

ISSUES ◀ TODAY

What rights do indigenous people have?



By the mid-1500's, most of Middle America had fallen under Spanish rule. Agreements between the Spanish king and natives guaranteed indigenous groups ownership of their ancestral lands. Most of these agreements have been ignored. Should indigenous people own this land? There are many perspectives on this issue. Here are two of them.

Indigenous people are entitled to their ancestral land.

- Indigenous people of the past were exploited by colonizing powers. They have a legal claim to ancestral lands that were guaranteed to them in treaties or other binding agreements with Spain and their successor governments.
- Indigenous communities consider their land to be sacred. The dispossession of land would lead to the extinction of indigenous communities, their cultures, and their traditions.
- Indigenous knowledge of plants and their medicinal properties, sustainable agriculture practices, land conservation, and other expertise would disappear along with the people.
- The traditional economy of indigenous people is less destructive to the environment and to natural resources than that of the commercial economy.

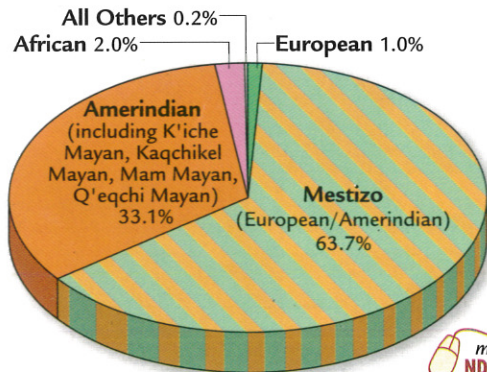


Indigenous protesters in Panama demonstrate against proposals to enlarge the Panama Canal and build more roads—which would result in the loss of land.

It is impractical to enforce indigenous claims.

- It would be nearly impossible to examine and interpret hundreds of years' worth of incomplete historical documents to determine who has rightful ownership of the land.
- The original treaties were feudal and assumed that all land belonged to the king. Adapting these treaties to modern property laws, which focus on individuals, is almost impossible.
- Few people today live a traditional indigenous lifestyle. However, most people in Central America have descended, at least partly, from indigenous groups. Deciding who receives “ancestral” land would create new conflicts.
- Current land owners should not be punished by having land taken from them for crimes that may or may not have been committed by their ancestors.

ETHNIC COMPOSITION GUATEMALA



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Mestizos in Central America are the result of intermarriage between indigenous people and the Spanish long ago. Over 90 percent of the people in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador have indigenous ancestry.