



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

July 13, 2020

The Honorable James M. Inhofe
United States Senate
205 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Inhofe:

The Society for American Archaeology (SAA) opposes Senate bill S. 3131, the Mirador-Calakmul Basin Maya Security and Conservation Partnership Act of 2019, which would establish a “Maya Security and Conservation Partnership program.” The proposed partnership represents an attempt by the United States to impose upon a region beyond U.S. borders a different organization that would conflict with the jurisdictions of two established and appropriate agencies of the Guatemalan and Mexican governments. The principal purpose of this organization would be to foster the development of a tourism industry. Despite the way the program is described in the bill, it has been conceived and proposed in an entirely unilateral way by the United States. As decades of research have shown, development projects that ignore local agencies and actors are doomed to fail.

The SAA is an international organization that, since its founding in 1934, has been dedicated to research about and interpretation and protection of the archaeological heritage of the Americas. With nearly 7,000 members, the SAA represents professional and avocational archaeologists, archaeology students in colleges and universities, and archaeologists working at tribal agencies, museums, government agencies, and the private sector. The SAA has members throughout the United States, as well as in many nations around the world.

The bill also contains a simplistic and inaccurate description of the character and importance of cultural remains in an area straddling the border between northern Guatemala and adjacent Mexico, including the major ancient Maya cities of Mirador (Guatemala) and Calakmul (Mexico). The description emphasizes an exaggerated use of superlatives (“largest,” “tallest,” “first,” “earliest,” etc.) that are scientifically unjustified and intended to foster invidious cultural heritage comparisons. The Mirador-Calakmul “Basin” is not even a basin, but rather a plateau. The “pristine tropical forest” around Mirador in Guatemala is indeed an environmental jewel, but it is hardly pristine, consisting instead of a series of long-term forest concessions that harvest forest products in a government-approved sustainable program that both preserves the tropical forest and protects ancient Maya cultural remains while providing income that sustains the human communities of the region. The bill would overturn this successful system by removing land from this protected status in order to further tourism development. The nature of well-organized community economic development around Calakmul in Mexico is quite different but equally threatened by the bill. The proposed program has considered neither the welfare nor the wishes of the residents of the area it covers on either side of the Mexico-Guatemala border.

There has been no meaningful consultation with any relevant authorities or communities in either Guatemala or Mexico, contrary to the bill envisioning a program that it describes as “collaborative,” a “partnership,” and “binational.” Yet both countries have very well-developed governmental and nongovernmental organizations for cultural heritage protection, environmental protection, and archaeological research, none of which have been involved in planning in any way. Nor have they expressed any support for the proposed program. Two existing national natural and archaeological preserves—the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala and the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve in Mexico, incorporating several national parks—already preserve and protect the natural and cultural resources of the region in question.

As archaeologists, we appreciate and support the legitimacy of diverse cultural heritage and scientific interests in places, structures, and physical objects that connect the twenty-first century to the distant past. We advocate full participation of the indigenous and local communities of northern Guatemala and adjacent Mexico in the planning of any program to develop their region, and particularly to develop as tourist attractions ancestral sites seen by many as sacred. We stress the importance of rigorous peer review and evaluation of any archaeological research.

We join our archaeologist colleagues in Mexico and Guatemala in strong opposition to the program Senate bill S. 3131 would create.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joe Watkins". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Joe E. Watkins, PhD, RPA
President

CC: Sen. James E. Risch, Chairman, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Sen. Bob Menendez, Ranking Democrat, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations