

Garifuna survivors of the Cayos Cochinos

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/garifuna-survivors-of-the-cayos-cochinos>

Rights Action recommends this story about racism, repression and land-theft against the indigenous Garifuna people of Honduras, about tourism economic imperialism (including the *Supervivientes* Spain “reality” TV show), and about the corruption and repression of successive U.S., Canadian and European-backed ‘open-for-global-business’ regimes and local economic elites in power.

*“To maintain the illusion, during the filming of *Supervivientes* of a deserted, virgin paradise that the show’s producers are so keen on selling to their European television audiences, guns have been shot, fishermen have nearly died drowning, and a long list of other acts of violence and abuse has rotted the relationship between outsiders and locals.”*

It is a moving report about the history and richness, tenacity and dignity of the Garifuna people.

It is a report that reminds readers of the breadth and depth of what economic imperialism (including tourism, mining and resource extraction, mono-crop food production, textiles and shoes, etc.) actually is, that is often put in place or kept in place through land theft, violence and corruption.

Economic imperialism that is imposed by the policies and actions of global companies, banks and their local business partners, and of governments, police and armies.

Economic imperialism that – whether we admit it or not, whether we know it or not - characterizes many aspects of the lifestyles of the richer nations and peoples of our global human community.

The Survivors of Cayos Cochinos

By Carlos Martinez, El Faro news, July 31, 2022

<https://elfaro.net/en/202207/centroamerica/26304/The-Survivors-of-Cayos-Cochinos.htm>



In a Caribbean paradise along the Honduran coast, the Garifuna people are defending their right to survival on ancestral territory from business conglomerates, the Army, and a European reality show seeking to profit from the natural beauty of the Cayos Cochinos archipelago.

1. The Battle of Cayo Palomo

On February 22, 2019, a battle broke out on an idyllic island in the Caribbean, just off the coast of Honduras.

That day, residents of the Garifuna fishing community of Nueva Armenia set sail for war in a fleet of dugout canoes and lanchas, small wooden fishing boats with outboard motors used to take tourists on coastal excursions. They brought with them an arsenal of drums and sacred sahumerio incense, and set out to fight for land they claimed was rightfully theirs.

They stormed Cayo Palomo before the Coast Guard could stop them. They took the beach, drumming the ancient rhythms of their warrior ancestors.

Then the Italians came out to dance.

The Italians were on the island to compete in a popular Spanish reality television show called *Supervivientes* (Spain's version of *Survivor*), filmed twice a year in the Cayos Cochinos archipelago, a smattering of cays northeast of the Caribbean port city of La Ceiba, in northern Honduras.

Participants in the show —sometimes Spaniards, sometimes Italians— compete with each other to “survive” on “deserted” islands: they face challenges, fall in love, fight, make alliances, and live lives of passion and drama, all to the delight of European audiences.

Apparently, the Italians thought the Garifuna landing was just part of the show, and came out in their bikinis and bare chests to wriggle around to the rhythm of the drums as best they knew how, while the camera crew orbited the group, not knowing what to do.

One of the Garifuna who landed on the island that day recorded the scene with her phone. At first glance, it's impossible to discern what's happening: dozens of Black fishermen, dressed in

simple clothes, drums beating, the Italians giving it their all; a community leader, on her knees in the sand, yelling demands into a megaphone; a group of soldiers with rifles at the ready, watching the scene unfold from their motorboat, not knowing what to do; a producer pacing frantically along the beach, in shock at the realization that none of what's happening is part of the show.

When someone finally puts an end to the chaos, the Garifuna warriors and the Italian TV stars have already started mingling and hitting it off, some teaching others to move their hips, and everyone else applauding after each dance.

“Hey! Stop drumming for a minute!”

In the video are the voices of Eduard, the leader of the Nueva Armenia fishermen's association, and Ana Mabel, head of the local land defense committee, as they break through the crowd: two young Garifuna organizers, gifted orators with a rage left fermenting for years.

Two disoriented producers come over to the young organizers, hoping to make sense of the situation. “We told them that our problem wasn't with them, it was with the Foundation — that the Foundation had carried out a series of aggressions against our community, and that the community had never received any of the proceeds from the rent paid to use the island for filming,” Ana Mabel recalls.



Carolina Castillo, 68, was born and raised in Nueva Armenia. As a child, she says the Garifuna people used to live freely off the land. “I haven't been back here to Cayo Bolaños for years,” she says as she walks among tourists. “My parents used to fish here and we would take a break before leaving for Cayo Chachahuate.

That all changed when the Coast Guard became violent and no longer let us come here. Today I have to enter as a tourist, like everyone else.”

More will be said about “the Foundation” later. For now, suffice it to say that it’s the organization that administers the Cayos Cochinos archipelago.

The Garifuna consider the islands part of their ancestral territory, where their parents and grandparents and great grandparents fished for over two centuries, and that they therefore consider it unjust and unacceptable that during the filming of *Supervivientes*, the Honduran Coast Guard, in the company of soldiers, systematically prevents them from fishing anywhere near the islands, lest their presence contaminate the illusion of a deserted, virgin paradise that the show’s producers are so keen on selling to their European television audiences.

To maintain this illusion, guns have been shot, fishermen have nearly died drowning, and a long list of other acts of violence and abuse has rotted the relationship between outsiders and locals.

That day, when the Garifuna landed on Cayo Palomo, the filming stopped. The production crew evacuated the jovial Italians off the cay, and then filed a complaint with the Foundation, which had rented the archipelago to the film crew without warning them that a group of poor Black fishermen might suddenly lay siege to the island in protest.

