

## Chapter 36

# GIS and the A'i of Colombia: Reserves, Resguardos and the Future

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper presents the work of the WCS with the A'i Indigenous people in Colombia as part of a USAID-funded project between 2009 and 2011. The project had several dimensions that make it unusual. Unlike conventional “counter-mapping” attempts to represent Indigenous land claims as a counter to government representations, the project sought to create maps and analyses that represent prior land assignments to the A'i by the Colombian government itself. These land assignments were not supported by geo-referenced maps and, in the case of Indigenous “reserves” the original boundary markers were only known to the oldest of the A'i people. Analysis of forest cover in lands controlled by the A'i reveal that they are highly protective of forests; indeed their collective identity is strongly related to forest cover. The process described also illustrates the difficult position many Indigenous Amazonians face in an era of drug wars, uncontrolled colonization, and in the case of Colombia, the lack of follow-up to the political and social measures envisioned in the 1991 Constitution.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The technology known as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) has been used since the 1990s to create maps representing the land and resource claims of local and native peoples, and to integrate Indigenous knowledge (IK) with mapping efforts (Chapin *et al.*, 2005; Chapin & Threlkeld, 2001; Harris & Weiner, 1998 Hodgson and Schroeder, 2002; Peluso, 1995; Poole, 1998; Stocks, 2003; Stocks *et al.*, 2012;

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Stocks & Taber 2011; Wainwright & Bryan, 2009). Some critics view GIS as a top-down technology that obscures the subtleties of Indigenous or local understandings of their lands; others question the use of a technology on behalf of people who cannot themselves operate the computer programs that manage the information (Jordan & Shrestha, 2000). Still others draw attention to the imposition of boundaries on fluid intercultural territorial arrangements (Walker and Peters, 2001) and the problematic constitution of new land categories that enter into the political economy without adequate political support (Rocheleau, 1997; Stocks 2003). However, participatory mapping, if carried out with an appropriate methodology and a commitment to training local and Indigenous participants in the management of the GIS technology, can overcome many obstacles (Tripathi & Bhattarya, 2004; Herlihy & Knapp 2003).

Between 2009 and 2011, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) supported the A'i (AKA Cofán) people of Colombia in participatory mapping and organizational strengthening related to land claims. These maps are rich with Indigenous knowledge as represented by place names and toponyms, including principally the names of streams and rivers, sacred sites, former settlements and cemeteries. The A'i people requested this support from WCS because they were interested in identifying boundaries of lands previously awarded to them by the Colombian State without geo-referenced maps, an omission that led to serious conflicts. Particularly significant in these conflicts were Indigenous reserves, set aside over two generations previously and colonized by outsiders in a process defined by deforestation, rural settlements and coca growing. Also significant to the A'i was an unmapped *Resguardo* that was left undefended against colonization, including colonization by another Indigenous group. A *Resguardo* is private communal property titled by the State.

An appropriate goal for conservation scientists who work with Indigenous people is to jointly determine where agendas overlap and to provide technical assistance for Indigenous agendas to promote complementary goals (Painter, 2005; Redford & Painter 2006). It has been stated that these kinds of alliances of Amazonian Indigenous organizations and conservation organizations “are calling for environmentally sustainable forms of development based on culturally specific values and practices” (Perreault, 2002: 598), providing a “conceptual ‘middle ground’ on which the interests of Amazonian Indigenous peoples articulate with those of northern environmentalists” (Conkin and Graham, 2005 in Perreault, 2002: 598). The A'i highly value the forest, in fact tying their survival as a distinct culture directly to the survival of the forest (e.g. Stevens, 1997; Stocks et al., 2007; Lu et al., 2010; Schmidt & Peterson, 2009). In the case of the A'i, the WCS goal of biodiversity conservation is richly served by supporting Indigenous people who value the forest and have themselves been affected and influenced by colonization caused by the lack of Andean land reform, increasing armed violence in the Andean-Amazon and Pacific regions and the economic opportunity provided by a thriving drug trade. A'i goals regarding land rights and desired policy changes are likewise supported by the collaboration with WCS (Alcorn, 2000; Arambiza & Painter, 2006; Painter, 2009).

Although it has been said that States can treat demarcation and titling of Indigenous lands “as an opportunity to reinscribe their power in Indigenous communities” (Wainwright and Bryan, 2009, p. 167), in the case of the A'i lands, the lack of government attention and presence has facilitated the consequent fragmentation and degradation of habitat conditions linked to cultural traditions and territorial integrity. Their call has been for State attention and land titling with the designation of *Resguardo* as a first step to recover control over the territory. Such control has been deteriorating with the extraction booms that have affected the Amazon region in different moments. With the booms have come armed conflict, colonization and land use changes beginning with the loss of forest cover.

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