



Oxfam Impact

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Landmark victory for indigenous people

After centuries of discrimination and a decade of legal work supported by Oxfam, Bolivia's indigenous Chiquitano people have finally won the title to their ancestral land.

By Chris Hufstader

When Pablo Solis Chuviru heard that he and other indigenous people had received the title to their ancestral homeland from Bolivia's president, he could not contain his happiness. "It was like a dream for me," the 57-year-old community elder says two months later, sitting in the winter sun in San Javier. "I never got tired of shouting."

It was a dream hard won. The indigenous Chiquitano people of Santa Cruz took advantage of an agrarian reform law passed in 1996 that allowed them to claim "original community territories" known by their Spanish initials as TCOs. It took more than 10 years, but the Chiquitano documented their claim to the Monte Verde

TCO and defended it against ranchers and logging companies intent on exploiting the forest resources.

Chuviru says that the legal title will help the Chiquitano to protect the fragile, dry tropical forest and still enjoy a decent life. "I hope we can preserve our hunting and fishing areas and use our trees in an orderly manner," he explains. There are 33 communities, comprising roughly 5,000 people living in or near the Monte Verde TCO, and they are now looking to the future

and envisioning the best ways to live in and enjoy the 3,830-square-mile territory.

Redressing historic injustices

Monte Verde has immense significance for the Chiquitano people. Their ancestors were moved out of the forest area in the 1700s by the Spanish and concentrated in communities run by Jesuit priests. Chiquitanos were enslaved on haciendas and eventually forced to tap rubber trees in the early 20th century. Escaped slaves settled remote communities, and their

Above: Pablo Solis Chuviru, leader of the Chiquitano community of Turuxnapez, worked for over a decade to secure the legal title to nearly 4,000 square miles of eastern Bolivia's forestlands. *Evan Abramson / Oxfam America*

descendants later organized groups to work on the legal claim to their territory, all the while watching as illegal logging decimated their forests.

It took over a decade of hard work and just over \$340,000 in Oxfam grants for the Chiquitano to comply with all the legal requirements needed to achieve their goal. Oxfam helped three local organizations in Lomerío, San Javier, and the village of Monte Verde coordinate their work and collaborate with the Center for Legal Studies and Social Research (known by its Spanish initials CEJIS) to get the technical training to gather satellite positioning data on the TCO borders. They investigated 158 land claims by ranchers and other nonindigenous people trying to grab a piece of the territory. Only a small number of these claims were legitimate, and it was only through the legal support, technical data, and satellite photos gathered by the community members and CEJIS that they could defend their claim from these interlopers, some of whom were using forged documents.

During this time the indigenous people struggling for their land and the staff of CEJIS supporting them were subjected to numerous human rights violations, physical attacks, threats, and intimidation. In some areas in the TCO, civic committees organized by nonindigenous



Monte Verde is rich in natural resources such as timber. Now that they have the legal title to their forest territory, the Chiquitano are developing an environmental management plan that will ensure these resources are managed in a responsible manner and enjoyed by future generations. *Evan Abramson / Oxfam America*

ranchers and loggers hired armed thugs to attack the offices and representatives of the local indigenous groups. One was burned down just over a year ago in San Javier—the group lost all its radio equipment, computers, and legal documents. In another incident, Leonardo Tamburini, the Argentinean director of CEJIS, was kidnapped and beaten severely in 2001 when he was investigating a fraudulent claim for 36,000 acres by nonindigenous ranchers.

Now, as Chuviru looks at the new building being erected in San Javier, he reflects on the struggle to gain the legal title to Monte Verde and the title's impact on the future of his small village, Turuxnapez, which means "Heaven's Door" in the local Bésero language. "Our children will benefit from the forest. This is the future for them; they can see the fight we won. For them it is a treasure."

Do one more thing today: Join the movement to support indigenous rights

Gaining the title to their land was the first step. Now the Chiquitano must protect the valuable natural resources of Monte Verde and guard against destructive forms of development. Oxfam America supports research to help the Chiquitano create environmental management plans and protect their forest home. The legal title requires that the Chiquitano be consulted about any mining or oil projects in Monte Verde. Oxfam supports a doctrine of "free, prior, and informed consent," which means local people must decide how their land will be used.

You can help to encourage governments and industry to respect rights of local people by joining Oxfam America's online community today. Members receive our eNewsletter and timely action alerts, and can take action by emailing policy makers and mining companies to urge them to respect the rights of indigenous communities.

Go to www.oxfamamerica.org/join.



A young girl helps her grandmother harvest plantains in the village of Palestina in Monte Verde. *Evan Abramson / Oxfam America*



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