

*ENVIRONMENT, POLITICS AND DEVELOPMENT WORKING PAPER  
SERIES*

*DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY, KING'S COLLEGE LONDON*

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*Year 2009*

*Paper # 22*

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**FRONTIER SPACES OF PRODUCTION AND  
CONSUMPTION: SURFACES, APPEARANCES AND  
REPRESENTATIONS ON THE 'MAYAN RIVIERA'**

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## **Introduction**

On the twelfth of September 2001 the massed taxi ranks at Cancun airport lay abandoned. After the appalling events of 9/11 nobody was arriving in Mexico from the United States, and the absence of tourists was to remain a problem for the tourist industry in Cancun and the 'Mayan Riviera' to the south for several more months. This is an area constantly exposed to hurricanes and tropical storms, and one familiar with the need to adapt rapidly to them. September 11<sup>th</sup> was a different order of 'disaster', and it took fully two years for this area of mass tourism to fully adapt to the consequences. However, by March 2004 tourism was 'booming' again, and in March 2004 the Mexican Government reported a record monthly income of one billion US dollars from foreign tourists. The Yucatan Peninsular, and particularly the Mexican Caribbean, remained the main tourist destination for international tourists to Mexico, four-fifths of whom are American. The events subsequent to 9/11 also raise, in a particularly vivid way, some of the peculiarities of thinking about 'space' in the context of consumption in general, and tourism in particular.

One example is the burgeoning effects of cruise ships and new cruise ports. In the wake of 9/11 there was an accelerated trend away from room occupancy in 'all-inclusive' hotels, and towards more passengers on cruise ships. There was a significant increase in cruise passengers: almost two million cruise passengers came ashore in Mexico in 2004, an increase of two hundred thousand over the previous year. Cruise ships represent a particular kind of 'space', within the lexicon adopted in this volume: secure and hermetically sealed, and allowing only limited contact with 'real' Mexicans. Cruise ships are also constantly, if not continuously, on the move; in this respect at least they represent the apotheosis of mobile 'space', and of 'place' as humanly occupied

space (Lefebvre 1991). With their in-built security, international cuisine, and twenty-four hour access to entertainment and pleasure, the cruise ship provides a balm against the unpredictable horrors of alien cultures, as well as those of September 11th. At the same time cruise ships provide an example of a wider phenomenon which this chapter explores: the relationship between *physical space* and its *cultural assimilation*.

In this chapter I want to explore space and its relationship to consumption through a narrative account of one geographical space (the Mexican Caribbean coast) that demonstrates some of the ways in which distance and time can be compressed, producing 'layered' histories that tell us as much about we the 'historians', who construct our spaces, as about the spaces themselves. The chapter also examines some of the *hybridizations*, through which nature and society meet and refashion space. Following Lefebvre (1991) we seek to explore "what lies beneath the surfaces of appearance".

We 'produce' and 'consume' space just as we 'produce' and 'consume' nature in the development of economic relations. At the same time, space and place are made and remade, produced and re-produced through the iterative processes, iconographies, and materialities of consumption. According to these perspectives, 'space' has historically represented a challenge for capitalism, and capitalism eventually filled it with the desiderata of late modernity's 'fetish' for fetishes: commercial imagery, brands and logos. Space has subsequently become occupied by images that we construct, or are constructed for us, to encourage the growth of the commodity form, and commodity culture(s). Space is never a passive location, which serves as the site for social activity, but, in the form of *social space*, it is the means through which the economic and political system establishes hegemony, and gains legitimacy.

Recent research, particularly in geography and history, have benefited from a more reflective view of space, and an active search for its properties and significance over time. Space is no longer a 'given' in intellectual history, the blank parchment on which human purposes are written. Some writers even argue that space should be seen principally as enactment or performance: constructions of the human imagination, as well as materiality. In the view of Nicholas Blomley, for example, "space (is present) in both property's discursive and material enactments"(Blomley 2003). Space like property, is active, not static, (and), "spaces of violence must be recognised as social achievements, rather than as social facts" (Blomley 2003, 126). Space thus assumes a role previously denied it, and performs a transitive role in the making of historical events.

