Zoques did not understand questions related to deforestation, development, and conservation, with several participants agreeing that this is why NGO and government experts have a special responsibility to organize programs in the Chimalapas. Tracing a long historical arc of infantilizing indigenous peoples (Fabian 2002), the Zoques were seen by some participants as lacking in knowledge and in need of the sort of "expert" assistance that their advanced training, technical knowledge, and resources could provide (cf. Esteva and Prakash 1998; Fischer 2000; see also Sundberg 1998, 2003a, 2003b; Nightingale 2005).[7] As we saw in the MPS case, and as we shall see in the case of the assembly, such patronizing depictions of the Zoques signal a serious misreading of their knowledge and capabilities. It is a misreading that, although it may have affirmed some participants' own sense of the value of their work vis-à-vis the forest, started to unravel later in the workshop, as participants gathered for evening drinks and considered the upcoming assembly in San Miguel.

That night at a popular outdoor bar, workshop participants betrayed the self-confidence that had earlier on circulated among them. After a few drinks in the tropical heat, they began to reveal their doubts about their ability to manage the upcoming proceedings. One participant worriedly stated that "it is going to be difficult to control the Chimalapas community members in the assembly. Although we are guests there, we need to come up with a strategy to not allow them to dominate the meeting." Another agreed: "If we give them the opportunity to speak, they will continue speaking the whole time." These comments, however, infuriated another participant who had spent many years defending and promoting indigenous rights: "But we have to give the Chimalapas community members the opportunity to explain what they want from us. How are you going to create a master development plan for the Chimalapas region without including the participation of the community members?" (Field notes 2004). The terms of this participation, however, were by no means settled. The NGO and state agency officials' worries about who was in charge of inviting whom to participate turned out in fact to be quite justified.

The assembly at San Miguel took place the next day in the village's community center. The leaders of San Miguel invited community members from Santa María, delegates from Mexico City representing the Federal Ministry for Environmental Protection (PROFEPA), SEMARNAT, and CONADEPI, as well as representatives from the WWF and the eight federal government agencies that had participated in the workshop in Juchitán. In all there were about 300 people in the community center that day.

The meeting was presided over by the *comisariado* of San Miguel, Cuauhtémoc Martinez Gutierrez. The delegates from PROFEPA, SEMARNAT, and David Ortega each spoke from the elevated stage and their remarks generated many questions and comments that brought into sharp relief local people's concerns about the unequal politics of participation, the deployment of different sorts of knowledge about the region, and the manner in which they and their land were being treated. For example, in response to a lecture by the PROFEPA delegate on land regularization and deforestation, a person advised: "If you want to see what is going on in the Chimalapas you cannot do it from a helicopter! We like to ride around in helicopters too, but if you want to see what is happening on the ground you have to enter by land to really get a good look at it." Meanwhile, the SEMARNAT delegate, who insisted that "the management of natural resources be conducted in an orderly fashion, not in an anarchic fashion" (Field notes 2004), was scolded by disapproving members of the audience who told the official that he could not be disrespectful to the people of the forest, and that they, the owners of the land, could do with it as they please.

David Ortega gave the last invited presentation, covering the master plan that had been discussed at the Juchitán workshop. The presentation employed computer-generated PowerPoint graphics and was structured around six points: conservation areas, sustainable logging areas, operational rules for financing projects, sustainable development for nonwood resources, strategies for inspection and vigilance (guarding the forests), and a guide to obtaining logging permits. Ortega's talk was detailed and lengthy, not least because community members continually interrupted him with questions about which agency was funding the plan and where the funds were to be directed.

When David Ortega had finished, the *comisariado* from Santa María took up the microphone and proceeded to chide the WWF and the government institutions for hoarding the money they receive from the federal government and international lending institutions:

> Where does all of the money go that you receive from USAID, DFID, and IDB? We know that many NGOs have received millions of pesos. No, *compañeros*, not just pesos, millions of dollars, to study the Chimalapas, to work with the communities in the Chimalapas, to develop strategies

