

# Ancient Maya Past in Peril

## DEFINING THE LIMITS OF ACCEPTABLE CHANGE

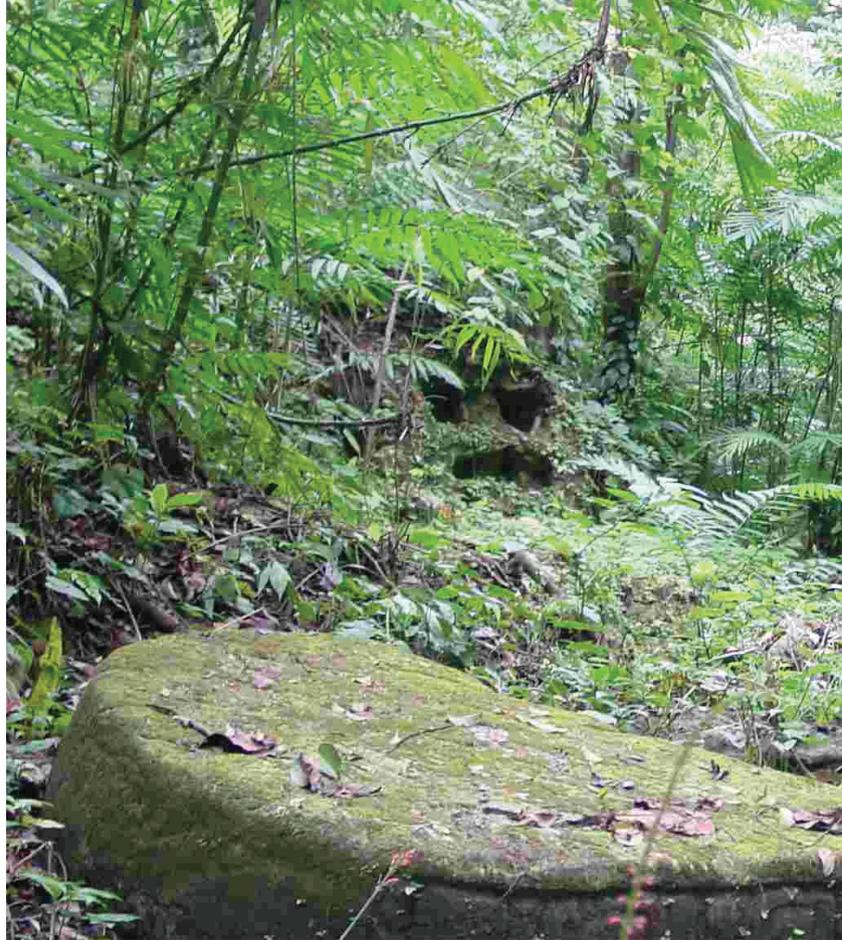
**T**here is no word for “tourism” in Chol, a Prehispanic language still spoken by more than 10,000 Maya living along the southern reaches of the Usumacinta River, which separates Guatemala and the Mexican state of Chiapas. Yet, due to a recent surge in interest in the development of two vast, ancient Maya cities—Yaxchilán and Piedras Negras—the need to come to terms with tourism and the encroachment of the modern world has become of vital importance. How such changes will impact this region must be addressed if this fragile landscape is to be preserved for future generations.

Settled in the early years of the first millennium A.D., Yaxchilán and Piedras Negras rose to preeminence on the banks of the Usumacinta in the sixth and seventh centuries A.D., reaching their apogee in the mid-eighth century when most of the structures we see today—temples, pyramids, and ballcourts—were constructed.

In antiquity, the Usumacinta served as a vast commercial highway for dugout canoes laden with exotic goods. The sites prospered from, and often competed for, control of the lucrative riverine trade in salt and *kakaw* (cocoa); cotton for clothing; obsidian for knife blades; and jade, feathers, and shells to make jewelry and royal headdresses.

In addition to their splendid architectural features, the sites have played a key role in Maya studies, yielding abundant inscriptions—among the longest in the Maya world—that have provided key clues in the decipherment of a complex writing system. Today, an estimated 60 percent of the ancient Maya glyphs can be read.

Since their construction more than 1,200 years ago, however, time has taken its toll on the two sites. Both have suffered from exposure to the elements, exuberant vegetation, and the predations of looters. Piedras Negras, in particular, has suffered more recent structural deterioration and destabilization due to poor excavation techniques employed in the early decades of the twentieth century. Though the sites had suffered from the ravages of time, until recently, their remoteness had protected them from the hordes of visitors who frequent better-known Maya sites such as Chichén Itza in Yucatán and Tikal in the Petén region of Guatemala. But this may soon change.