This 'active', transitive conceptualisation of space carries implications for the way in which we view resource peripheries, particularly within the context of 'globalisation', a process that is increasingly seen as pre-dating modernity, rather than as an outcome of it. Geographical frontiers are ascribed, figuratively, temporally and spatially, in ways that serve to influence succeeding events. Their 'discovery' and 'invention' are acknowledged as part of powerful myths, which are worked and re-worked by human agents, serving to create environmental histories as important as the material worlds that they describe.

Elsewhere I have suggested that the re-working of space in cultural terms consists of separate but linked processes: the analogue, digital and virtual descriptions of space (Redclift 2006). Each of these provides a different construction of space and in the Mexican Caribbean is associated with distinctive 'pioneer' generations of settlers. In charting the resource histories of places, and the histories of the visitors and tourists

who have ‘discovered’ them, we are engaged in continually re-working a narrative. The social processes through which we come to identify space over time resemble a series of ‘successions’ or ‘layers’ (Jones 2003, Martins 2000, Salvatore 1996).

The creation of existential spaces, as part of the fabric of environmental history, is seen clearly in the accounts of the Caribbean coast of Mexico, today’s state of Quintana Roo. Over time we see: first, a ‘wilderness’, discovered by archaeologists, second, a ‘natural resource’ frontier of *chicle* extraction for the manufacture of chewing gum, third, an ‘abandoned space’ identified and exploited by early tourist entrepreneurs, and fourth, a ‘tropical paradise’ promising escape to international tourists, and ultimately turning nature into a commodity, as theme park, leisure complex and cruise liner.

There is also a darker side to this space of consumption and production, represented by the legacy of the Caste War, one of the great indigenous revolutions of the nineteenth century, which brought the ‘rebel’ Maya into conflict with their white masters. This conflict still resonates in the region to this day and constitutes another part of the narrative.

### **Space as wilderness**

The tourist ‘pioneers’ of the mid twentieth century were beating a track that had been followed by earlier pioneers, the most famous of whom were John Stephens and Frederick Catherwood, the ‘giants’ of Mayan archaeology in the mid nineteenth century. Stephens and Catherwood had already explored the major Mayan sites of northern Yucatan, such as Chichen Itza and Uxmal, and arrived in Valladolid at the end of March 1841. They made enquiries about getting to the Caribbean coast, no mean feat at the time since there were no roads. “It is almost impossible to conceive what

difficulty we had in learning anything definite concerning the road we ought to take”, Stephens reported to his diary (Stephens 1988).

The coastal location that they aimed for was the settlement of Tankah, where a pirate named Molas, had sought to evade the authorities in Merida, where he had been convicted of smuggling. Since there was no road they had to journey to the northern (Gulf) coast and take a ‘canoa’ down the Caribbean, past today’s Cancun and Isla Mujeres, to the Mayan fortress of Tulum. The journey took them two weeks, and was accomplished despite every privation known to explorers of the time: no wind, no protection against the sun, so much provisioning that there was no space for the human occupants, and little idea of where they were headed. Stephens says their objective was “...in following the track of the Spaniards along this coast, to discover vestiges or remains of the great (Mayan) buildings of lime and stone (that had been reported)...”.

They sailed first past Isla Mujeres, or ‘Mugeres’ as Stephens described it, an island notorious as the resort of Lafitte, another pirate who (rather like Molas) was well regarded by the Mayan fishing communities of the coast, and “paid them well for all he took from them...”. Next was Cancun, or Kancune, as Stephens described it, which left a very poor impression on the travellers. It was nothing but “a barren strip of land, with sand hills, where the water was so salt we could barely drink it...” Whenever they landed, usually in search of water, they were pursued by hordes of ‘moschetoes’, that made life difficult, and would continue to have done so one hundred and thirty years later, if the Mexican Government had not intervened and sprayed them into oblivion.

They went on to land on Cozumel, at the only inhabited spot, the ranch of San Miguel, where they record that “our act of taking possession was unusually exciting”. Here they stopped to feast on turtle and fresh water, strolled along the shoreline picking

up shells, and went to sleep in their hammocks, “as piratical a group as ever scuttled a ship at sea”.

The island of Cozumel had been ‘discovered’ several times before; once ‘by accident’ it is said, when Juan de Grijalva caught sight of it in March 1518. He had set sail from Cuba. Unlike Grijalva, three centuries earlier, John Stephens knew where he was in 1841 and noted for the benefit of the ‘Modern Traveller’ that they alone had proprietorship of “this desolate island”.