The Garifuna took the opportunity to take to the cays and fish, throwing lines and casting their chinchorros —traditional fishing nets— and ending the day with a celebratory communal dinner of fresh fried fish. For a few hours, Cayo Palomo was theirs once more. Then they packed up their drums and gill nets and headed back to Nueva Armenia.

The Garifuna people embrace their history of resilience and strive to adhere to the principles of love for the land and respect for life. “We have a spirit of liberty,” say the land defense committees of the Garifuna nation.

Roughly two weeks later, on March 10, 2019, Eduard, Ana Mabel, and other leaders in the community received a letter summoning them “to discuss work-related issues.” The letter wasn’t from the producers of *Supervivientes*, or from the owners of Cayo Palomo, but from Captain Henry Geovany Matamoros, frigate commander of the First Infantry Battalion of the Honduran Navy, who, after sending them “kind and cordial greetings” and wishes that “the divine creator of the universe may provide [them] with rich and abundant blessings,” summoned them to appear the following day at the military garrison in the municipality of La Ceiba.

And that’s where the story stops being so quaint.

2. When “Mine” Arrived in Paradise

October 2021. As we float along the Caribbean coastline in a wooden cayuco, or dugout canoe, Pepito looks toward the shore for a few seconds, checks the height of the sun, looks back to the shore, looks at some trees, puts his paddle back in the water to align the boat with who knows what, then tells Lala to jump in: “If I tell him there's a rock, there's a rock; if I tell him to jump, he has to jump.”

Without hesitating, Lala dives into the water, bobs back up alongside the canoe and grabs the hooks he uses to catch lobsters before strapping an oxygen tank on his back and disappearing into the deep.

Pepito, 56, is a veteran Garifuna fisherman and an expert in the art of handline casting. When sober, he's one of Nueva Armenia's best marcadores, or “spotters,” and a coveted lobster-hunting companion. He's never been keen on diving, but he inherited an equally important skill from his father: Pepito is a human compass, and knows exactly where to find the underwater rocks where lobsters tend to congregate — rocks he has never seen, but which he knows by name. “Down here is Corozo,” he tells me. “It's a really big rock. Sometimes Corozo can be a bit stingy, but when he provides, he provides.”

Where all I see is water and more water, Pepito sees ridges and rises and signs of things entirely invisible to me. As we float along, he tells me when we pass over El Cañal, then La Cubera, then La Ariola, identifying each lobster rock with only the instrument of his own eye and the knowledge passed down to him from his father and grandfather, and from his grandfather's father before him.

Then there's hunger, which can be an undeniably powerful instrument in its own right, especially when the only way to satisfy it is to learn to listen and speak to the sea.



Luis Martínez, 19, a fishermen's assistant. Photo: Carlos Barrera/El Faro

As Lala chases lobsters 50 feet below, the job of the spotter is to follow the bubbles the scuba tank sends to the surface, so that when the diver comes up, the canoe is close by. If the trail of bubbles keeps moving, Pepito says in a voice so soft it might as well be a thought, "he's hunting." But when the bubbles stay in one spot, he mumbles, "that's when Lala is killing."

Pepito throws a line and bait-hook into the water, and while he waits for something to bite, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a little bottle of Tatascán —the most caustic and savage sugarcane moonshine one can find around these parts— and downs a couple of big gulps, twisting and puckering his face. He kisses the bottle of Tatascán, recounting his years as a sailor on a big ship, when he roamed the Atlantic and set foot on new shores, discovering new islands where he learned that his mother tongue, Garifuna, was spoken in other places, beyond the borders of Honduras.

"Look at the sea. It's so clear and calm," he says, sipping from the bottle. He starts complaining about how his mother-in-law keeps him up all night talking in her sleep. Then suddenly he realizes that he's lost track of the bubbles. There's no sign of Lala. For a diver to stop making bubbles is a very bad sign. Pepito squints his eyes, scanning the sea for any sign of Lala. He puts his paddle in the water, then reorients back to the spot where Lala first dove in. Nothing. No bubbles. "I don't like it, I don't like it," he mumbles, looking out at the seam which moves like some living creature, slapping the paddle and swaying the canoe. Sitting low in the cayuco, the waves make the shoreline disappear and reappear, and Pepito is filled with foreboding.

In the distance, amid the sea spume and surf spray, Lala finally surfaces, cursing in frustration at finding the canoe so far away. Pepito paddles full speed toward Lala, who boards the boat holding only a single lobster: the only catch for the day. Sometimes, Corozo can be a bit stingy.

* * *

Lala —36 years old, tall and skinny with long dreadlocks— has been fishing since he was 12. He decided not to follow in the footsteps of his father, who's work also involved going out to sea, not for fish, but to bring back "other things," Lalo says — other things worth much more money than lobsters. He tried to become a professional soccer player, but that didn't pan out, and now he says he's finally thinking about "heading north."



Lala prepares a dugout canoe for a fishing excursion. Pepito, the skipper, waits for departure, still shaking off the effects of last night's drinking. Photo: Carlos Barrera/El Faro

His business is simple, or at least simply put: Lala tells me he doesn't have his own cayuco. Instead, he uses his boss's, who also finances the oxygen tanks. In exchange, Lala sells all the lobsters he catches to his boss—and only his boss—at a lower price than other buyers would typically pay. He gets about \$11 per pound of meaty Caribbean lobster tail, which the canoe skipper then sells to resorts and tourist restaurants.

The cayuco is a long, narrow hull of wood, hand-hewn and propelled by hand-made paddles, and a nylon sail affixed to a hand-carved mast.

Lala makes a living catching lobster, but other predators prowl the waters here too. Sitting in front of his mother's corner store in the company of two veteran fishermen, Lala tells me about his encounters with these other big fish while the others nod and interject their own stories.