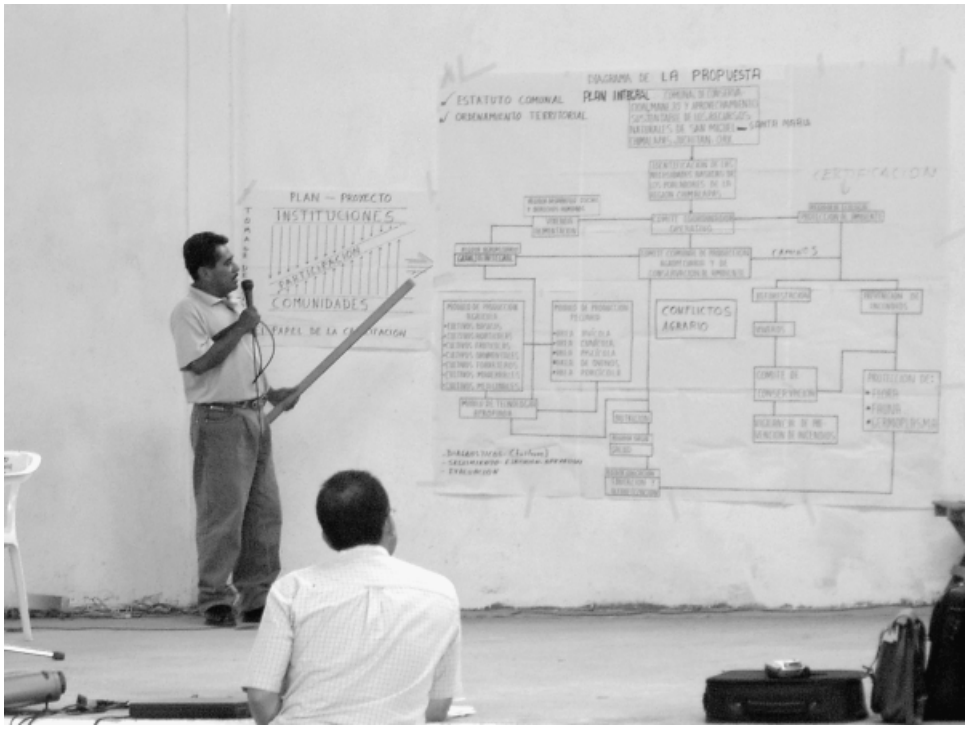

Figure 2. Cuauhtémoc Martinez Gutierrez, the *comisariado* of San Miguel Chimalapa, presenting the Communal Plan.

> and plans for the conservation and the preservation of the Chimalapas, but where is all of that money? It did not stay in the community! They took it with them! This new interinstitutional master plan for the Chimalapas is not a development plan. If it were a development plan then it would include education, health care, transportation infrastructure, and communication infrastructure, the management of livestock and crops, not just environmental preservation. Today, *compañeros*, we present the *plan comunal chimalapas para la defensa indigena y biodiversidad!* [the Chimalapas communal plan for the defense of the indigenous and biodiversity].
>
> —(Field notes 2004)

Then, in a forceful turning of the tables, the *comisariado* from Santa María handed the microphone to his counterpart from San Miguel who commenced by asking an unnerved Daniel Ortega to turn off the computer-generated images from his still-projected presentation. With the help of community members, he taped to the wall a large paper poster laying out the main elements of the community's plan (see Figure 2). For the next two hours the *comisariado* deliberately went over, line by line and box by box, each of the elements, leaving the government officials squirming in their seats as the temperatures rose in the already sweltering, cement-block community center.

The most important difference between the two plans, aside from the different politics of participation that led to them, was the overt inclusion of social development in the Zoques' plan alongside the requisite ecological programs. Thus, in addition to a proposed biosphere reserve with community-based natural resource management that would allow sustainable resource extraction and forest conservation, the Zoques' plan also spelled out programs focused on health care, education, agrarian issues and land disputes, and transportation infrastructure. Moreover, the institutional structure for administering the plan's elements was delineated. As one delegate from Oaxaca de Juárez remarked upon seeing the plan unfold, "this is better than anything David Ortega or the other government institutions presented." He went on to note that the community leaders had impressively appropriated the tools and languages of capacity building that they had learned from the very NGOs and state agencies present at the assembly (Field notes 2004). His plan clearly trumped by that of the Zoques, David Ortega jumped up from his seat to embrace the *comisariado*, telling him that he wanted the plan to work, but that it would take a lot of effort on the part of the people of the Chimalapas and the assistance of the WWF.

Conclusion

In their scathing critique of participatory development, Cooke and Kothari (2001) expose the many ways

that participation fails. Chapin's (2004) attack on the "Big Three" environmental INGOs added to the efforts of those seeking to expose flaws in the practices of participatory conservation and development. Arguments, such as those in Hickey and Mohan (2004), have also been made for rehabilitating the whole idea of participation as better than nothing, or for reclaiming the radical political intent of the term. In the case examined here, we have seen that participation lies at the very heart of the struggles and negotiations between the Zoque municipal leaders and some of the many institutions (from the federal state agencies, to state agencies, to multilateral development donors, the U.S. government, major conservation NGOs, and so on) active in the region.