As we shall see Cozumel reappears a century later, in the 1950s, as the location of some of the first successful tourist enterprises on the Mexican Caribbean coast. The intervening century, however, saw the area developed for quite different purposes: as part of the enclave economies associated with hardwoods and *chicle*, the resin from which chewing gum was made.

### **Space as a natural resource frontier: chicle and chewing gum.**

The ‘boom’ in *chicle* production, to meet North American consumer demand, began during the first two decades of the twentieth century, and reached its peak in the early 1940s. *Chicle*, the raw material from which chewing gum was derived, came from the Yucatan Peninsular and Central America, where the *chicozapote* tree grew in the high, tropical forests. The demand for *chicle* from the United States, served eventually to transform the landscape and ecology of the east and south of the Yucatan peninsular of Mexico, and paved the way for new land uses on the tropical frontier. It led to harvesting and production practices which are of contemporary importance, especially for protected tropical forest areas, in which forest products represent a growing market activity.

Most consumers in the twentieth century were doubtless oblivious of its origins, but nevertheless, by stimulating these distant commercial links chewing gum illustrates the way in which ‘nature’ is actively produced as both material artefact and discursive construct (Bridge and Jonas 2002).

Research has recently emphasized the way in which consumer markets, especially for products of extractive industries, are linked in complex ways with environmental and other policies (Simonian 1995, Bridges 2001, Redclift 2001). The areas from which raw materials are sourced have been described as “the marginal spaces in, and through which, broader processes of socio-spatial order are worked out” (Bridges 2001, 2149). Indeed, it is suggested that today these spaces are rendered even more marginal by the prospect of plenty: “already rendered distant, shadowy spaces by the value of the commodity chains, these commodity supply zones are pushed further out of sight by the emergence of a post-scarcity discourse that celebrates material abundance” (Bridges 2001, 2153). In the case of chewing gum its close association with the values of the twentieth century: leisure, independence and private indulgences, seem almost to be precursors of the ‘post-scarcity’ and ‘post-material’ age.

The impact of the enormous surge in consumption during the 1930s and 1940s, and the later depression in sales, when synthetics derived from hydrocarbons replaced the natural gum base, was felt particularly acutely in the east of the Yucatan peninsular. Here, early production had been associated, like many extractive forest products, with transient labour working under onerous conditions and in an unregulated fashion, like so many ‘informal sector’ activities today.

Most of the first commercial *chicleros* (tappers) were natives of Veracruz on the Gulf coast, and they often arrived in the Yucatan peninsular by boat after dangerous sea

crossings. They worked under contract to men who provided the equipment for tapping gum, and lived for six months of the year (the wet season from June to December) in camps located deep in the mature tropical forest. Working in groups of about a dozen men in each camp, they tapped the milky white resin from the *chicozapote* trees within range of their camp. Using rope and a machete, they climbed these trees, cutting zigzags in the bark and collecting the tasteless resin in cups underneath. This was then boiled in vats until it had congealed, and could be transported in 'bricks' on mule-back. The contractors were allocated areas of forest for tapping, or entered it illegally, for there were few workable laws in what was very much a frontier area.

The principal zone of production was a stronghold of rebel Maya chieftains, veterans of the Caste War between whites and Mayan followers of the 'Talking Cross'. Their leader in the south of the peninsular, until 1931, was the notorious 'General' May, who had developed close relations with American gum manufacturers, such as Wrigley's, and whose revenues from *chicle* helped to fund armed opposition (Ramos Diaz 1999, Reed 2001). However, the containment, and suppression, of the rebel Maya, and the enlarged role of the Mexican state, especially under President Cardenas in the 1940s, brought the harvesting of *chicle* within the compass of organized cooperatives, and increasing measures of state regulation. In 1942 nearly four million kilos of *chicle* from Yucatan was sold to four large American-owned companies: Beechnut, Wrigley's, American Chicle Co. and Clark Bros. The commercial, and strategic, importance of these sources, at their height, can be gauged from the fact that, in June 1943 representatives of *chicle* cooperatives travelled to the United States, "discuss and defend the price of *chicle*, one of the most appreciated wartime materials in the United States" (Encyclopaedia 1998, 101).