Predators protecting tourism interests and *Supervivientes*

In 2019, during the filming of *Supervivientes*, Lala was diving near Cayo Bolaño when a Coast Guard boat spotted him, motored over, and told him to hand over his diving gear. "If you take my gear, that's like taking my hands," Lala pleaded. "How will I feed my family?"

The soldiers were unrelenting. But rather than hand over his equipment, Lala decided to destroy it: he smashed his mask against the canoe and slashed his scuba fins with a knife. He also refused to let them confiscate his catch, dumping the ten live lobsters he had in his boat back into the water, and tossing his 12 pounds of sea snails in after them.

That day, the Coast Guard let him leave, but after hours of diving, he was forced to return home empty-handed.

“They told me that it was illegal to fish there, but when the reality show is filming, and the Spaniards and Italians come, they get to scoop up whatever’s in front of them. They can take whatever they want. I’ve seen it. They even eat the sea urchins and snakes.”

He grits his teeth and tightens his face as he recounts his run-ins with the Coast Guard, which everyone here simply calls “the Foundation boat.”



The Cayos Cochinos archipelago encompasses 16 islands of the Caribbean coast of Honduras. Garifuna people have lived there for generations. Photo: Carlos Barrera/El Faro

In 2018, Lala says, one of his friends bought a small outboard motor to fish farther out at sea. The first day, they took it out and caught 16 lobsters and four pigfish. On their way back to Nueva Armenia, they were once again intercepted by the Foundation’s patrol boat. This time, the soldiers ordered them to board. Lala told one of the soldiers, “Why don’t you follow us to shore and then we’ll see who’s who.” The soldier replied: “So you’re not gonna get in the boat, boy? Is that what you’re mumbling, negro?” Lala was fed up, and dove overboard, goading the soldier from the water: “Dive in then and we’ll see who makes it back out.”

The soldier pulled off his boots, pulled off his socks, unbuttoned his shirt and... stayed put in his boat, reflecting, perhaps, on what a terrible idea it would be to jump into the ocean to fight a Garifuna diver like Lala. Then the Coast Guard abandoned Lala at sea over a mile from shore, towed his canoe, and hauled away his companion and the day’s catch.

Another fisherman spotted Lala swimming toward the beach and came to his aid. The soldiers tossed the newly purchased motor into the ocean and never returned the confiscated canoe.

Just like the last time the Coast Guard had intercepted Lala, that day, the sea and its islands were off-limits to locals — they were filming another episode of *Survivor Spain*.

Two years earlier, in 2016, the coast patrol found Lala and his fishing companions taking a break on Cayo Culebra: after a long day of work, they had stopped at the little island to find some shade and prepare something to eat. This time, the soldiers forced them to lie face down with their mouths in the sand as they pointed their rifles at their backs. The soldiers kicked Lala's two friends as they lay on the ground and forced one of them to take off his earrings, then tossed them into the bushes.

Lala was spared a beating because his father, who was still alive at the time, was a well-respected figure in the community. But they stole his earrings and his diving mask. The other two fishermen spent weeks nursing bruised ribs.

A few weeks later, the Coast Guard again intercepted Lala, along with three other divers, and dumped the 80 lobsters they had caught that day back into the sea. The soldiers made them watch as they tossed the lobsters one by one into the water.

Another time, Lala and his fishing crew were caught with a sack of lobsters, and the soldier who seized the bag told Lala he would give them away to people in need. Lala quipped, "You think I'd be out here diving if I wasn't in need?" It didn't matter. He and the others were sent before the municipal authorities in La Ceiba. Since no judge was available to see them, they spent the night in the police barracks. The next day they were let go. When they went to sign for their release, they saw their lobster sack in the office. Empty.

* * *

In a hidden corner of Nueva Armenia in a small, wooden shack lives a solitary old man, José. Darkness reigns inside the tin-roofed hut, even during the day. In one of two rooms lie a simple wooden cot, a pile of clothes, and a black battery-operated radio.

In the other room is a coffin. The old man is saving it for himself, but in the meantime, before he passes on, he uses it as a trunk to store his memories: papers and things the man once wrote or read, protected by plastic bags.



José, 83, is an elder among the residents of Nueva Armenia. He lives alone in a small house and when he was younger, like his ancestors, worked as a fisherman. Photo: Carlos Barrera/El Faro

José was a fisherman his whole life, just like his father and grandfather, until a few years ago when his health forced him back to shore. José is now blind. A fine white film covers his eyes, transforming the world into a blur of silhouettes. Blindness is common among fishermen here, who work their whole lives in the salt and sun.

But José often returns to the sea in his mind, sailing along the coast, breathing the warm salty air and soaking in the hot sun. His weathered face softens into a smile, like an excited child, when he's back in his canoe, feeling the sudden tug of a fish on his line, or resting in the shade of a sandy cay, watching the sky turn from sunset to starry night.

Then, a strong wind whisks him back further in time:

“In 1952... I would go fishing with these two old folks named Isabel Ávila and Elías Martínez, and an indio named Trino Tejedo... We would fish the open sea, using only sails. If a storm came up, we'd head toward the closest cay and wait out the bad weather on land. We were always out fishing.”

Los Cayos Cochinos had long served as a place of refuge and rest for the fishermen — unspoiled and beautiful, belonging to everyone. The islands were usually uninhabited, save for three months of the year when the Garifuna would build seasonal shelters during the height of fishing season: the month of Lent.

The Garifuna first began building settlements in the area in 1797, and this land and the sea have run in their blood ever since.

For José and for his neighbors in Nueva Armenia, the history of the community and their ancestors who founded it is tied to one cay in particular. At 83, José clearly remembers the day he saw it for the first time, when he was just a teenager, and a chuckle escapes him: he saw it from his canoe, surrounded by water so clear and pure he thought the seabed was barely an inch down, and in an explosion of excitement, he jumped into the water, but then sank completely, until his feet finally touched the soft sandy bottom.

