

Central America Indígena Project

Land Rights and Stability in Indigenous Societies of Central America

Jerome E. Dobson, PI; Peter H. Herlihy, Co-PI;

With Taylor A. Tappan, Matthew L. Fahrenbruch, and Aida Ramos Viera



Introduction

The *CA Indígena* project of the of the University of Kansas (KU) and the American Geographical Society (AGS) formed a collaboration with Universidad Pedagógica Nacional Francisco Morazán in Honduras; the Universidad de San Carlos in Guatemala; the Universidad Nacional in Costa Rica; and with indigenous federations, government agencies, and NGOs. Together we operate the *Mesa Geográfica Indígena*, a research center at UPNFM where indigenous and other university students collaborate in our applied geographic research and field work.



Our **primary research objective** seeks to understand geographic factors that cause stability or instability in indigenous municipalities (*municipios*) of Central America. We assist indigenous groups in their land governance, while researching why some indigenous groups are more successful at achieving cultural, political, territorial, and environmental stability than others.

Scale and Methodology

To understand indigenous territorial jurisdictions we research at **two different scales**:
 a) the **regional**, using mostly census results, with the municipality as our unit of analysis; and
 b) the **local**, researching specific territorial jurisdictions of indigenous populations.

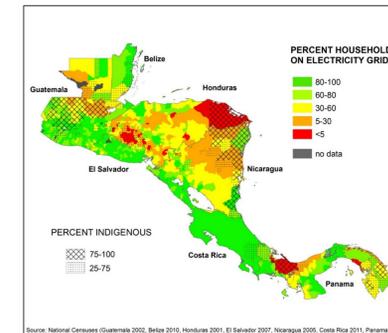
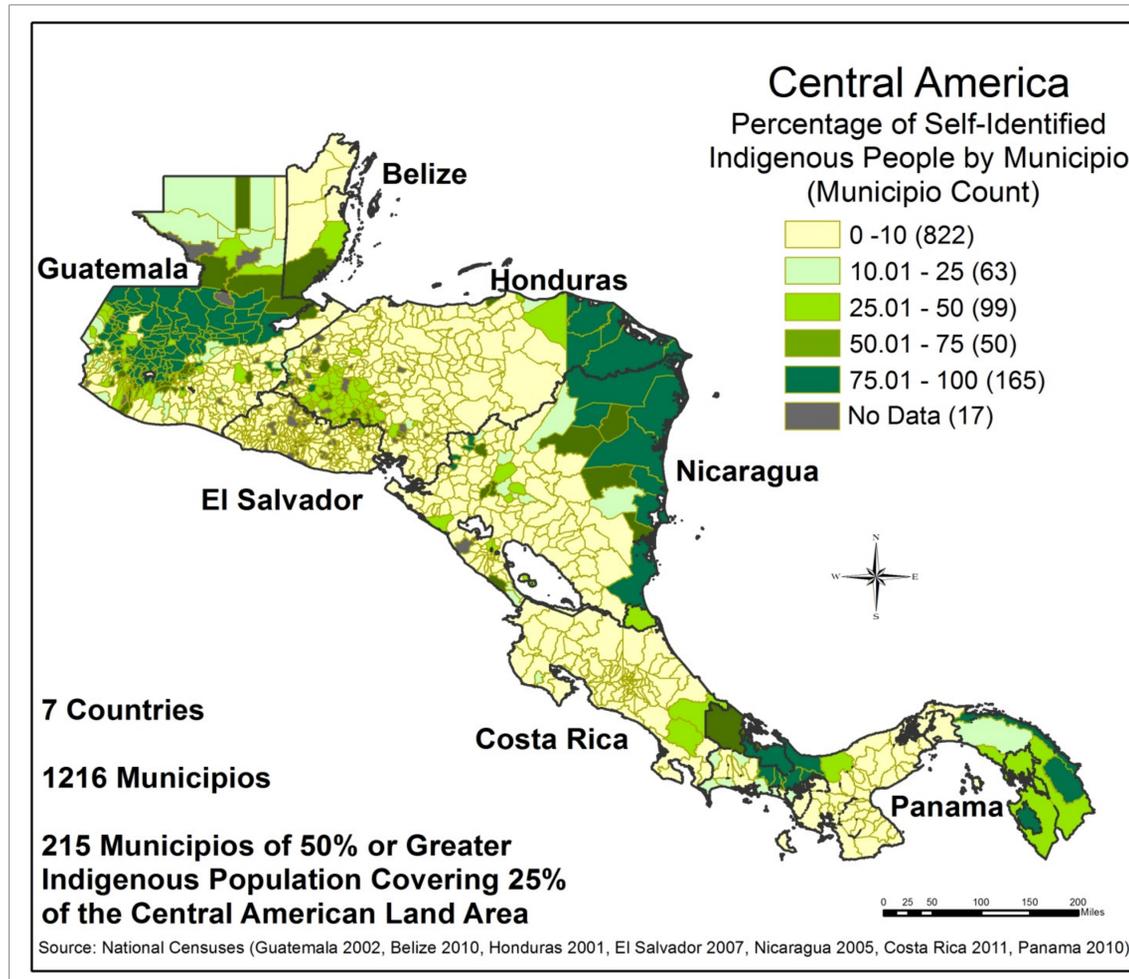
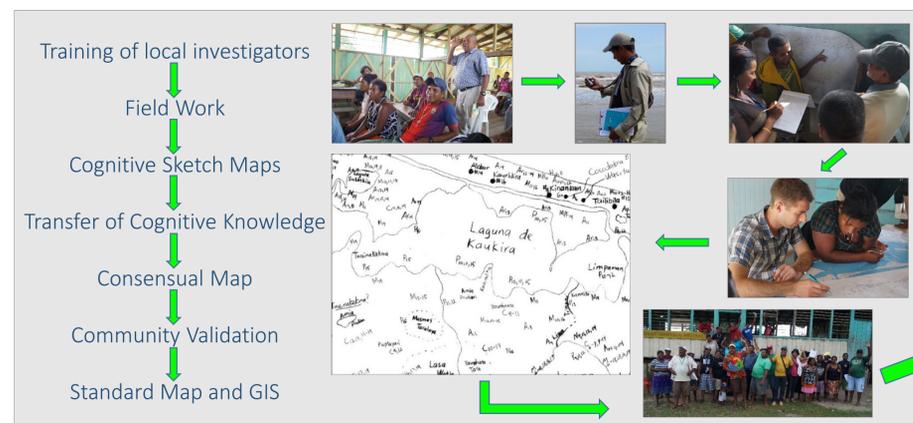
Regional Level: Indigenous Municipios