During the 1940s and 1950s the Mexican Government sought to control both the production and the export of gum, through the Agricultural Ministry and the Banco de Comercio Exterior. *Chicleros* were encouraged to organize themselves into marketing cooperatives and greater controls were exercised over their production by the Federal Government determined to 'settle' the forest frontier of Quintana Roo (and, by the late 1960s, to pave the way for mass tourism on the Caribbean coast south of Cancun). Most of the trees from which the resin was tapped, grew on land held by *ejidos* (peasant communities) or on federal lands, making them, a common property resource. Access to the forests, which was once governed by tradition and personal influence, became officially regulated. Production of *chicle* was increasingly managed through establishing production quotas and targets, and using more competitive tendering.

This period of state regulation, however, did nothing to reverse the fortunes of the industry. By the 1970s a forest industry that was potentially sustainable ecologically, and capable of providing livelihoods for poor families without causing wide-scale forest destruction, was in sharp decline, and secondary to the demands of global tourism (Primack et.al. 1998).

Chewing gum sourced from *chicle* replaced products that were also native to the indigenous cultures of the Americas, notably spruce gum. However, because *chicle* was sourced from the Yucatan Peninsula, several thousand miles from its main market in urban America, its origins were almost invisible to those who consumed it. It appeared, like other manufactured commodities, to have come into being to meet a need of consumers, rather than a livelihood for producers. Few commodities were more material; but because of the distance (culturally as well as geographically) that separated

consumers from producers, and the form taken by its commercial transformation into 'product', chewing gum was also invisible.

It was invisible, but not abandoned. The boom in *chicle* production eventually gave way to other forms of production and consumption, notably in the development of international tourism on an altogether more ambitious scale.

### **'Abandoned spaces' and the early tourist entrepreneurs**

The coast of today's state of Quintana Roo had never been fully 'abandoned' by the Spanish, although the distance from Merida, made it difficult for them to govern the area effectively. Before the Conquest this part of the coast had been among the most densely settled areas of the Mayan world, a fact that was commented on by the Spanish ships which first observed the Mayan city of Tulum, in the sixteenth century. However, after the Conquest the population was decimated by war, epidemics introduced from Europe, and the gradual movement of much of the population towards the interior of the Yucatan peninsular. After the Caste War, in 1851, the whole coastal zone was converted into a refuge for those Mayans fleeing bondage on the henequen plantations to the north (and, in the case of the island of Cozumel, people fleeing the 'rebel' Maya). It was then left to English hardwood traders and buccaneers, and settled by indigenous fishing communities (Andrews and Jones 2001).

One of the 'abandoned spaces' of the Mexican Caribbean was eventually renamed as the coastal resort of Playa Del Carmen, today one of the most rapidly urbanizing coastal settlements in Latin America. Playa was not 'discovered' until the summer of 1966, according to one account in a tourist magazine:

"Playa was discovered by a sixteen year old boy, in the summer of 1966. A momentous event, which changed forever the face of history for this small fishing village... In 1966 Fernando Barbachano Herrero, born of a family of pioneers, arrived there and found it inhabited by about eighty people, with

a single pier made of local (chico) zapote wood. Fernando befriended the local landowner, Roman Xian Lopez, and spent the next two years trying to talk him into relinquishing some of his land...”  
(Playa Magazine, August 1999, 7).

Two years later, in 1968, Fernando Barbachano bought twenty-seven hectares of this land adjacent to the beach for just over \$13,000 (US), or six cents a square meter. In 2003 it was worth about \$400 (US) a square metre, an increase of over six thousand per cent.

Today this piece of real estate constitutes less than ten per cent of Playa’s prime tourist development. As Playa developed, piers were built for the increasing number of tourist craft, and game fishers, hotels and bars were constructed fronting the ‘virgin’ beach, and clubs were opened a short way from the shoreline. The first hotel to be constructed was Hotel Molcas, in the 1970s, next to the little ferry terminal to Cozumel. Today the town possesses shopping malls, selling designer clothes and global brands. International gourmet restaurants compete for the lucrative tourist business; over twenty million tourists visit Mexico today. The beaches draw migrants from all over Mexico, particularly the poorer states such as Chiapas, and the town’s hinterland contains squatter settlements as large as any in urban Latin America. These areas have names which sometimes suggest wider political struggles: like ‘Donaldo Colosio’, a ‘squatter’ area named after a prominent politician in the PRI (Party of the Institutional Revolution) who was murdered in 1994 in Tijuana by a crime syndicate.