He pushed through the water and walked onto the beach, standing before the white, naked beauty of Cayo Chachahuate.



On Cayo Menor, one of the largest islands in the Cayos Cochinos archipelago, are the headquarters of the Honduran Coral Reef Foundation, an organization that has used environmentalist rhetoric in efforts to remove the Garifuna people from their land. Photo: Carlos Barrera/El Faro

“If you had seen the cays back then, you would have been enchanted too. For me, the cays are paradise—a paradise God gave to man. I’ll take them to my grave. If I could still see, I wouldn’t be doing this interview here, I’d bring you out there to Cayos Cochinos. I miss them so, so much. If God is listening, my greatest desire is that he restore my sight so I can go back,” José tells me.

But perhaps the fate of earthly paradises is to live only in the distant memories of old men who can no longer see them.

“Mine”

One day, somebody arrived and called the islands “mine.” As the Garifuna here tell it, in an oral history passed down from generation to generation, Tiburcio Carías Andino —the merciless [U.S.-backed] dictator who ruled Honduras for 17 years between 1932 and 1949— gifted Cayos Cochinos to a loyal servant by the name of David Griffith, who then passed them down to his son Jano Griffith: “A man,” José says, “unmatched in his kindness and sense of service.”

But kind Jano grew furious over the constant theft of “his” coconuts. And so he imposed two rules on the Garifuna fishers: the first, that they stop “disturbing” his coconut trees by taking their fruit and fronds; the second, that if they build huts during the height of fishing season, they must take them down after Semana Santa.

And so the fishermen spent three years, toward the end of the 1960s, building and destroying their own fishing huts. One day they got tired of the extra work, and decided to stop taking them down. Jano had the huts burnt to the ground.

“The Garifuna have never stopped breaking chains”

Perhaps Don Jano did not know the Garifuna very well: Since their birth as a people, the Garifuna have never stopped breaking chains, and have never been a nation keen on bending the knee. José and the other fishermen did something that, while obvious, appeared to Jano, who didn’t see any problem with setting fire to the huts of some Black indios, as an almost inconceivable surprise: they filed a complaint with a judge.

Miraculously, the judge agreed with them: he sent a letter to Jano advising him that he had no right to burn the fishermen's huts. Jano conceded, and the only remaining rule was that the fishermen couldn’t steal the coconuts.



Private property on Cayo Mayor. The Garifuna community says that millionaires purchased some of the cays as vacation getaways. Photo: Carlos Barrera/El Faro

Between 1967 and 1969, fishing huts began popping up along the beaches of Cayo Chachahuatate, a long, thin crescent-moon cay with a few dozen palm trees, short enough that a person can walk its length in under 5 minutes. Some fishermen, like José, started moving to the island to live and fish full-time. Eventually, José was appointed coordinator of the local fishing cooperative, in the years when a pound of fish sold for about \$0.15 lempiras, a fraction of a

cent of a U.S. dollar. “Of that whole group, I’m the only one still left,” says José, sitting outside his home in Nueva Armenia one afternoon barefoot, shirtless, skinny as a paddle, with pants that look as old as him.

Chachahuate and Nueva Armenia have been a single community ever since, divided by 12 miles of sea. When someone asks on the mainland, “who are the families living out on the cay?” the response comes without hesitation: “We are the same.”

Before, the Garifuna would split their time between fishing and farming, planting on the outskirts of the community and irrigating their fields from the slender Papaloteca River: “The only thing that didn’t grow was whatever you didn’t plant,” José says.

Bananas and African Palm: Land theft and repression

But in 1953, the Honduran government consigned the Garifuna’s ancestral territory to the Standard Fruit Company, a gringo multinational that blanketed the land in banana trees and left the community with no place left to farm, making them even more dependent on the sea.

Standard Fruit exploited the land and, when they were finished, gave it back to the state, which has still not returned it to the Garifuna. Today, a new crop is king, that modern-day tropical gold: African palm.

Ultimately, Jano started selling off “his” cays, mostly to foreigners who could afford to buy or lease their own private island in the Caribbean. One by one, those little white dots off the north coast of Honduras, a paradise shared by the community for generations, became the private playground of the rich.

José continues:

“The way I see it, the cays belong to Hondurans, to Black people, to the fishermen. I’ve never used one of the docks without permission, because —and I told them— the only thing I respect are the docks. A while back, I went to go collect some wood, some yagua palm to fix up my house in Nueva Armenia. A gringo came out of nowhere and told me I couldn’t collect wood there. ‘And why’s that?’ I asked him. ‘Because it’s mine!’ he said. And I told him, ‘Since when do you have more of a right to the land than me, if I was born here?’”

In that short exchange, and without knowing it at the time, José summed up the root of the conflicts and violence to come.



Every year thousands of tourists visit the Cayos Cochinos archipelago. On one of the cays, Cayo Menor, a foundation charges tourists for access to the islands. Photo: Carlos Barrera/El Faro

3. The Foundation

In 1993, three ships arrived unannounced at Cayo Chachahuate. Amid the entourage of officials and businessmen to step off one of the boats was none other than the president of Honduras, Rafael Leonardo Callejas (1990-1994), who after landing ambled around in amazement, mingling with the inhabitants, who were even more amazed that a figure of such magnitude had graced them with his presence.

“We offered him what hospitality we could, with what we had,” remembers José. And for over an hour, the Garifuna fishermen received the president, who generously promised to send the community new backpacks for all the kids.

Then, recalls José, Callejas wished them goodbye and told them: “Compatriotas, I’m so jealous of your beautiful island.” Then he left.