We develop baseline geographic data at the regional and local levels, producing new maps and digital coverages to understand land and cultural stability in indigenous *municipios* of Central America. We assign attribute values categorically to the 1216 *municipios* in our GIS database with select variables to construct a land stability index. (SEE PERCENT INDIGENOUS BY MUNICIPIO MAP TO RIGHT). In turn we map land stability index variables as they relate to *municipios* and other indigenous territorial jurisdictions in Central America.

Participatory Research Mapping (PRM)

The methodology involves investigators, elected by their communities, working with university students, professors, and other experts, to convert cognitive spatial knowledge into consensual maps, and then into standardized maps (Herlihy and Knapp 2003), and now into digital formats.

We train "**Local Geographers**" through our workshops and field work to collect geographic information and to draw sketch maps of their territories. They work with the researchers to transform the information into standard maps and other data that are validated through an iterative process of community revision and approval before the results are published.



Local Level: Indigenous Territorial Jurisdictions

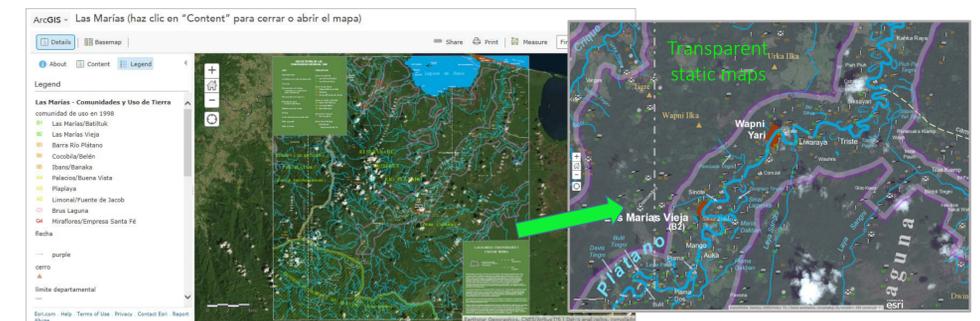
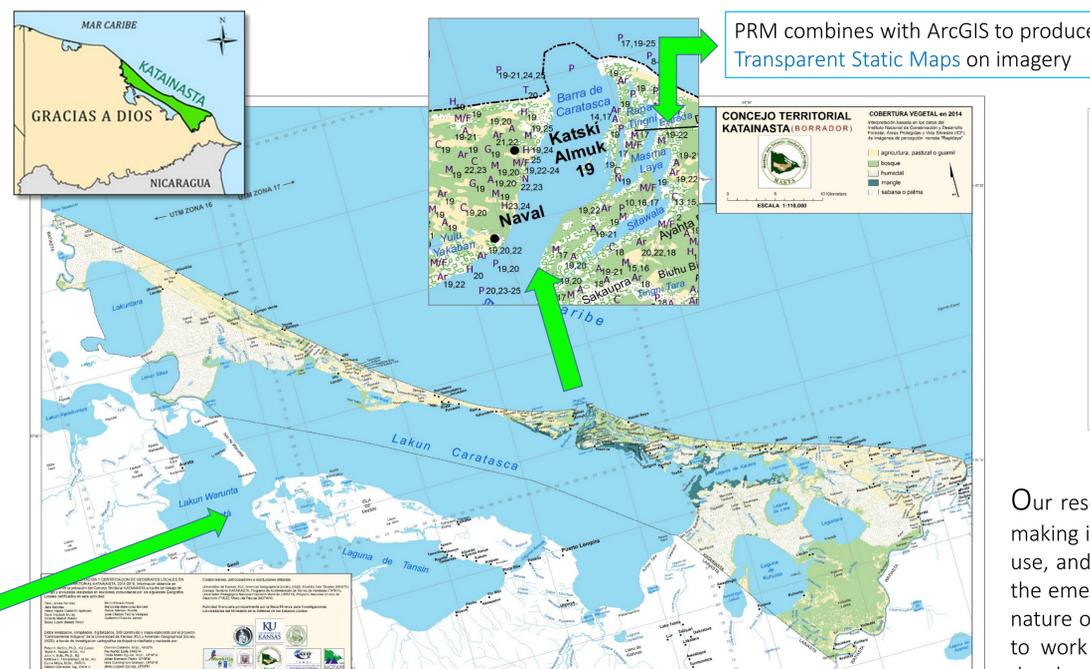
We hypothesize that secure land ownership is a key factor affecting the stability of indigenous communities. We work in the Mosquitia region of Honduras; Sacatepéquez, Guatemala; and in Alto Chirripó, Costa Rica, where we investigate Biosphere Reserves, *Concejos Territoriales*, *Municipios*, *Tierras Comunes*, and *Territorios Indígenas*. Here we focus only on one:

Concejos Territoriales - KATAINASTA

We completed an in-depth PRM study of *KATAINASTA*, the first of 12 *concejos territoriales* – new inter-community property titles established for the Honduran Miskitu people since 2012. They award unprecedented expanses of territory and autonomy to the Miskitu people, covering 17,000 km² of Honduras.

CA Indígena Project Website

We use ArcGIS Online to combine satellite imagery with PRM data to create **transparent static maps** in a portal that is frequently updated, shows historic resource use, and reflects indigenous stakeholders' place in the research.



Results

Our research provides new baseline geographic information to support decision-making in the region and to evaluate land stability related to governance, resource use, and other salient factors. Our initial results include a better understanding of the emergence of new territorial jurisdictions in the region and of the complicated nature of creating local management and governance structures. We will continue to work closely with indigenous, university, government, and NGO agencies to develop multi-scale geographic information of Central America's lands and peoples.

