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## The Forest of the Lacandon Maya



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Suzanne Cook

# The Forest of the Lacandon Maya

An Ethnobotanical Guide

 Springer

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## Preface

When I first drove into Naha', in 1990, all the Lacandon men of the community of Naha' were at work in the middle of a logging road erecting electric power poles. Although electricity failed to arrive for another decade, it was clear that a dramatic shift in the Lacandones' way of life was underway.

I was inspired at that time by a book which described the Lacandones as “The Last Lords of Palenque”.<sup>1</sup> It was a romantic portrayal of a Mayan people supposedly forgotten by time. The book has since been debunked for its premise by most scholars: today it is confirmed that the Ch'ol Mayas, rather than the Lacandones, were the builders of Palenque. Furthermore, at the time of its writing, the traditional culture has largely disintegrated, and the forest had already shrunk to a few protected reserves. When I arrived, the government-owned logging company was still extracting timber, and in its wake, immigrants were clamouring to establish homesteads.

While conservationists have made some progress towards curbing the destruction, only a few of them have considered the attrition of Lacandon traditional ecological knowledge. Gertrude “Trudy” Blom, wife of archaeologist Franz Blom and proprietor of Na Balom, a research station in San Cristobal, was a powerful voice among those wanting to save the Lacandon forest. As the trees were being felled, she alone expressed great concern for the Lacandones' emotional, spiritual, and psychological well-being, believing that without the forest they would lose their culture and be forced to join the ranks of the disenfranchised, indigenous people of Mexico. Others were Nations and Nigh, who were the first to show how Lacandon traditional knowledge sustained the ecological diversity of the forest, in their paper “The Evolutionary Potential of Lacandon Maya Sustained-Yield Tropical Forest Agriculture” (1980). Their thesis was that the Lacandones' traditional agricultural practices not only preserved the forest but facilitated its regeneration, and that without the forest the Lacandones' ecological knowledge would be lost. Thus, the fates of the forest and the Lacandones were intertwined, each depending on the other to survive.

This book is an attempt to record as much of that knowledge as possible, with the hope that it will aid conservationists in their ongoing efforts to save the Lacandon forest, and that it will also interest Mayanists, Mayan enthusiasts, and most of all, the Lacandones.

The videos for this book can be accessed at:

<http://www.springer.com/us/book/9781461491101>

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<sup>1</sup>V. Perera and R. D. Bruce, *The Last Lords of Palenque: the Lacandon Mayas of the Mexican Rainforest* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).



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