That was the first and last time President Callejas would visit Cayos Cochinos. He died 23 years later in the United States, where he was tried and convicted of racketeering and conspiracy to commit wire fraud.

The backpacks never came, but in May of 1994, during the death throes of the Callejas presidency, something did finally arrive: an eviction notice. Apparently, the presence of the Garifuna fishermen interfered with some government plan or another, and the Honduran state set out to drive them away from Cayos Cochinos for good.

That’s when the real problems began.

“In the name of ecological conservation”

The first regulations to come down—in the name of ecological conservation— prohibited hook-and-line fishing in the cays, as well as the use of gill nets. It was the equivalent of completely banning the Garifuna from fishing at all. The state then made it illegal for locals to gather wood on the area’s two largest islands, making it nearly impossible for the Garifuna to build their huts, collect firewood, or trap the crabs that had sustained them for generations.

Ana Mabel, the young Garifuna organizer from the local land defense committee, sums up the sentiments of her people: “When you’ve been taking care of your own house for hundreds of years, do you think it’s right for me to come and tell you that your house would be better if I was the one taking care of it? We’ve been fishing here for over 200 years, and now they come and tell us that what we’re doing is wrong.”

On March 4 of that same year, 1994, far from the white sand beaches of the Caribbean, in the industrial city of San Pedro Sula, a group of powerful Honduran businessmen created a new corporation: Sociedad de Inversiones Ecológicas, S.A. (SIEC). This new business lists its function in the Honduran commercial registry: “The main purpose of the company will be the acquisition, management, use, conservation and protection of ecologically valuable areas; promotion of tourism, events, conferences, seminars, guide services; provision of food services, lodging, logistical facilities; rental of diving and underwater equipment; water, land and air transportation services; all types of activities pertaining to ecotourism operations; implementation of management plans for protected natural areas...”

An agreement between SIEC and the Honduran government determined that the Cayos Cochinos archipelago should be an ecologically protected area.

Or rather: at the exact moment the Honduran government declared the Cayos Cochinos a protected natural area, a new corporation dedicated to administering and developing protected natural areas appeared, with a remarkably perfect sense of timing.

Honduran Coral Reef Foundation

The SIEC bought four islands, including the area’s second largest and three acres of the aptly named largest, Cayo Mayor. Then, that same year, the Foundation was created: the HCRF, or Honduran Coral Reef Foundation—tellingly, its original name and acronym are in English—whose purpose was to establish guidelines for deciding how to use and care for the 15 cays, including Chachahuate, that make up the archipelago. The company charter also stipulated that the president of SIEC would serve as the president of the Foundation.

That same year, in 1994, the Honduran government and the Foundation signed an agreement with the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute to install a “research station” on one of the SIEC-owned cays. One of the Institute’s first recommendations was the “relocation” of the island’s Garifuna inhabitants.

Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute & Honduran Naval Forces

One year later, in 1995, the Smithsonian Institute inaugurated the new research station, at the same time that the Honduran Naval Forces inaugurated a military and “resource ranger” base on another of the SIEC’s properties.

Those rangers and soldiers have been patrolling on “the Foundation’s boat” ever since, prohibiting the Garifuna from fishing in areas that the Foundation has decided are off-limits, and intercepting their canoes and fishing boats when they come too close to the SIEC’s islands — especially when those islands are being used to film a certain Spanish reality TV show.

4. Swallowed by the Sea

[Forced disappearances of Garifuna people]

On January 15, 1995, a man disappeared. Domitlio Cálix Arzú set out on his canoe to fish near the cays and never returned. The Navy claimed to have encountered the canoe drifting at sea, so his family thought it was strange that when the military returned it, it was dry, with all of his fishing gear still aboard, and a line with live bait still squirming.

Less than a month later, coast guardsmen detained Silvinio Córdova and Mariano Lino, two Garifuna fishermen from Nueva Armenia, and towed their raft, leaving them stranded at sea some six miles from dry land.

Córdova, now 60, continues to make a living at sea. Sitting next to three other Garifuna fisherman, he begins to recount what happened to him, bit by bit:

“That day I set out with my partners from Nueva Armenia to Cayos Cochinos. When the authorities arrived, I was diving without a tank and they had approached my skipper. When I surfaced, the soldiers told me to climb into their boat. I couldn’t do it. I needed to bring something home —lobsters, snails, anything— so my children could eat. I hadn’t done anything to harm them. When I refused to board, they tied up my canoe and towed it away. When my companion saw that I was swimming, he jumped in, and we were abandoned far out at sea. I don’t know why they did that to me.”

Other fishermen rescued them and took them to Chachahuate. Had they not been saved, it’s possible that Córdova and Lino would have disappeared at sea, just like Domitilio Cálix Arzú. Córdova never recovered his canoe, a fatal blow to a fisherman living hand-to-mouth: a replacement would cost an enormous and out-of-reach \$800.

Since then, other men have disappeared at sea without a trace: “Changai” Gutiérrez, Jacinto García, Alejandro Arzú, Julio “Apiacocos” Flores, Malaquía Zúñiga, “Tututú,” and Julio “Boa” Arzú.

The youngest of the four fishermen to recount his experiences at sea was Javier Marín, 55. As they did to other fishermen, soldiers confiscated and burned his fishing equipment. The authorities did this without a warrant from a judge, without an asset forfeiture notice and, of course, without any legal order stipulating that they could set fire to his personal belongings.

A bullet wound in 2001 left Jesús Flores, now 63, with only one working hand. “Soldiers arrived and grabbed two of our oxygen tanks. We asked them why they had said nothing to other divers.” Then two shots rang out. “Blood started flowing, filling the bottom of the canoe. A bullet hit me in the arm. I was losing blood like crazy. I didn’t know that the human body had so much blood. I still have the bullet in my arm, and every time it gets cold out...Ha! I’d like to cut it off.”