Ultimately, though, the politics of participation as expressed by the Zoques is not defined along a continuum between a grand theoretical conundrum on the one hand and the difficulty of concretely implementing participatory practices on the other; rather, the Chimalapas case pivots on the difference between an aspatial understanding of participation (i.e., of "communication," "dialogue," and "having input") and one that directs attention to the powerful territorial politics that determines who gets to *invite* whom to participate. Frequently explained by way of metaphor, the politics of invitation is rooted in the material space of the forest. The Zoques insist that the forest is their home, which they own, and that they therefore are the only ones who can extend invitations. The invited party is thus a guest, welcome to stay only as long as the host permits (Esteva 1987; also see Esteva and Prakash 1998, 107–8, on the related concept of hospitality and Esteva 2005, 135, on "hospitable dignity"). As one resident of the forest expressed the sentiment:

> How would you feel if I organized a rowdy party (*pachanga*) at your house without asking your permission and without even inviting you? Wouldn't you be upset? What if I repeatedly organized *pachangas* at your house and even made a copy of the key one day when you weren't home? Wouldn't that be disrespectful to you?
>
> —(Interview 2004)

This resolutely territorial politics of invitation is not a rejection of development per se, but an inversion of the typical discourses and practices of participatory development. Instead of accepting their circumscribed role as "participants" in someone else's conservation plan, the Zoques are insisting, on the basis of their territorial control, that any invitation to participate in planning for their lands will come from them alone. Just as the Zapatistas, when faced with the issuance of an official pardon from the president in 1994, asked instead, "Who should ask for forgiveness and who should grant it?" (quoted in Esteva and Prakash 1998, 183), the Zoques are cutting through the assumptions that underpin participatory projects by in effect asking, "Who has the right to invite others to participate in whose plans?" Through assertions of territorially-based indigenous identity, the Zoques of the Chimalapas answer their implied question in ways that affirm their power to offer or deny hospitality (see Barnett 2005, 13).

Yet what unsettles this comfortable conclusion—one that, despite its radical premise of participation on the terms of those now sufficiently empowered to issue an invitation—is the missing question: "Who is this community that invites?" For while the Zoques' powerful inversion of business-as-usual appears to offer a salutary lesson for those seeking to reconfigure state and/or NGO-led development and conservation projects in ways that are more truly participatory, such a hopeful reading runs aground on the politics of difference, a politics that questions the "we" behind the invitation and that works "against the romance of community" (Joseph 2002; see also Gujit and Shah 1998; Mohan and Stokke 2000; Kumar and Corbridge 2002; Watts 2004). Emboldened by the currency of indigeneity, the Zoque leaders speak in the language of an unquestionable "we," and yet they (both men) owe their power not to a representative democracy, or even less to a communal decision-making process beyond the culturally-disjunctive ballot box, but to concessions made to San Miguel and Santa María by the state, and to agrarian decrees, the NRC experience, and the system of *usos y costumbres* that sanctions local political traditions, all combined with shrewd alliances and concessions. These factors have enabled the Zoque leaders, whose indigenous group represents only about 30 percent of the Chimalapas population, to centralize control in the two municipalities and to press territorial claims. Their position has been enhanced by strategically incorporating in-migrants from places as diverse as Michoacán and Chiapas, conferring on them status as *comuneros*, thereby expanding the leaders' political base and strengthening their claims to representation. The concentration of social power in the villages of Santa María and San Miguel has had the effect of muting social difference within the forest, such that many women, young people, in-migrants, residents of smaller villages, and nonindigenous populations are only incorporated into communal decision-making on terms that ensure the Zoque leaders' power.

These contingencies and complications are, finally, part and parcel of the always "conditional" nature of hospitality (see Popke 2003, 2004; Barnett 2005, 16).

