

M A P P I N G T H E

GRAN SABANA

When he was a young man back in the 1950s, Jesús Velásquez built his daub-and-wattle home on the banks of the dark and muddy Apanwao River, deep in the Gran Sabana. Velásquez chose his land his pata well. There were forests nearby with deep, black soils. To the west rose a series of dry hills, the Waipa and Chini mountains, where deer were common and easy to hunt. In the river, the fish were large and plentiful. He built his house on a grassy plain and when the rainy season began, the earth was full of swarming maywak, delectable ants that he could mix in his pepper sauce. He called his village Maywak to honor the ants that shared the plains with him and helped him survive when hunting was difficult, and he knew he had found his sanctuary.

Today, Velásquez's little settlement has grown into a village of about eighty people. They are Pemon, for whom these rich lands of southeastern Venezuela have been their traditional home since the time before Columbus. But life in Maywak these days is a strange blend of the old and the new, people living uneasy, liminal lives, caught between modernity and tradition, as in most indigenous villages in Venezuela. Although village homes are still made of mud and straw and poles, most roofs are of sheet metal instead of grass. A concrete building houses the elementary school, where Pemon schoolchildren raise the Venezuelan flag and sing the national anthem in the early morning mist. But still, the village has no running water, and no electricity. There's a dirt road to Maywak that's passable with a four-by-four, but only in the dry season. Once, someone brought home a car battery and now teenagers play merengue and American rock in the blackness of the night. But in the morning, the boom box is silent. All you hear are the muffled voices of children, chopping wood for the morning fire, and the murmurs of men, going hunting with their bows and arrows. Women still tend the gardens, bake the traditional kasabe bread, and brew kachiri, the fermented drink made from manioc roots.



Text and photographs by Bjorn Sletto



Village elders in the vast Venezuelan savanna helped create the “paper of their land,” protecting it for future generations

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The contradictions that define life in Maywak even extend to the very name of the village. Only villagers and other elder Pemon know the community's real name is Maywak. On the only map of the area, produced by the government agency EDELCA, Maywak is called "Vista Alegre," a Spanish name dreamed up by a nameless bureaucrat. On other maps, Maywak does not appear at all, as if it never existed.

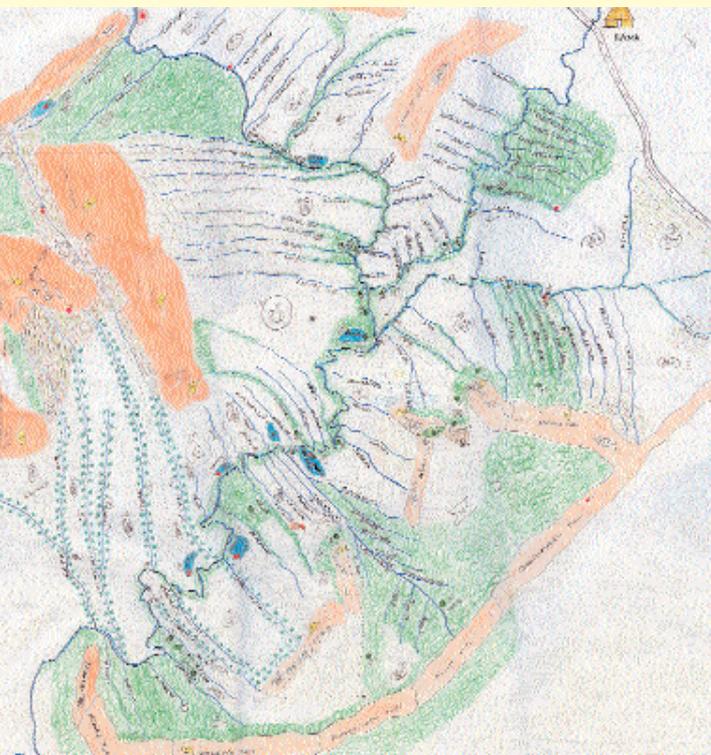
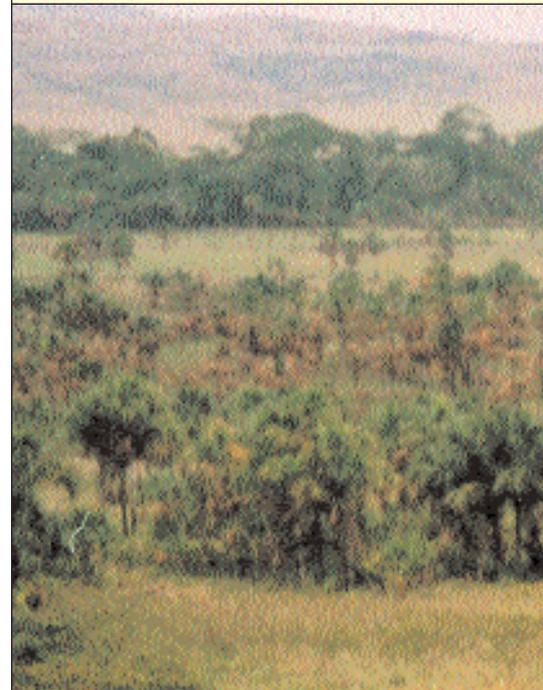
This is why Velásquez always wanted to make his own map. When he was young, he recalls, he and other men tried to draw a map of their homeland—the woods, rivers, hills, palm, and shrub lands—that make the Gran Sabana a crazy quilt of greens, browns, yellows, and life-giving veins of blue. "But we didn't know how to make a map," he says, with a glint in his one good eye. "We didn't have the training."