He shows me his arm, the chunk of metal still stuck inside it, paralyzed like a claw. He no longer fishes. Now, to make a living, he carves thick tree trunks into giant mortars to mash plantain, which rolls into tasty yellow balls called machuca.



Jesús Flores’ fingers were paralyzed when he was shot by the Honduran Coast Guard during an expedition in an area where his family has fished for decades. Photo: Carlos Barrera/El Faro

OFRANEH & Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

Days after he was shot, Flores filed a report with the prosecutor’s office in La Ceiba, the closest city, with the help of an organization representing the interests of his people: the Black

Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH). When they returned a month later to follow up, they learned that their report had been “misplaced.”

For two years, they continued to demand answers from the court, to no avail. Then, in 2003, they took their case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). They denounced the authorities for the shooting of Jesús Flores, for leaving Córdova and Lino to die at sea, and for the disappearance of Cáliz Arzú, as well as the Foundation’s pattern of harassment against the fishermen, with the backing of the Navy, and restrictions on fishing in general, arguing that these actions robbed the Garifuna of their means of survival.

The Honduran state responded, admitting that coast guardsmen Julio Chávez, Henry Aarhus, and Samuel Mejía had indeed shot Jesús Flores, but they asked the IACHR to not hear the case, arguing that the complainants had not exhausted all avenues for legal recourse in Honduras.

In 2003, the Attorney General’s Office issued an arrest warrant for the three soldiers and asked the commander of the military garrison in La Ceiba to turn over the firearms used to shoot Flores. Four years later, in 2007, the Commission asked the Honduran state to provide a report on the progress of the case. There was none to speak of. None of the three guardsmen had been captured, and not one firearm had been turned over as evidence.

About the other complaints in [OFRANEH’s filing](#), the Honduran government simply never said a word.

Supervivientes — “Survivors”

That same year, in 2007, SIEC began renting the cays to produce *Supervivientes — “Survivors.”* From that moment on, the coast guard has ensured that the production’s backdrop remains pristine, by chasing off the bothersome Garifuna boats.

In a letter to the Foundation, residents of the coastal villages of Nueva Armenia, Sambo Creek, and Río Esteban asked for two things: to be informed of the economic agreement to rent the cays, and to be taken into consideration when deciding the terms of the agreement.

The Foundation's representative at the meeting, Mr. Adrián Oviedo, responded to both requests with varying degrees of “no.”

In 2013, the Inter-American Commission issued a [follow-up report](#) noting that there had been no progress in Jesús Flores’ case. Honduras continued to ask that the commission not agree to hear the case, even though the soldiers remained at large, the arms hadn’t been submitted, and the government had said nothing about the disappearance of Cáliz Arzú or the stranding of Silvinio and Mariano.

But OFRANEH had expanded its complaint to include other incidents, among them a fisherman beaten by soldiers, another who took a bullet to the foot after authorities fired twice at the

motor of his boat, and the illegal seizure of canoes and fishing equipment. These abuses were each reported to Honduran authorities, who responded just as they had in Flores' case.

A stand-out among the new information submitted to the Inter-American Commission was a report of death threats made by soldiers against none other than Jesús Flores.

José, the elderly fisherman, hasn't quite wrapped his head around the *Supervivientes* ordeal.

"The reality shows supposedly are groups of artists who...I'm not sure how to explain it...are on an adventure to survive on their own. It's like a contest, but it's a business, because they ended up renting the cays. They even prohibited us from getting fray [tiny fish used as bait] because they say they're filming there."

He seems to be practicing in his head the only response that appeals to him in these cases: "I tell them, 'tell the director of the reality shows that if they don't want to see monkeys fishing in the cays they can turn their camera the other way, because I'm getting my fish now,'" he says, punctuating the quip with a smirk.



Swimming, fishing, and diving are everyday activities for children in Chachahuate. Photo: Carlos Barrera/El Faro

* * *

Drunken tourists party in "conservation" area, stolen from and off limits to Garifuna people

The cays living in José's memory no longer exist. The tiny white islands, with their palm trees and turquoise water, are still there. Lobsters continue prowling the large underwater rocks, like Corozo. The nights are long and the sky still shows the same map of stars the old fisherman once admired in his youth. But a different aura now hangs over the whole scene.

It's 9 a.m. one morning in October 2021. Some 90 tourists have gathered on Cayo Bolaño, ferried over by ten motorboats. Some of the visitors have already managed to get drunk and the rest are working on it. They've arrived with coolers packed with beer and a two-foot-tall sound system that lights up to the beat of their electronic dance music. Everyone is looking around for a spot to snap pictures far away from all the trash.

On Bolaño's sandy beach, near several enormous pink snails and dried-up coral, lies a heap of bottles: water, alcohol, ketchup, hot sauce, Gatorade, juice, eyedrops, shampoo and lotion, along with beer cans, facemasks, disposable cups, ziploc bags, a child's shoe...

Nearby, tourists stick their tongues out for photos as the speaker blasts the reggaeton hit Rica y Apretadita at full volume.

Each tourist boat must check in with the Foundation office on Cayo Menor before unloading its clients, so that they can pay the entry fee to the conservation area — \$13 for foreigners and \$6 for Hondurans. Annual entry fee revenue remains a secret, at least for the residents of the Garifuna villages.

“Get to know the Garifuna culture”

Some of the tourists will eat lunch on Chachahuate, delighting in plates of fried fish and soup prepared by women on the island. Among other entertainment options offered on the Foundation's website, “as an alternate activity and for an additional cost,” tourists can “visit the community of Chachahuate to get to know the Garifuna culture.”