Tourist ‘pioneers’ had taken an interest in the Mexican Caribbean coast even before Fernando Barbachano stumbled upon the resort potential of Playa Del Carmen. In the longer view tourist expansion on the coast of Quintana Roo can be compared with the trade in dyewood three hundred years ago, or of mahogany and chicle, the raw material for chewing gum, during the last century. All three were milestones in the

development of the region, and linked it with global markets and consumers. Each possessed their own ‘pioneers’, like Fernando Barbachano, who ‘discovered’ a land of rich natural resources, apparently unworked by human hand. To some extent, however, these timber and gum pioneers not only paved the way for tourism; they re-entered the story at a later date as pioneers of tourism themselves. It is worth recalling that the account of Playa’s ‘discovery’ in the passage above refers to a “single pier made of local *zapote* wood...” Chicozapote was, of course, the tree from which *chicle* (chewing gum resin) was tapped. The tourist industry in turn occupied what had become an ‘abandoned space’ after the demise of *chicle* production in the 1960s.

The island of Cozumel, which lies opposite Playa Del Carmen geographically, was one of the first pioneer tourist zones on the coast, and provides an early illustration of the way in which tourist economies can develop successfully in highly demarcated spaces, such as tropical islands. The Grand Hotel Louvre on Cozumel, owned by Refugio Granados, had been constructed in the 1920s. Advertised in the *Revista de Quintana Roo*, in 1929, the owners publicised its merits in the following terms:

“Tourists, tourist, tourists, travellers and travel agents! If you want a well-Ventilated room and are demanding of the very best in attention, come to the Gran Hotel Louvre. In addition it has a magnificent restaurant attached. Set meals and a la carte meals are available in a constantly changing menu. Expert chef. Calle Juarez with Zaragoza. Proprietor Refugio Granados.” (Dachary and Burne 1998, 394).

Between the late 1920s and 1940s two other hotels were built on Cozumel, the Yuri and Playa, but at this time most visitors to what are today major Mayan archaeological sites on the mainland, still slept in improvised cabins. The majority of tourists still left Cozumel by boat; landed on the mainland coast at Tankah, stayed briefly at the most important copra estate near-by, and then either cut a path in the jungle to Tulum, or took a boat along the coast.

It was another century before modern tourism arrived in Cozumel, with the construction of Hotel Playa and the patronage of an influential American, William Chamberlain. From about 1952 onwards Chamberlain enticed numerous foreigners to the area, and constructed the first tourist *cabanas*, which he named 'Hotel Mayalum'. This was also the first recorded attempt to link the region and its coastal tourist attractions to the cultural life of the Maya, the historical antecedents of the 'Maya World', the brand name for most of this zone today.

In the mythology of pioneer coastal tourism, the main protagonists in Cozumel were adventurous Americans and a medley of rather unusual Mexican businessmen. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1948 a Panamanian merchant vessel, the 'Narwhal', under Captain J. Wilson Berringer, with a crew of ten, transporting bananas from Guatemala to Mobile, Alabama, was cast onto the reefs off the island. The owner of the boat, Charlie Fair travelled from New York to Cozumel to take charge of the rescue and supervise the paperwork. Here he soon made contact with Carlos Namur, one of the few local people to speak English. Namur, who is now celebrated in the museum of Cozumel as a 'founder and tourist pioneer', booked the American into the Hotel Playa, and Charlie Fair was so entranced with the island, and his stay there, that he almost forgot the circumstances of his arrival, and wrote to his friends recommending they join him.

By 1957 an article on the island had appeared in the American glossy magazine, '*Holiday*', and the first eight tourists arrived on a new flight from Merida to Cozumel.<sup>i</sup> Unfortunately their 'host', the indefatigable Carlos Namur, was himself in the United States at the time, and the tourists had to be put up with local families, some of them on the second floor of the building occupied by the harbourmaster. Sharing this accommodation only excited their interest more, and since several of the tourists were

journalists, they soon made good copy of their visit to tropical Mexico. Soon afterwards, in the 1960s, the French filmmaker Jacques Cousteau discovered the reefs nearby, and added some media celebrity to the island.