So, Velásquez says, he waited. As only a Pemon can, he waited for fifty years. He smiles his easy smile. "Today we have our map, thanks to the boys who came to help us. Now we finally have the 'paper of our land,' our *kowamopö dapon*."

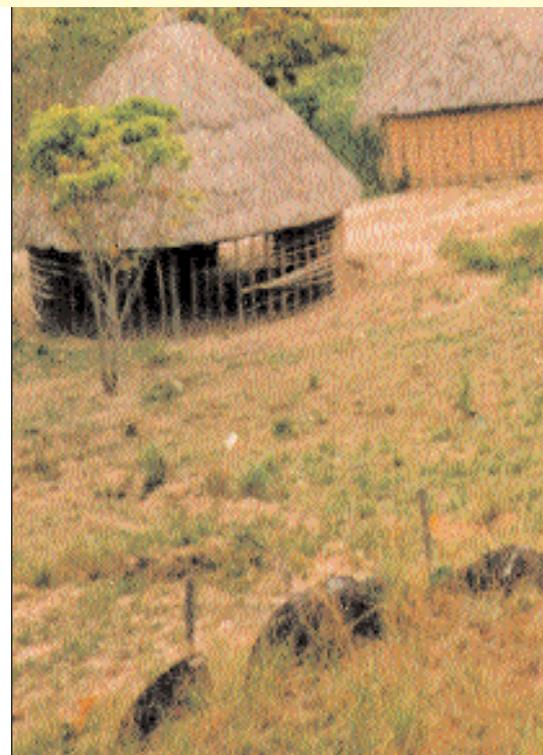
The paper of their land came to Maywak in July 2003, conceived in the minds of Velásquez and other elders, and brought to life by a group of young activists from Kumarakapay, a nearby, larger and more modern Pemon village. The mapping of Maywak was part of a four-year, participatory mapping project initiated in 2000 by

village chiefs, the capitanes, of twelve Pemon communities in "Sector 5," one of eight Pemon sectors, representing about 20 percent of their territory. Sector 5 forms the extreme southeastern corner of Venezuela, squeezed between the rain forests of Guyana in the north and the savannas of Brazil in the east, and the project aimed to map the cultural landscape what Venezuelan law calls habitat of the entire sector. It was an ambitious goal. These vast savanna lands dotted by forest patches, palm swamps, shrub lands, and mist-covered sandstone massifs called tepuys stretch some 125 miles (200 km) from the Sierra Lema in the north to the Kukenan River in the south, less than eight miles (12 kilometers) from the frontier city of Santa Elena and the Brazilian border. Only one asphalt road, the Pan American Highway, crosses the Gran Sabana. Although some communities are linked to the highway with rutted and treacherous dirt tracks, most villages are a four-to-eight-hour hike from the highway on trails that wind through deep swamps and over

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steep and rocky hills, and through river currents that tug and push at your legs as you wade across.

