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Review of *The Maya Tropical Forest: People, Parks, and Ancient Cities* by James D. Nations

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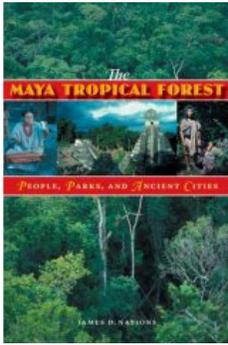
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Reviews**The Maya Tropical Forest: People, Parks, and Ancient Cities**

James D. Nations
University of Texas Press
ISBN: 978-0-292-71282-9
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At the center of the historic and contemporary Maya homeland in Central America lies the largest tropical rain forest north of the Amazon, a hotspot of biodiversity and an archaeological treasure trove. Split between Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico, management and conservation of cultural and ecological resources in the Maya Tropical Forest are at a critical juncture. While scientists and conservationists seek to preserve the area for future generations, regional economic and population pressures drive people further into the forest. The establishment of several parks, protected areas, and reserves has led to significant progress toward the preservation of the area, but much work remains.

Drawing on decades of experience in the area, Nations provides an excellent overview of the issues currently facing the Selva Maya. He demonstrates that, as an anthropogenic forest, humans have had an important role in management of the region throughout history. Maya civilizations in the past built great cities such as Tikal and Palenque and left their legacy imprinted on the face of the forest. The descendants of ancient Maya, living in and on the fringes of the Selva Maya have maintained a long cultural tradition of use, harvest, and care of their tropical forest. In recent history, a variety of groups, including mahogany cutters, chicle harvesters, farmers, ranchers, and even oil prospectors have all contributed their influence to shape the landscape to its present form. Despite these human impacts, the Maya Tropical Forest is home to thousands of species, many of which are unique to the area.

In *The Maya Tropical Forest*, Nations divides his analysis into three sections. The first focuses on the region's human and environmental history. From Pre-Columbian civilizations, through the period of Conquistadors, to more recent revolutionary movements, Nations vividly illustrates the human influences on the forest. He also gives a thorough description of the major animal and plant species that are found in the area. In the second section, Nations discusses the contemporary relationship of stakeholder countries to their portion of the Maya Tropical Forest. Putting people first, he begins by focusing on cultures that live near and use the forest. Only then does he focus on protected areas, their impact on local groups, and the effectiveness of conservation efforts. At the end of each chapter in this section, Nations turns his attention to the cultural patrimony found in each country, providing brief descriptions of major archaeological sites. In the final section, Nations ponders the future of the Selva Maya and suggests how a balance between human and natural biological needs might be achieved.

Well-researched and filled with first-hand anecdotes, *The Maya Tropical Forest* is written for an audience that includes scholars, conservationists, and tourists. A delightful read, the book artfully intertwines Nations' experiences, such as getting captured by Marxist Guatemalan guerillas, and his ethnographic recordings of Maya songs about the tropical forest with informative commentary on the region's cultural and ecological diversity and the issues associated with protection efforts. For a person first visiting the area, *The Maya Tropical Forest* is prerequisite reading. For scholars and conservationists, the book is an invaluable reference due to its broad scope, its detailed discussion of humanity's past, present, and future role in the Selva Maya, and how current issues of use and conservation will decide the forest's ultimate fate.

Review by David Greenwalt, Department of Anthropology at the University of Georgia