In Mexico Cozumel had blazed a modest trail, as a tourist destination, followed by Islas Mujeres, where relatively small hotels and guest-houses began to cluster around the modest central square, and provided important facilities for discriminating groups of Mexicans and Americans anxious to avoid large-scale tourism. By 1975 ninety thousand tourists were visiting Islas Mujeres annually. Behind much of this growth were powerful new political interests, later to play a part in the development of Cancun, and linked to the person of President Luis Echevarria, whose godfather was a leading businessman on the island.

During the 1960s fourteen new hotels were built in Cozumel, with a total of four hundred beds; an apparently modest figure in the light of subsequent developments. But by the end of the decade, fifty seven thousand tourists had visited the island; two thirds of them foreigners. This remarkable success prompted some of the inhabitants to examine their own histories more carefully. It was soon revealed that almost the entire population was made up of 'pioneers', or 'founders' (forjadores). Refugees from the Caste War had in fact repopulated contrary to the prevailing view, "created by global tourism that the Mexican Caribbean lacked any identity of its own", and the island, shortly after Stephens and Catherwood' visit. Unlike the rebel Maya who held the mainland, the twenty-two families of refugees who arrived in Cozumel in 1848, felt themselves to be the only surviving 'Mexicans' on the peninsular.

Cozumel had played an important advance role in tourist development because, apart from its roster of former chicle entrepreneurs, who were interested in putting their

capital into a profitable new business, it also boasted an international airport, originally built during the Second World War for United States airport reconnaissance. Cozumel had traditionally been a staging post for the natural resources of the region; now it was a natural watering hole for foreign tourists, moving in the opposite direction. Unlike Cancun, however, the pioneers and founders of Cozumel had been its own indigenous bourgeoisie (Dachary and Burne 1998)

**‘Tropical Paradise’: the consumption of space by mass tourism.**

The Mexican Caribbean coast was largely absent from mainstream history until Cancun was built, and the coast rediscovered almost a century later. Today a myth has developed around Cancun that probably explains why so much of its history is still unwritten. One of the principal tourist guides to the area says:

Cancun, until very recently, was an unknown area. Formerly it was a fishing town but over a period of thirty years it evolved into a place that has become famous worldwide. It is located in the south-east of Mexico with no more ‘body’ to it than the living spirit of the Mayas, a race that mysteriously disappeared and who were one of the great pre-Columbian cultures in Mexico. The only thing that remained was the land transformed into a paradise on earth”. (Everest Tourist Guide 2002)

This extract reveals all the major myths about the area: Cancun was uninhabited when it was ‘discovered’; it embodied the spirit of the ancient Maya (who had mysteriously disappeared); and the few remaining mortals who survived had the good fortune to be in possession of ‘paradise’. These three myths guide much of the ‘Maya World’ tourist discourse today. That is: space was devoid of culture, Indians were devoid of ancestors, ‘natives’ were possessed of ‘paradise’.

The development of Cancun, beginning in the 1970s, made earlier tourist incursions seem very modest indeed. In the view of some observers Cancun was chosen because the Mexican Caribbean was like a political tinderbox, liable to explode at any time. Cancun was not simply a gigantic tourist playground, in this view, it was an’

abandoned space' on the frontier, which needed to be 'settled, employed and occupied'. Even in 1970 almost half of the population of Cancun was from outside Quintana Roo; as the zone developed it pulled in people from all over southeast Mexico.

Before work even started on the vast physical infrastructure of Cancun, the Mexican Fund for Tourist Infrastructure (*Infratur*) and the *Banco de Mexico* completed an unusually complete feasibility study of the tourist potential of the region. The study reported that the withdrawal of Cuba from the tourist scene had left a vacuum that Mexico was in a weak position to exploit, since so much of its Caribbean coast was undeveloped. The danger was that other places such as the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Jamaica and the Virgin Islands, would fill the vacuum. The study suggested that two sites should be given priority for Mexican investment: Cancun, in the Caribbean and Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo on the Pacific. The early development of Cozumel gave the development of Cancun an advantage, and the reasons why the Yucatan peninsular should be favoured were spelled out in the document. It possessed an army of under-employed or irregularly employed workers, since the demise of henequen and chicle, and these workers lived close to some of the most beautiful marine environments in the Caribbean. Rapid tourist development would bring them both together.