The mapping project, “Proyecto Etnocartográfico Inna Kowantok” (Ethnocartography Project “Our Land”), differed from the cartography typically conducted by state agencies. It was “participatory”: Pemon worked with other Pemon and drew maps, which were later transformed into a standard map using the Geographic Information System ArcView, a computer-based mapping program. And the project relied on the “mental maps” of Pemon elders: their knowledge of the distribution of natural features, such as forests and rivers; their mental picture of the many trails that criss-cross the Gran Sabana, leading to hunting areas, fishing grounds, gardens, and places where they collect termites and fruits; and their memories of historic sites and sacred places, such as the hills the *imawari* (Pemon ancestors) have declared off-limits, ponds where the *ürütürü* (dangerous tigers) live, and the mountain homes of the *urupre*, the fierce dragons that can kill a hunter with a single swipe of its claws. But perhaps most importantly, elders located the hundreds of small settlements—sometimes merely the house of a single family—scattered throughout the Gran Sabana and recorded their proper, Pemon name, in most cases for the first time. “It was good that we made our own map,” says Leticia Fernandez, an elder woman from Kumarakapay. “And do you know why? It’s because we are from here.”

For modern city-dwellers, making a map might not seem like a momentous undertaking. But for the Pemon and other indigenous people who have an intensely personal relationship with their land, and who have long experienced the disrespect of scientists and government officials, a map of their own has enormous, symbolic value. “Venezuelans don’t know the history of this land,” says Antonio Gonzales, an elder, former village chief in Kumarakapay, and an active participant in the mapping project. “We are the ones who know. We know the whole story. Venezuelans can put their own names on places, but we know the story of these places. Because these places are in my territory, here where we are living.”

As Gonzales suggests, indigenous people have an intimate knowledge of their environment, mental maps that are amazingly detailed and accurate. The Pemon and other indigenous live in the embrace of their natural environment, forming their world view and their cosmology through

the memories and legends they attach to natural places. In the Gran Sabana, virtually every hilltop, pond, and forest patch has its own name, its own history, and its own meaning. To become a responsible and educated Pemon adult is to know the meaning and locations of each of these places. This is why a map of indigenous territory must rely as much on traditional, local knowledge, as on modern cartographic techniques. But the challenge lies in recording these mental maps and converting them, as faithfully as possible, to standard maps. In the Gran Sabana as in other indigenous areas, cultural differences, language barriers, and logistical problems such as a lack of electricity, roads, and telephones, create formidable challenges to participatory mapping projects. To overcome these obstacles, indigenous peoples and their collaborators need technical skills, creativity, dedication, and not the least: patience.

In the case of the Gran Sabana, twelve young villagers from Kumarakapay became key to the mapping project: since they could speak both Pemon and Spanish, they were able to gain the confidence of elders and translate their knowledge into a legible, standardized form. During the two years of working together, the ethnocartographers and the author grew into a tight group of colleagues and friends, hiking together to distant villages, cooking over open fires, fighting mosquitoes and fatigue, and sharing frustrations and successes while the map of Sector 5 slowly grew from dream to reality. The ethnocartographers, who had no knowledge of cartography and had never spoken in village assemblies, eventually excelled at their work, easily negotiating with skeptical or dominant chiefs, and confidently guiding men, women, and children as they drew “mental maps” by hand. After the villagers had sketched their mental maps, the ethnocartographers patiently interviewed elders and turned vast, blank sheets into meticulously drawn “intermediary maps” (*mapas iniciales* in Spanish), and recorded more than two thousand names of land-use sites and detailed historical,

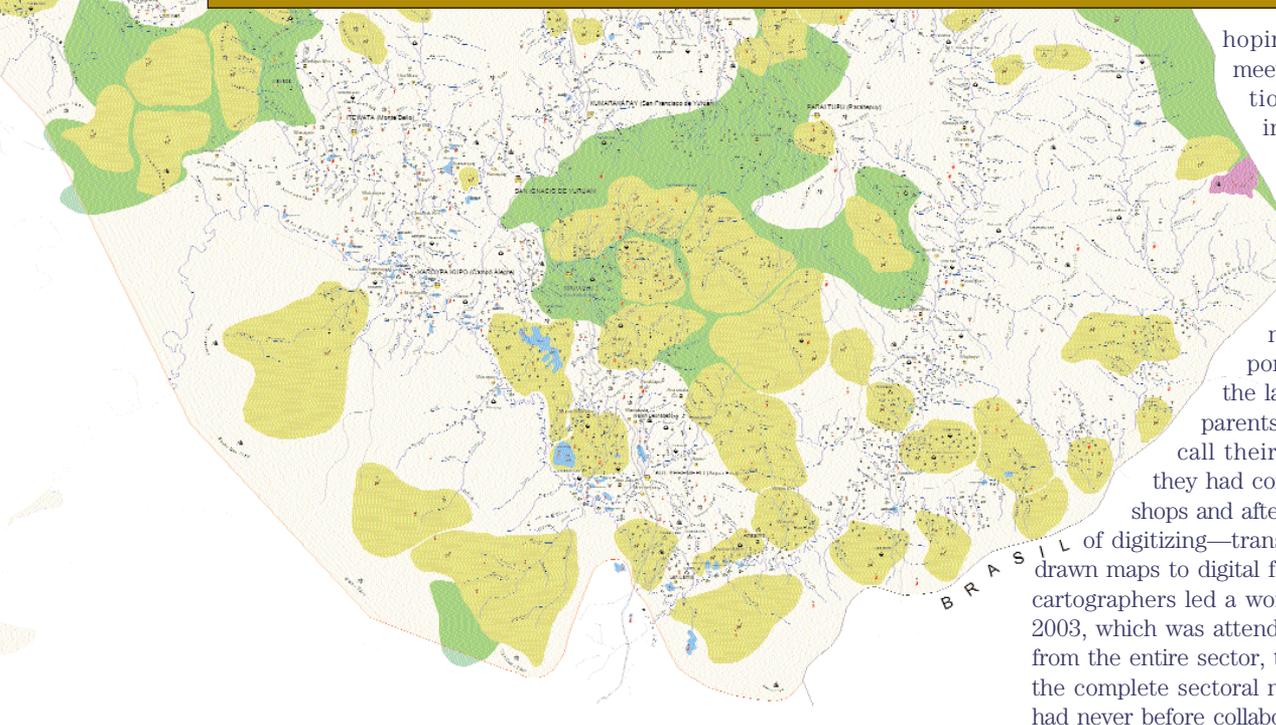
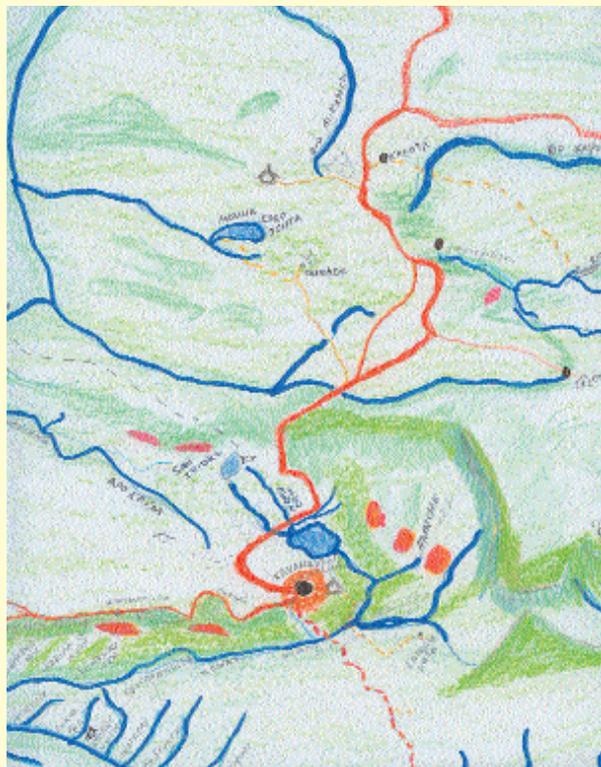
cultural, and land-use information about each site. Eventually, the skills of these indigenous cartographers reached the attention of government officials in Caracas, who invited them to share their experiences with state technicians and to assist the indigenous Warao to begin their own mapping project in the state of Delta Amacuro. To the ethnocartographers, it was a dream come true. Not only did they learn a valuable skill; they also made a difference for the future of their people.

