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Wildcat gold mining threatens sustainable forest management in Honduras

“We buy gold at a good price” – sign from Copén pulperia (corner store).

Unregulated “wildcat” gold mining has long been a cause of ecological damage in tropical forests, and the Sico-Paulaya region in northeast Honduras is no exception. As the global recession has taken its toll on Latin American economies, high gold prices and a lack of governance have made illegal mining increasingly attractive in Honduras, where poverty is widespread and legal employment opportunities scarce. Such mining frequently has negative ecological effects: in Suriname, associated increases in erosion were shown to shift riverine fish populations1, while studies in nearby French Guiana showed inferior soil microbial functioning after mining2. In Ghana, industrial gold mining was cited as the primary cause of forest loss in the latter half of the 20th century3. Finally, the processing of ore with toxic chemicals, such as cyanide and mercury, has strong ecosystem and health impacts4.

Though official figures are unavailable for Sico-Paulaya, anecdotal evidence from a variety of local and international observers indicate a staggering increase in the volume and intensity of gold mining in the region over the past two years, none of it regulated. Such mining ranges in intensity from artisanal prospectors using little more than shovels and pans, to industrial-scale excavators. No chemical processing has thus far been observed, but it would not be difficult to conceal, as the area is large and sparsely populated. Earnings are also difficult to estimate, but conversations with local community members indicate that a laborer can make at least double the normal daily wage for agricultural work ($10/day) by mining gold. Those with more capital and larger-scale equipment are likely earning much more.

One community where the effects of mining on sustainable forestry have been especially pronounced has been Copén, Iriona, Colón, near the Paulaya River on the Northeastern Coast of Honduras and adjacent to the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve (a UNESCO World Heritage site in Danger). Copén was recognized in October 2010 by the UN-FAO as a model for economic and ecological sustainability in its 15-year management and harvest of Bigleaf Mahogany (Swietenia macrophylla). The sale of Mahogany guitar parts to Taylor Guitars of California and other clients, as well as investment from many local and international partners (e.g. Honduran nonprofit Fundación Madera Verde; American non-profit GreenWood; U.S. Forest Service International Programs; Danish non-profit Forests of the World; United Nations Development Program Proyecto Ecosistemas) has allowed the community to purchase its own sawmill and make significant contributions to their own sustainable harvest and social development. These include the development of a state-of-the-art chain-of-custody timber-tracking system, purchase of accident insurance for workers and improvements in both education and local health care. Forestry income has and even contributed to the construction of a small-scale hydroelectric system in the nearby Maranones watershed, which provides electricity to the entire community.

Mining began on a small scale in the second half of 2011. The activity increased steadily until the present, where the most recent reports from Fundación Madera Verde and GreenWood staff indicate that every free room in Copén is now taken up by mining lodgers. Apart from their obvious social impacts,

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which have been well documented around the world, rampant mining activities pose a direct threat to the forest—and the community—on a number of levels. First, prospectors have caused significant stream erosion in their search for gold within the harvest area (pictures 3, 4). This damages the watershed and reduces the prospects of continued third-party certification of the community’s forestry operations. In addition, the high, short-term income derived from prospecting typically prevents the most skilled and experienced sawyers from engaging in sustainable timber harvesting, as the financial returns from mining are more immediate and the bureaucratic process less intense. Combined with a growing abundance of illegal land invaders within the harvest area, who are clearing land for ranching and farming and becoming more organized, the impact on future timber management and harvesting is uncertain.

Fundación Madera Verde, GreenWood, and community leaders are seeking increased government regulation of mining activity and illegal land invasions in the region. However, a lack of governance, poor infrastructure and cumbersome bureaucratic legal processes—combined with a general lack of trust in government institutions and the pervasive regional influence of drug cartels weaken the potential for such action to be effective. We urge strong leadership and a well-coordinated plan to ensure that mining and other illegal activities do not undermine nearly two decades of active forest management and a thriving, sustainable timber harvesting operation.

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