Cancun could only be developed if all the available land was acquired by the project. The task of land acquisition, much of it in the form of lakes and marine lagoons, proved to be a mammoth operation. Unfortunately the man who was its guiding light, Carlos Nadir, died before his work could be completed. The project was divided into five sub-projects, separating the tourist zone from the new city. A bridge was built connecting the island of Cancun with the mainland, and the harbour of Puerto Juarez. At

the same time an international airport was constructed which could handle incoming flights from Europe and North America, as well as Mexico.

The second part of the project involved a massive drive to ‘sanitize’ the zone, eradicating mosquitoes like those that had bothered Stephens and Catherwood, as well as most other forms of wildlife, and providing a secure supply of fresh water by constructing twenty enormous holes in the porous rocks. Yucatan has no rivers. This was followed by the electrification of the new zone, linking it with the grid in Yucatan, and opening up a vast new telecommunications network. Finally, the whole area was subjected to building and construction on a scale hitherto unknown in the Caribbean.

About two-thirds of the capital for the development of Cancun, initially one hundred and forty two million dollars, was provided by the Mexican state, with help from Inter-American Development Bank loans. The scale of this investment, and the risks borne by the Mexican Government, virtually assured complementary private investment of a similar magnitude. Cancun began to function as a tourist resort in 1974 with fewer than two hundred hotel beds. By 1980, when the project’s first phase was completed, there were forty-seven hotels, four thousand beds and almost three hundred thousand tourists staying in Cancun. The coast was passing from a forest enclave, linking tropical forest products with the consumption of hardwoods and chewing gum in the United States, to a tourist emporium, bringing people from far away to utilize their consumer power on the Mexican Caribbean coast.

The collapse of oil prices in 1981 forced a massive devaluation of the Mexican currency the following year and, as a consequence, more efforts were made throughout the 1980s and 1990s to earn additional foreign exchange from tourism. Environmental concerns, although frequently voiced, did little to hold back the pace of tourism on the

Caribbean coast, nor the gradual destruction of the coastal habitat. Pollution became a growing problem, and Cancun spawned slums, which spread northwards, and sewage, which turned the lagoon on which the city was constructed, into a diseased sewer, alive with algal blooms, and exuding a terrible stench. Ecological problems were mirrored by a growth in criminal activity, including the large-scale laundering of drug money through inflated resort development. Drug barons moved into Cancun in the late 1980s, and one of them, Rafael Aguilar Guajardo, was famously gunned down in Cancun in April 1993.

By the early 1990s Cancun had lost much of its initial appeal, even to tourists. It had developed too quickly, and at too much cost, and the developers feared that however much lip service was paid to the environment, it was evident that mass tourism, especially from the United States and Europe, (which was increasingly the market for Cancun's resort owners), was moving elsewhere. Cancun had been the principal example of what has been described as an "... archipelago of artificial paradises" in tropical Mexico (Loreto and Cabo San Lucas in Baja California, Ixtapa near Acapulco, Puerto Escondido on the coast of Oaxaca) but Cancun had always been the jewel in the Mexican tourist crown (Dachary and Burne 1998).

Gradually foreign tourists began to follow the Mexican tourists, the backpackers and beachcombers, south of Cancun to the coastal area opposite Cozumel, where local 'tourist pioneers' established themselves in the 1970s, in places like Akumal. Most of the tourists however did not travel so far south, and they arrived eventually at Playa del Carmen. As we have seen. Here the 'pioneers' were of more recent provenance, like Ted Rhodes quoted in a tourist magazine. They were also instilled with 'Green' ambitions:

“Ted Rhodes is a local developer and pioneer for ecologically sound technologies, who is attempting to combine state-of-the-art technology, while enjoying the benefits of eco-tourism. He’s only been in the Playa area since 1995, but is in the process of planning and developing six major projects...carrying disdain for the use of the word ‘eco’, which he feels has been an over-abused term for a less than fully understood concept. Ted describes his ventures as ‘raw jungle converted with the hand of Mother Nature, to create a positive impact, using Mother Nature’s rules... He works with the natural elements of the land, employing natural building materials from agriculture to culture, including water treatment which respects the composition and inhabitants of the land...’ (Playa Magazine August 1999, 8).