From February 2002 to September 2003, the ethnocartographers traveled to ten communities, including Maywak, where they worked with Velásquez and other elders for four days in the shade of a shaky lean-to, children running underfoot, *kachiri*, jokes, and stories flowing freely, rain showers hammering on the metal roof. They were excited but also nervous, recalls Ana Cristina Rossi with a laugh. “When I was in Maywak I realized I had learned a lot. I was amazed. But I at the same time I was worried. I was hoping it all would turn out well. . . . I was



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hoping that we would meet people's expectations.” They did, indeed. After two years of mapping workshops, the ethnocartographers produced twelve different, hand-drawn maps of different portions of Sector 5, the land they and their parents and grandfathers call their birthright. Once they had completed the workshops and after uncounted hours of digitizing—transferring the hand-drawn maps to digital format—the ethnocartographers led a workshop in October 2003, which was attended by sixty elders from the entire sector, to revise a draft of the complete sectoral map. Villagers who had never before collaborated on a profes-

sional project—in fact, in many cases they could not read or write—worked under the direction of the young ethnocartographers to correct the spelling of place-names, to adjust the geographic locations of fishing and hunting grounds and other land-use sites, and to add new names to the map. During the project, the ethnocartographers and the author also referred to satellite images of the Gran Sabana and recorded almost two thousand geographic coordinates



with GPS units—often on week-long expeditions into the most remote corners of the sector—to make the map as geographically correct as possible.

In February 2004, two years after the first mapping workshop, the final map was printed at the Instituto Venezolano de Investigaciones Científicas (IVIC) in Caracas. At a ceremony in Kumarakapay later that month, the final map—and all original maps, photographs, and videos recorded by videographer Anibal Herrera—were turned over to the village chiefs, other indigenous leaders, and regional and national representatives of state agencies. Finally, Velásquez's settlement had earned a place on the map. And not as "Vista Alegre," but as Maywak. Finally, the knowledge of elder Pemon had been recorded and published, providing an important corrective to traditional state-produced maps of the region. The map, and the young Pemon who had led the project, became a source of intense pride for elders.

Says Fidel Calcaño, an elder from the community of Kavanayen: "You young people who are doing this work are more intelligent and are studying more than those before you. That makes me happy. I thank these young people and the professor who has come from far away to teach us, and who has made us come together to be one single heart. Because one person can not carry such a heavy burden."

