

# Mapping the Darién in Panama

The Darién region, with a total land surface of 16,803 km<sup>2</sup>, is the largest province in Panama, the most sparsely populated, and the least well known. It is a region of dense tropical rainforest. Its indigenous population of Emberá, Wounaan, and Kuna live in settlements scattered along the numerous river valleys; their villages are interspersed with communities of the descendants of escaped slaves from Africa, called Darienitas.

Until 20 years ago, there were no roads in the Darién; now there is a gravel highway cutting through its center down as far as the town of Yaviza, 100 km short of the Colombian border. This 100-km stretch is the only uncompleted piece of the Pan-American Highway, which connects overland commerce between North and South America. While most of the traditional inhabitants of the Darién travel by river, the highway has opened up the region to loggers, cattle ranchers, and landless peasants from the overcrowded interior provinces. This influx of population is threatening both the indigenous people and the natural forest.

Since the time of the Spanish conquest, those of European descent have called these lands “empty quarters,” as if they had no inhabitants. Sadly, this colonial ignorance of indigenous peoples has persisted into the present. Indian lands considered vacant are prime targets for government colonization schemes. The Indians have been made “invisible,” and their claims to the territory they inhabit are not recognized.

This is beginning to change. Indian groups throughout the shrinking tropical forests of Central America are presently fighting to gain secure title to their territories. Conflicts over indigenous land rights have become one of the most pressing social issues in the region.

In early 1993, the Congreso Emberá-Wounaan-Kuna began working with the Centro de Estudios y Acción Social Panameño (CEASPA) on a project to map indigenous land use in the Darién. From May through October 1993, a team consisting of two professionally trained cartographers and 23 local surveyors (*encuestadores*) made maps that meticulously depict river systems and show where local communities hunt, fish, farm, cut firewood, gather building materials, and collect medicines. The maps clearly indicate the extent of the territory utilized by the indigenous peoples of the Darién and the ways in which they manage their natural resources.

The final map of the Darién, completed in March 1994, is crucial to discussions about the future of the region, which stands on the brink of massive and potentially devastating change. Although the proposed Pan-American Highway would cut through the very heart of their territory, Indians have thus far been given little voice in the matter. The mapping process and public forums are all attempts to change this situation. “We are making [our lands and their uses] clear to our government,” said Leopoldo Bacorizo, the General Chief of the Congreso Emberá-Wounaan-Kuna, “so that it can understand and coordinate with us on solutions to problems that involve us.”

— Mac Chapin



An indigenous encuestador (surveyor) with the Darién project drew this map with the assistance of villagers, who located the places they farm, hunt, fish, and gather medicinal plants and materials for houses, canoes, and crafts. Maps like this were combined with one another and with aerial photographs and older government maps to develop a single, accurate, authoritative map showing land uses for the entire area. Drawn by Requildo Cunanpio, courtesy Congreso Emberá-Wounaan-Kuna. Photo by Nicanor González, courtesy Mac Chapin

Mac Chapin is Director of The Center for the Support of Native Lands, an organization which works with indigenous land-tenure issues in Latin America.