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## Political Ecology in Mexico: Explaining the Southern Roots of Sustainable Development and Indigenous Environmentalism

The tropical lowlands of southeastern Mexico (Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, and Veracruz) represented for post-1940 Mexican elites an untapped land of plentiful resources, ripe for development. Mexico's "marcha al mar" program hinged on the rational utilization of these resources for capitalist development and agricultural modernization. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, Mexico's tropical southeast also played a disproportionate role in the rise of ecology as a discipline and as a political movement in Mexico. Yet, this key space has largely been neglected by environmental historians who have instead focused on extraction and resource governance in the mesa central and the arid north. In this paper, I aim to center the Mexican tropics into national—and global—debates about nature, ecology, the politics of conservation, and the contested meanings of sustainable development.

Leading tropical ecologists, such as Victor Toledo, Alejandro Toledo and Arturo Gómez Pompa, and social anthropologists such as Miguel Bartolomé, Alicia Barabas and Gertrude Blom, conceived of the Mexican southeast as an imperiled ecosystem and social space threatened by dual, interlocking processes of ethnocide and ecocide. Many began to politicize ecology in the early 1970s to push the state to protect these fragile ecosystems by fostering and re-deploying indigenous technologies and practices deemed more ecologically harmonious. Institutions such as the Centro de Ecodesarrollo, the Instituto Nacional de Investigación sobre Recursos Bióticos, and the Instituto Mexicano de Recursos Naturales Renovables proved instrumental in shedding light on tropical destruction wrought by state-sanctioned capitalist development and proposing alternative development models.

By examining these discourses and proposals, I seek to reveal the leading role Mexican ecological experts played in the early formation of sustainable development, leading up to the UN's Brundtland report that made the phrase famous. I also aim to explore the co-constitution of elite-led environmentalism and later indigenous environmental justice struggles; it was the brief marriage of ecology and anthropology in the 1970s that helped animate incipient indigenous rights struggles and fostered our commonly held notions of indigenous culture and heritage as amenable to nature protection.