The mapping project grew from the old, persistent dreams of people like Velásquez of

a map of their own, and from the fears of indigenous leaders in the Gran Sabana and elsewhere in Latin America that their land was being lost. For decades, the lands of the Pemon and other indigenous people have slowly been occupied by settlers, ravaged by mining and logging companies, and invaded by careless tourists and the companies that bring them. In the Gran Sabana in the late 1990s, the Pemon fought unsuccessfully to halt the construction of a power line across their land, even blocking the Pan American Highway and facing the bullets and tear gas of the National Guard. Daily, young indigenous people were confronted by the trappings of modern culture and grew impatient with the old ways. Instead of learning old dances, indigenous languages, or traditional food preparation, young Pemon and other indigenous people learned to dance

merengue and salsa, speak Spanish or Portuguese, and eat at McDonalds. These cultural influences combined with the assimilationist policies of most Latin American governments, which had long sought to integrate indigenous people into urban society and rid the modern nation of that which was considered backwards and primitive.

In the Gran Sabana, as elsewhere, these social changes are a source of great concern. Nodrid Delgado, a villager in Kumarakapay, says he doesn't know as much about the natural and spiritual life of the savanna as his father and grandfather, and his children know even less. "I know more or less the customs of our grandfathers," he says thoughtfully. "But I didn't teach them to my sons, because they started going to school when they were young boys. They didn't walk with me like I walked with my grandparents. I know how to hunt deer, I know how to call for the turkeys, I know how to fish, I know all that. But now that I have my business I stay in Kumarakapay all the time. I don't leave to hunt deer, to kill turkeys at four in the morning. I don't do these things anymore. And I don't bring the boys to do any of this, so they don't learn."

Until recently, indigenous people had little recourse to withstand such social pressures or to fight state agencies, companies, and individuals that had an interest in their land. They were impoverished, wracked by illness, and lacked education. And they were relatively few in numbers and therefore politically powerless: Although the

Pemon are one of the largest indigenous groups in Venezuela, their population is only about twenty thousand. But now, Latin American countries have moderated their policies, allowing for—even actively supporting—indigenous peoples' right to maintain their cultures and religions apart from mainstream society. And perhaps most importantly, indigenous people throughout Latin America have earned the rights to self-determination of their traditional homelands. Although in reality, these homelands—which take different forms in different countries, ranging from the semiautonomous region of the Kuna in Panama to the rescuardo system in Colombia and the reserve systems in Brazil—routinely are invaded by settlers, miners, and others, and state enforcement of their boundaries is weak and inconsistent, they nevertheless represent a great improvement from the state repression of the past.

In the case of Venezuela, these indigenous territories, or habitats, have still to become a reality. The notion of an indigenous habitat stems from the revised Venezuelan Constitution of 2000, which for the first time gave indigenous people rights to control large homelands designed to protect their culture, as opposed to the small blocks of land designated for communal farming, as was the case under the previous agrarian law. But the government has been slow to make this laudable intention a reality. Today, five years later, the legislation and methodologies to demarcate and legalize indigenous land claims are still being developed by a poorly funded state commission. Venezuelan indigenous leaders remain vigilant, lest the rights granted by the Constitution be diluted through political pressure. But despite the delays in enforcing their constitutional rights to territorial control, Venezuelan indigenous people such as the Pemon, the Y'kwana, and the Hoti are taking advantage of this political opening to map the lands where they have fished, hunted, and made their spiritual home since pre-Columbian days.

"The recognition of the rights of indigenous people in the Constitution was an important, historical achievement following many years of struggle," muses Juvencio Gómez, indigenous representative in the Bolívar state assembly, former village chief of Kumarakapay, and former president of the Indigenous Federation of the State of Bolívar (FIEB). "But this consecration of the rights of indigenous people doesn't mean that our aspirations have come to an end. Now we have to fight to make the collective property of our lands a reality."

This indigenous system of collective ownership of the land has translated into a respectful, low-impact relationship with the environment. The Pemon and other indigenous people have forged a bond with their homelands—with the forests, mountains, and rivers that surround them—that is at once magical, practical, and sustainable. They have developed land-use strategies that minimize the impact on the environment: shifting agriculture ideally suited to rain forests with fragile, shallow soils; plant breeding techniques intended to prevent the spread of disease and adapt to local conditions; hunting strategies designed to maintain animal populations. In the case of the Pemon, they maintain a proscriptive burning system designed to keep savanna grasses from accumulating and savanna fires from raging out of control. Soon after the end of the rainy season, the Pemon burn the savanna in small patches, only a few square feet at a time, turning the savanna into a mosaic of different shades of yellows and greens. This means that any fire, started anywhere in the savanna, will always stop by itself once it reaches a newly burned area. Through this system, fires are not likely to reach any of the forest patches, which provide shelter for game and prevent soil erosion.

