



UPPER AMAZON CONSERVANCY

Peru: Illegal Mahogany Logging Continues in Reserve for Uncontacted Tribes

Widespread illegal mahogany logging continues inside Peru's Muruanahua Territorial Reserve for Indigenous People in Voluntary Isolation. An investigation by the Upper Amazon Conservancy (UAC) conducted from March 2009 to April 2010 documented logging settlements and felled trees throughout the 481,560 hectare Reserve. The Reserve and adjacent Alto Purús National Park are home to some of the world's last remaining uncontacted indigenous tribes.

With more than 80% of Peru's mahogany exported to the United States, this logging provides evidence that Peru is failing to uphold the environmental and forestry obligations of its 2009 free trade agreement with the U.S. Moreover, the logging violates the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), under which mahogany is listed.

The investigation included river patrols and overflights conducted in collaboration with Pronaturaleza, Frankfurt Zoological Society and Peru's protected areas agency, SERNANP. Three separate areas of logging activity were documented inside the Murunahua Reserve along the Mapuya and Yurua rivers (see Map).

The Mapuya River

A large logging operation is based in the headwaters of the Mapuya River near the border of the Alto Purús National Park (see Photo A). Originally discovered by UAC in March 2009, an April overflight observed two large rafts of recently cut mahogany boards, indicating the settlement continues to be used as a transport center for mahogany illegally removed from the Reserve and Park.



Photo A: Logging settlement in the headwaters of the Mapuya River near the border of the Alto Purús National Park inside the Murunahua Reserve

A separate logging settlement is located on the lower Mapuya (see Photo B). According to local indigenous people, this site, as well as the site located upstream in the headwaters (Photo A), has been used for several years to collect and transport mahogany from the Murunahua Reserve.

In order to transport the wood from extremely remote areas of the Reserve and Park, loggers cut the trees into large boards with chainsaws. Because chainsawing mahogany is illegal in Peru due to inherent massive waste, they then carry and/or float the boards to sawmills in less remote areas and reprocess them. The illegal wood is then transported to the city of Pucallpa via the Mapuya, Inuya and Ucayali Rivers. Along this route it passes in front of a forestry control post on the Inuya, constructed specifically to prevent the transport of illegal wood. Instead, the wood is laundered with forestry permits intended for legal logging operations in registered timber concessions or indigenous community lands. These permits provide the timber companies with “proof” that the wood was legally cut in compliance with approved management plans—not from protected areas or unregistered lands. Thus when the wood is finally trucked to Lima, it contains export documentation required by the United States and other international markets.

The Yurua River

UAC observed several logging camps and felled trees along small streams in the remote headwaters of the Yurua River (see Photos C and D). We investigated these activities in April during a monitoring patrol with members of the Yurua Vigilance Committee. The Committee is a new project of UAC and SERNANP focused on training local people to help protect the Murunahua Reserve and Alto Purús Park. Committee members knew that loggers have been working in the headwaters for the past few years as seasonal flooding periodically washes mahogany boards downstream before the loggers can move the wood from the riverbanks to higher ground. In order to conceal their activities from the communities, loggers do not transport wood down the Yurua; instead, they hand carry the boards over the watershed divide to the Mapuya River and follow the downstream transportation route described above.

In addition to extracting wood from the Murunahua Reserve, loggers are also targeting the titled indigenous communities on the Yurua River. Over the past several years, companies like Forestal Venao have aggressively pursued agreements with community chiefs to log their lands. Among the local people, Forestal Venao has a reputation for illegal and exploitive logging practices and aggressive, heavy handed politicking to continue securing additional mahogany-rich lands to log. These community lands contain some of the last commercially viable mahogany stands anywhere in Peru outside of protected areas.

A vast network of logging roads now connects the Yurua to the Ucayali River, providing a fleet of over a dozen tractors with easy access to the forests all along the Yurua. According to locals, wood from both the communities and Reserve is transported directly to the Ucayali via these roads. The situation on the Yurua is a reminder that the exploitation of the Amazon’s forests and indigenous inhabitants, perfected by rubber and animal skin traders in the 20th century, is business as usual in today’s mahogany boom.

Uncontacted Tribes

The Murunahua Reserve and Alto Purús Park are part of the largest network of core protected areas in Peru and home to at least three uncontacted groups, the largest concentration of isolated tribes in Peru and perhaps the world. These tribes lack natural defenses against diseases brought

from outsiders and are threatened by any type of contact. [Survival International](#) reports that after being contacted by loggers in the mid 1990s, an estimated 50% of the isolated Murunahua tribe died.

Intrusions into their lands also has the effect of forcing the tribes into adjacent watersheds already inhabited by other tribes and, in many cases, by settled communities in contact with outside society. In the Alto Purús Park, a tribe rarely seen in the past is now collecting turtle eggs on the same stretch of river used by two other uncontacted groups as well as hunting and fishing parties from settled communities downriver. This crowded atmosphere invariably creates conflict. To give just one example, in 2005, 11 members of an uncontacted tribe and one local Asheninka women were killed in a conflict in the headwaters of the Yurua. Within the last few years, several members of the Murunahua tribe have emerged from the forest to live a settled lifestyle on the Yurua River (see Photo E). It is likely that this decision was influenced by the invasion of loggers into their homelands and the lack of uninhabited forests in which to live peacefully.

Conclusion

This investigation proves that illegal mahogany logging continues within Peru's protected areas, calling into question Peru's compliance with the forestry annex of its trade agreement with the United States, CITES and the United States' compliance with the Lacey Act.

The situation demands an immediate response from the Peruvian authorities in charge of managing the Murunahua Territorial Reserve and combating illegal logging. Our conclusion, however, is that the illegal logging, and resulting endangerment of isolated indigenous tribes, will continue until the U.S. government unilaterally rejects questionable Peruvian mahogany.

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Photo B: Logging settlements on the lower Mapuya River



Photo C: Abandoned mahogany boards in the Yurua headwaters



Photo D: Recently cut mahogany tree in the Yurua headwaters



Photo E: Murunahua man in initial contact, Yurua River

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