AN ALTAR AND FALLEN STELA, ABOVE, LAY CLOKED IN JUNGLE IN FRONT OF PIEDRAS NEGRAS' K-5 PYRAMID. A CARVED LIMESTONE LINTEL FROM YAXCHILÁN, LEFT, NOW IN THE COLLECTION OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM, DEPICTS THE EIGHTH-CENTURY RULER BIRD JAGUAR IV WITH A PRISONER FROM THE KINGDOM OF WAK'AB. PARTICIPANTS OF WMF'S MAYA WORKSHOP POSE IN FRONT OF YAXCHILÁN'S MAGNIFICENT TEMPLE 33, BUILT IN THE MID-EIGHTH CENTURY.





Because of their poor state of preservation and the threats posed by uncontrolled tourism and the ever-looming possibility of dam construction on the Usumacinta River, the sites of Yaxchilán and Piedras Negras were placed on WMF's 2002 list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*.

To adequately address the conservation problems facing these sites, however, requires far more than a commitment on the part of WMF and the preservation community. It is crucial that any efforts to preserve the sites have the backing and active participation of the various government and regulatory agencies that control them, as well as the support of the local communities who live in their midst.

To begin the dialogue, WMF convened a workshop this past February to bring together all of those who have an interest in the long-term preservation of two of the Maya world's most important cities.

Titled *Taller: Herramientas para el Uso y Protección de Recursos Naturales y Culturales* (Workshop: Tools for the Use and Protection of Natural and Cultural Resources), the symposium was held in the Chol village of Frontera Corozal. The three-day workshop, conducted by Craig MacFarland, an independent consultant who has designed management plans for endangered sites such as the Galapagos Islands, and Jim Wurz, of the University of Colorado, focused on issues pertaining to conservation and sustainable environmental development—issues that recently have been combined under the rubric,



MEXICO

GUATEMALA

Usumacinta

● Piedras Negras

● Yaxchilán

Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC).

The field of preservation has undergone a dramatic transformation in recent years. No longer are conservators concerned simply with repairing a monument or great work of art; they now examine the entire context in which a cultural treasure exists. For the Maya sites in question—Yaxchilán and Piedras Negras—this context includes a vast and complex ecological system that embraces the sites as well as the needs of indigenous peoples who live in their shadows.

LAC is a method by which site development decisions can be made. In short, it is a recipe for evaluating various types of site exploitation and deciding what is acceptable and what is not. How much wood, for instance, can be extracted from a forest, yet leave it capable of replenishing itself? The same question can be asked with regard to a cultural resource. How many visitors can a site accommodate before it becomes an eroding asset?

Using an enhanced form of LAC that also takes into account more recent thinking on environmental management, MacFarland and Wurz outlined various scenarios for site development and management. They highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of each scenario based on their own, firsthand experience with park development around the globe.

More than 30 representatives of the preservation community participated in the workshop, along with some 60 local Chol and Lacandon. The latter, from Lacanhá and Bonampak, traveled several hours each day to attend the sessions. In addition to listening to a series of presentations, participants were invited to break up into working groups to address specific conservation and development issues. Presented with a variety of sites and site problems, they were asked to determine such things as how many visitors could the sites handle at a given time without further damaging archaeological remains? What toll would such visitation exact on local resources—water, food, rainforest, and wildlife? What sort of infrastructure would be needed to increase the capacity to accommodate visitors, yet leave the environment surrounding each site relatively unscathed? Such group discussions gave rise to thoughtful and animated discussions about the best way to “have it all,” to reap rewards with the smallest possible cost to the environment.

“No one has ever asked us what we thought about development, planning, and conservation,” said Manuel Gomez, a Chol community leader in Frontera Corozal. “When will you come back to teach us some more? We know we do not have the tools necessary to care for our sites.”

WMF has agreed to sponsor a conservation training program for guards at Yaxchilán and Piedras Negras, as well as those from Bonampak. Bonampak—known for its exquisite suite of mid-eighth-century murals—has recently been opened up for tourism. Historically, it was a six-hour horseback ride into the site. Today, there is a site museum, nature trail, and tram to take visitors to the site.

Beyond these measures, WMF hopes to undertake a series of interventions, engaging locals in the conservation process. However, there are no educational offerings beyond the sixth grade in Frontera Corozal—those seeking higher education must travel to Palenque, two hours away, or to Tuxtla, the state capital. While historically, providing higher education has not been part of the mission of the World Monuments Fund, increasing the level of educational attainment is critical if project directors are to look to the local population to participate in site preservation. Those engaging in conservation must have a firm grounding in the sciences.

The workshop was a beginning. WMF hopes the seeds take root and lead to the development of a long-term strategy for the preservation of two of the Maya world's most important sites.

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