The ability to extend hospitality, to invite other people in, depends first on territorial control or sovereignty—"mastery over one's space" (Barnett 2005, 13, paraphrasing Derrida)—and second on exclusion and discrimination, because "sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence"[8] (Derrida 2000, 55). Thus the Zoque leaders' ability to determine which NGOs are allowed to work in the Chimalapas rests on an affirmation of territorial sovereignty and indigeneity that requires exclusion, a process that like all identity formation is preceded by and constituted out of negation (Natter and Jones 1997). Importantly, this process is not only directed against Ortega and his state-affiliated colleagues, who live beyond the boundaries of the Chimalapas, but also to those living *in* the forest (literally the "others" within) who experience their own exclusionary violence based on gender, ethnicity, and original residence. These exclusions preclude a consensus over the "we" in the Zoque's invitation. Just as such masking of social difference in the name of totality prevents closure around the politics of invitation, so too does it further complicate critical assessments of participation, whether understood as a practice in need of rehabilitation or as the new tyranny.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the National Science Foundation under the auspices of research grant SBE-GRS # 024329-5, "Transnational Networks of NGOs." We thank other members of the research team whose work has been integral to the larger project: Sarah Moore, Laurel Smith, Margath Walker, and Jamie Winders. The assistance of staff at WWF-UK and WWF-Bosques, particularly David Ortega, is appreciated, as are the contributions of several interviewees from San Miguel Chimalapa and Santa María Chimalapa, particularly Cuauhtémoc Martinez Gutierrez. We also thank Thomas Bassett, Katherine Gibson, Richard Gilbreath, Andrew Grimes, Dorothea Kleine, Diana Liverman, Katharine McKinnon, Tad Mutersbaugh, Wolfgang Natter, Phil O'Neill, Jeffrey Popke, Patricia Price, Sarah Radcliffe, and Paul Robbins for their comments and assistance.

Notes

1. A few methodological comments are in order. This work is part of a larger project (Roberts, Jones, and Fröhling 2005) aimed at tracing the discourses and practices of modern managerialism (e.g., accountability, transparency, participation, entrepreneurship) as they circulate through NGO networks in and beyond Oaxaca. The project's aim is to understand the effects of managerialism upon NGOs' spatial strategies, organizational culture, and project design and implementation. The methodology involves organizational ethnographies to trace managerialism's flow through and impact on NGOs (for a parallel approach aimed at capturing the impact of product-certification standards as they move through transnational networks, see Mutersbaugh 2004). The case reported here is based on DW's daily work within the Oaxaca offices of Bosques. As part of his WWF-approved participant observation as a researcher, DW was permitted to attend meetings, conduct interviews, and shadow staff as they went about their tasks. He was also given access to numerous written reports. During the course of his work within the office, participation emerged as a key aspect of managerialism facing the Bosques staff. The empirical materials reported here are based on field notes and interviews collected during 2004 and 2005. Because of the sensitivity of some of the materials, and to comply with confidentiality assurances made to interviewees, we do not in most cases disclose their names or positions, nor do we reveal the precise dates on which the interviews occurred.
2. Even prior to its publication, Chapin's essay was being circulated and discussed in the offices of NGOs worldwide, including Bosques. As noted by Worldwatch Institute President Chris Flavin in the January/February issue of *World Watch Magazine* (2005, 5), Chapin's article attracted an "overwhelming" response, more than any other article since the magazine's inception in 1988.
3. One stake in the discussions is the extent to which researchers in political ecology should privilege political over ecological forces in explaining environmental change (Walker 2005). In our particular case this debate is a moot issue, for the case study at hand concerns not ecological transformations but social interactions, here between NGO staff and indigenous peoples. The "events" in question are therefore inherently political.
4. Some of PPP's ambitious Mexican projects have stalled in the wake of indigenous opposition, internal political squabbling, and financial constraints, but other parts, such as highway construction from Oaxaca City to the Isthmus, are being implemented piece by piece.
5. The agencies represented were the State Development Panning Committee (COPLADE), the Secretariat for Agricultural and Forest Development (SEDAF), the Secretariat for Social Development (SEDESOL), the Transportation Ministry (SCT), the Secretariat for Agriculture (SAGARPA) and its Extension Service (FIRCO), CONADEPI, and SEMARNAT. In addition to Bosques, there was also a representative from another Mexican NGO, the National Wildlife Council (CNF).
6. While not emanating directly from the Chimalapas forest, the 2006 political uprising in Oaxaca City shows that this commentator was not wrong in making pointed reference to the volatility of the region.
7. As Bruno Barras, a leader of the Yshiro-Ebitoso people of the Paraguayan Chaco, has noted, "The problem is that most NGOs treat us [indigenous and traditional people] as if we are babies still drinking from feeding bottles. They speak for us and design projects for us. Most times they are the main beneficiaries of the 'projects for the communities'" (Barras 2004, 49). Barras also raises the issue of who actually receives the resources NGOs obtain in the name of indigenous people, just as the Zoques had done in the case of MPS in the 1990s.

8. Thanks to Jeffrey Popke for pointing us toward this aspect of Derrida's formulation.

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