

The Pesch in Honduras

“A Pesch Indian expertly poles the mahogany pipante [*pea-PAHN-tay*], a long narrow dugout, through the churning rapids. The shallow boat slips between large rocks barely visible above the frothy water. A toucan darts across the river and quickly disappears into the wall of green velvet vegetation that soars skyward. Ahead is a view of the world as it must have looked on the dawn of creation.” (From a travel column on Honduras.)

It is interesting to imagine a people completely dependent on the forest and living untouched by the outside world. But the reality is that the Pesch – like other forest dwellers around the world – do not live in isolation. While they once wore bark loin clothes and used blowguns, today they wear machine-made clothes, use modern rifles for hunting, and even practice Christianity.

The Pesch live in La Mosquitia, a region of Honduras and Nicaragua that covers the largest wilderness area in Central America. This region has tropical rainforests as well as mangrove swamps, lagoons, and savannas. Before the Spanish conquered the Americas in the 1600s, the Pesch lived across one-fourth of the area of Honduras and were larger than any other native group. Today there are only 350 Pesch people left.

Like other forest people, the Pesch still depend on the forest to survive. They regularly hunt game animals like deer, monkeys, wild pigs, wild turkeys, iguanas, and the massive tapir that live in the forests of the region. They can catch iguanas barehanded and spear fish with hand-held harpoons. And those who live along rivers are superb boat-handlers, maneuvering dugout canoes deftly up and downstream through boulder-strewn rapids.

But, the Pesch must also depend on other ways to survive. To supplement their diet, they have traditionally grown plots of rice, cassava, beans, and corn in clearings hacked from the rainforest. Because much of their land is gradually being lost to outsiders (known as Ladinos), many Pesch also have paying jobs in order to feed their families.

Most of the land where the Pesch live is legally owned by the government, though the Pesch have always considered it theirs. This means that the Pesch cannot always control what happens to the forest on which they depend.

In 1980, for example, the Honduran government and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) created a biosphere preserve in La Mosquitia, called Rio Plátano. The reserve was supposed to protect the Pesch culture and the plant and animal species of the region. Sadly, people built illegal logging roads into the reserve in order to cut down the valuable mahogany trees. These roads have allowed many new Ladino settlers to sneak into the area and chop down more of the forest for crops and grazing.

With the forest around them being damaged, and with the loss of more and more of their land, the Pesch are having a more difficult time getting by. Many young Pesch are being lured to the city for jobs and an easier life. As a result, the future of the Pesch is uncertain. It is not clear whether this culture will be able to survive all the changes it faces.