Every weekend, dozens of boats land on the pearly beach of Cayo Chachahuate. Tourists end their trip to the cays with fried lunch, beer, and time for photographs. Photo: Carlos Barrera/El Faro

Life in Chachahuate is slow. Everything seems engulfed in lethargy, in a state of permanent half-sleep. Perhaps because no one is in a hurry to get anywhere. When they aren't out fishing, the

men sit or lie in hammocks in front of their shacks, or spend the day focused on their bottles of Tatascán. The women grate coconuts to make bread or sweets and fry things on wood-fired stoves. Children run up and down the island in tiny mobs, jumping in and out of the water until their mothers call out or shout at them to come inside. Everyone seems indifferent to the inevitable and permanent presence of hordes of flies.

The rhythm changes only when they spot a tourist boat heading toward the cay. Then, in the blink of an eye, the whole island springs into motion: Men and women dash across the sand, setting up tables, washing plates, starting fires, and lighting candles to scare away the flies.

Tourists step off the boats and sit down at tables looking out over the water to eat and drink beer. Local children orbit the visitors hoping that they'll buy them candy or give them some spare change. Then the visitors get back on the boats and set off for wherever they came from, and the island slows to a crawl once again.

Most of the tourists likely don't realize that they're dining in a favela, where there's no running water, sewage system, electricity, health clinic or school. The floor of every home is sand, with the exception of the Evangelical church, which remains largely empty due to the lack of a pastor. Almost the entire community relies on two latrines, in deplorable condition and surrounded by trash, including a massive mound of used toilet paper, and a swarm of flies.

What used to be a kindergarten classroom is now a desolate space that looks like it got into a fight with a hurricane, with desks stripped to their skeletons and tattered children's books littering the floor. There's no one to give classes there anymore, and the room stays padlocked.

A boat used to arrive early in the morning to take the older children to school on Cayo Menor and bring them back at noon, but during the pandemic, the school closed and the boat stopped making its rounds.

On top of all that, Chachahuate is being slowly devoured by the sea. Every year the island shrinks and the sea eats away at the homes along its edge.

Residents know little to nothing about what happens to the revenue from tourism and the reality show. Some say that at some point the visitors donated a roof, or some barrels to catch rainwater.



Tour agencies take visitors in motorboats to all of the cays. The first stop is Cayo Bolaños, which for years offered a reprieve from the salt and sun to Garifuna fishermen. Photo: Carlos Barrera/El Faro

* * *

Repression targeting community leaders

On March 11, 2019, the Garifuna leaders who led the boycott of the reality show on Cayo Palomo accepted an invitation from the commander of the First Battalion of Marine Infantry to discuss the matter. Of course, the meeting would be held in the military garrison in La Ceiba.

In attendance were Dina, the president of the council of Nueva Armenia; Ana Mabel, president of the land defense committee; and Eduard, leader of the fishermen's association. Frigate Captain Henry Geovanny Matamoros, their host, was waiting for them in the barracks, along with two representatives from the Foundation.

One of the representatives was Enrique Morales Alegría, a businessman from an elite Honduran family with investments in energy, hotels, and construction, and an investor in two electric companies and a series of hotel and real estate firms. The other was Vicente de Jesús Carrión Amaya, a real estate investor and legal representative of a firm that, according to government records, pays more taxes than any other company in San Pedro Sula.

Carrión Amaya is a board member of SIEC, the ecotourism firm that signed the agreement with the Honduran government to convert the Cayos Cochinos archipelago into a conservation area, and that bought up four of the area's islands. Morales Alegría is the president of the company, and thus the president of the Foundation.

But they're far from the largest shareholders: Davivienda Bank and the Honduran Sugar Company are also major investors, but the biggest of them all is Fundación Azteca, a charitable

organization founded with capital from Grupo Salinas, a firm owned by Mexican tycoon Ricardo Salinas Pliego.

In Honduras, Salinas Pliego owns Banco Azteca, the electronics retailer Elektra, the motorcycle brand Itálíka, and TV Azteca. Fundación Azteca owns 85.7 percent of SIEC shares, holdings worth a total of 77 million lempiras (\$3.1 million).



Children play all day on Chachahuate due to the Honduran state's abandonment of local education. Photo: Carlos Barrera/El Faro

Dina, on the other hand, farms the land and sells fish. Ana Mabel, an ex-detective with the Honduran police, resigned when she suspected that her superiors had cut mafia deals with the Mara Salvatrucha. Now she survives on the proceeds she earns from a tiny shop that sells incense, aromas, and magical powders. Eduard is a fisherman who returned to Honduras in 2018 after trying to migrate to the United States without papers.

One of the demands made by Eduard, as head of the fishermen's association, was that fishermen be paid 300 lempiras (\$12 dollars) for every day that they are unable to work due to the filming of the reality shows. "In the meeting, they told me that I was extorting them and could go to prison," Eduard recalls.

From the beginning, it was clear to the Garifuna delegation that the meeting had been called with no intention to negotiate: "Mr. Enrique told us that we were silly, spoiled children. He told us that ever since he was a kid, he's been smashing whatever rocks people put in front of him, and that if anyone gets in his way, he'll destroy them. Then he started talking about the kidnapping of a family member, telling us how he had killed the kidnappers, and then killed their family. He said all this in front of the soldiers, in front of everyone. Then Vicente Carrión spoke about how they had come to own the islands. He told us that they had previously

belonged to Robert Griffith, with whom he had cultivated a friendship, by buying him expensive bottles of wine, rum, and tequila, and that through this friendship, he had been selling them the islands at a steal. It was all really ugly. And the military was right there, sitting next to the people from the Foundation.”