Comments like those of Ted Rhodes have received attention because they encapsulate the difficulty with which advocates of more sustainable tourism have to grapple. It is clear that much of the development of Mexico’s Caribbean coast has been at the expense of conservation objectives, whether marine turtles, mangroves or coral reefs. The natural environment is fragile and needs protection. Nevertheless the economy of the region is highly dependent on tourism, and any suggestion that the environment is under threat rebounds against tourism. The response has been to provide a new ‘eco-tourist’ discourse that appears to pay attention to the concerns of the environmentalist and concerned tourist. Coastal development has been ‘re-branded’ as “eco-friendly”, “natural” and “sustainable”. However, these new ways of repackaging development pay scant attention to the history of the area, which shows every sign of social and political conflict and little consideration for long-term sustainable development.

### **Reinventing histories and the politics of space**

Chacchoben is the name given to a new ‘heritage’ village, built deep in the forest of southern Quintana Roo. It is a construction of the tourist industry, the local peasant community and the state government of Quintana Roo, built on the site of an original settlement of *chicleros*. The location of Chacchoben is important because it signals the development of one of the most ambitious tourist frontiers in Latin America. A six-lane

highway is being built, linking the existing road south to the largely undeveloped coast, to Mahahual and on to Xkalak, almost one hundred miles. Here a new generation of tourist pioneers is establishing itself, around diving and game fishing. These 'pioneers' threaten to leave when the tourist 'armies' descend, as they fear they will. The electric grid has only just arrived; the pylons were erected in April 2003. Meanwhile, fishing communities like Xkalak, on the coast, which was destroyed once by Hurricane Janet in 1955, are being gradually rebuilt, in preparation for the arrival of cruise ships, expected to dock in the port of Majahual nearby. A new generation of 'itinerant' tourists is setting foot on a stretch of the Mexican Caribbean coast formerly only known to pirates, *chicleros*, copra plantation workers and Mayan fishing families. An 'abandoned space' is being reclaimed and occupied by new visitors, who leave their 'mother ship' for only a few hours at a time, as tour coaches take them inland to spend their dollars in villages like Chacchoben.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that the way in which space is 'consumed' needs to be set in historical context. Investigating an area such as the Mexican Caribbean we meet several different historical narratives of space, and competing interpretations. The vast urban coastal development known today as 'Playa Del Carmen' to the international tourist industry, is also known to some by its original Mayan name, 'Xiaman-Ha', and by others as 'Solidaridad' (or solidarity) the revolutionary epithet used by the local administrative authority. The space represented by Playa can be translated into several spaces, each with their own history and mythology.

It is also clear that if we investigate the connections between this coast and the outside world it is clear that they have existed even when the area was looked upon as

having been ‘abandoned’, for example in the early colonial period after the fall of the Mayan empire and the hegemony of the Spanish. The Mexican Caribbean was important to pirates and privateers, mercenaries like Henry Morgan, who performed illegal acts on behalf of the British crown. Indeed, it is difficult to draw convincing lines of ‘legality’ in the white sand of the Caribbean, since natural resources were often exploited without license, and certainly without the consent of indigenous populations. The histories and politics of space are reinventions, for different generations and for different groups of people. I have argued that, taken together, these represent ‘layered’ histories, which serve to sanctify place through the activities of people whom some refer to as ‘pioneers’. In many cases spaces are ‘discovered’ by successive generations of travellers and visitors, as the uses to which they are put are transformed and, occasionally, memorialised. So the burgeoning tourist economies today find ‘pioneers’ in Cozumel, Akumal and Playa, whose early efforts (as we have seen) serve to sanctify current activities and lend the gravitas of history to market opportunities today. Similarly, the tourists from North America and Europe who visit the new ‘Eco-Parks’ being built on the coast, ‘discover’ the marine environments and ‘Mayan’ cultures in new, hybridized forms. And the ‘ecotourists’ who visit the Biosphere Reserve of Xian-Ka’an, under the direction of wildlife experts and specialist companies, ‘discover’ a space that has been drawn on the map, to provide cartographic evidence of global conservation (and a legitimacy that is often at odds with what happens there on the ground).

September 11<sup>th</sup> was an event that the world will not easily forget – indeed, its impacts are still felt in Mexico, as well as in most of the rest of the world. But the spaces of production and consumption on the Mexican Caribbean, or the ‘Mayan

Riviera' as it is represented today, are only the latest spatial imaginaries in a long history of changes surfaces and appearances. They illustrate that the fortunes of New York are closely linked with those of the Mexican Caribbean, and those of the Caribbean are linked with generations of people elsewhere, especially in Europe and North America, whose daily lives depended on connections that they were usually only dimly aware of.

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