Upon leaving, he and Ana Mabel took stock of the encounter: “I told Mabel that if we backpedal they’ll know we’re scared and that their intimidation game is seeing results,” Eduard said, closing with a phrase that he and Mabel have made a mantra: “We are born to die.”

The next day, they led another protest against the Foundation.

Eduard used to live in Nueva Armenia along the banks of the Papaloteca River, whose current fishermen ride out to sea. Around four months after the meeting in the barracks of La Ceiba, a boat entered Nueva Armenia at night, motoring up the river and carrying three men dressed in black. For the small fishing village, 10 p.m. is past closing time.

“When I saw three people get out I ducked down and left my house. I didn’t wait for them to ask for me,” says Eduard. “I could see they were dressed in black and had something in their hands, like rifles.” When Eduard returned home in the morning, his door had been forced open.

He decided not to make a scandal out of it, to avoid startling his mother, who had heart problems and begged her son to abandon his activism. She knew all too well what tends to happen to poor, Indigenous, Black men when they stare back into the eyes of men with more power than them. But Eduard was young and unshakeable.

Some time later, he and Ana Mabel witnessed a pillar of smoke wafting up from Cayo Menor, the headquarters of the Foundation. The organization’s own rules prohibit the burning of trees or brush. They set off toward the cay and when they arrived, they discovered a burning plot of land, a violation of the regulations for which the Garifuna are commonly sanctioned. They recorded videos and uploaded them to the internet. Soldiers showed up in uniform and accused them of trespassing on private property.

Eduard continued asking uncomfortable questions, like why the military, rather than private security guards, was patrolling private property.

He and Ana Mabel filed a report against the Foundation with the local prosecutor’s office, and went on local television to denounce the destruction of the environment and present the videos to the public.

The men in black paid a second visit to his home. By that time, Eduard’s partner was in the final stage of pregnancy.

“This time there were five men. The lights in the community had gone out and when that happens there’s no cell phone signal. It was very hot out, and when I opened the door I saw the

shadow of the boat and turned back into the house to tell my wife, ‘Don’t make any noise. There’s a boat coming this way with people looking for me.’” We ducked out and ran to the house of a friend who could help us. I called Mabel. When we returned, the door was open. They had broken it down again.”

5. “We are born to die”

On September 8, 2021, Eduard Onasis García Arzú, 29, and his pregnant partner left their village on Honduras’ Caribbean coast, their home and their lagoon, their sea, their white cays, and their country. They fled north.

After multiple attempts to contact the president of the Foundation, Enrique Morales Alegría, El Faro was finally able to reach a secretary at one of his companies, Inversiones Paraíso (“Paradise Investments”) who said that she would leave a note on his desk and that he would respond later. He never did.

Fundación Azteca’s offices in Honduras and México didn’t reply to emailed requests for comment. A spokesperson for the Honduran Army, Lieutenant José Coello, said he would “happily” provide an interview. But that was the last time he responded to messages or answered a phone call.

El Faro wrote to the executive producer of *Supervivientes*, Héctor Gutiérrez, to Bulldog TV, the show’s production house, and to the Spanish television station Antena 5, describing the conflicts caused by their filming. Mr. Gutiérrez responded that he had to make some inquiries, because he was not authorized to give interviews that were not for the purposes of “promoting our reality show.”

He did say that he has been the show’s producer since 2007, and claimed to know first-hand that there has been “very close communication” with local communities “looking to better their environment and quality of life.” He said he was unaware of the Garifuna leaders’ filings before the IACHR but that, in any case, the Foundation should be the one to respond to them. He offered to put El Faro in contact with a representative of the institution. El Faro sent an email with a list of five questions, and a request for his assistance in contacting Morales Alegría. Months later there has been no response.

By the end of October 2021, Eduard, the leader of the Nueva Armenia fishermen’s association, was in Mexico, begging on the streets with his pregnant wife. When they made enough money, they would rent a room in a bunkhouse, sleep in a bed, and wash their clothes in the bathroom.

When they didn’t, they would sleep in the park where they begged, keeping one eye open, dreaming about their remote fishing village in the Caribbean.

Their son was born a month later.

Ana Mabel fears that the Foundation will build a hotel and restaurant in Cayo Menor: “If they open a restaurant they’ll ruin us financially; nobody will come to eat on Chachahuate. The occasional tourist might come to see Black people dance punta... and the worst of it is that we’ll have to dance. Out of hunger,” she says, resignedly.



Mabel Robledo is the leader of the Land Defense Committee of Nueva Armenia. Photo: Carlos Barrera/El Faro

At the end of last year, Ana Mabel’s daughter had a dream: She saw two men in her mother’s room, and when she called out for her mother, the men told her that she was dead.

The last threat against Ana Mabel came from the Sevilla family, who hold a financial interest in a sand mining operation in the local watershed. Ana Mabel had denounced the extraction of sand from the Papaloteca River, which cuts through Nueva Armenia. As more and more sand is taken, she says, the river overflows into the community when the rains come.

A man named Olvin Sevilla wrote her a message on Facebook loaded with slurs. “You better be careful, we have our sights on you, you black bitch,” he wrote. “We know you’re the one promoting all that stuff about our land in Armenia. Keep fucking with us and we’ll have you skinned.”

Ana Mabel spends less and less time at her aroma shop as she pushes to finish the remaining dozen courses she needs to graduate from law school. She dreams of becoming her community’s attorney. In February 2022, Nueva Armenia named her their president, their top warrior.

But she has also just received an offer of asylum from another country whose name has been omitted from publication. Ana Mabel is torn between the two paths that lie before her. When

she is reminded of the very real dangers she faces, she often recites the gloomy mantra uttered by Eduard: "We are born to die."

*With reporting from Jimmy Alvarado. Translated by Max Granger and Roman Gressier

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