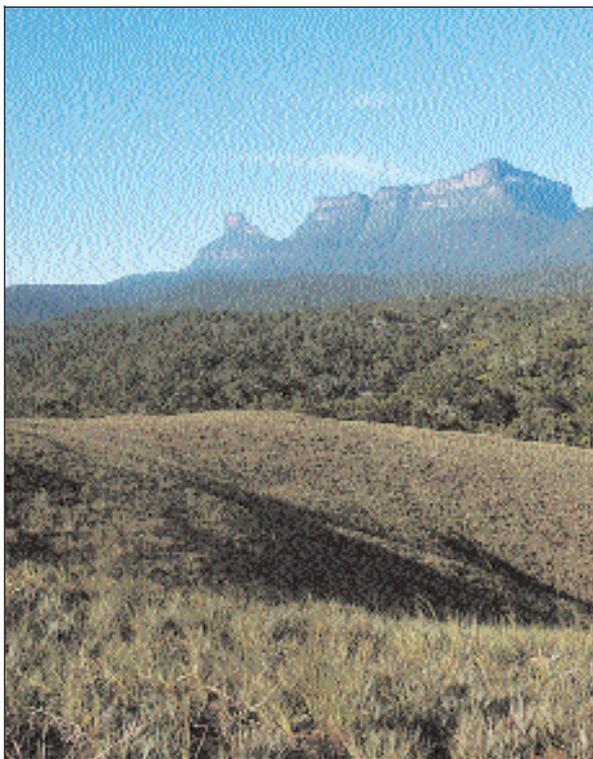
Such landscape management is increasingly appreciated by environmental scientists, who are beginning to see indigenous people as partners in the conservation of tropical forests. In fact, areas occupied by indigenous people correspond with the areas of greatest, remaining biodiversity in Latin America, in large part because indigenous people maintain land-use practices that are largely nonintrusive and sustainable. Increasingly, indigenous peoples' claims to greater self-determination receive powerful support from international environmental organizations such as the Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, and the Wildlife Conservation Society. No longer is indigenous self-determination merely an ethical cause feebly supported by nonbinding international treaties: It is becoming a key to biodiversity conservation. In the case in Venezuela, most of the Pemon homeland lies within Canaima National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site considered one of the most important wilderness areas in the world because of its wealth of endemic species. Greater self-determination for the Pemon not only improves their chances for cultural survival. It also means that Canaima National Park is more likely to be preserved for future generations of Venezuelans.

"To us indigenous people, our connec-

tion with Mother Earth has always been vital," explains Noeli Pocatererra, president of the Commission for Indigenous People and vice-president of the National Assembly, and through her close relationship with president Hugo Chávez, one of the most powerful politicians in Venezuela. "Our land is the foundation for our culture, our cosmology, our essence as indigenous people. We are nothing without our land." Because of this connection with their land,

survival of his people lies in the hands and hearts of his children and his grandchildren. It is for them he made this map, he says. "We are living in a land of legends," he says pensively, leaning on his staff. "And now we have fulfilled the dreams of our ancestors. Now our grandchildren can say, 'look, this is what our grandfathers made.'"

He pauses, staring dreamily across the mottled plains towards the Chini



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indigenous people care for the environment as a means to conserve biological diversity—but also to protect their own identity. "This is why the mapping project in the Gran Sabana is so important," she says. "It doesn't simply reflect the technical vision of a European scientist. It is a communicative process that facilitates the expression of indigenous views and knowledge. This project shows how we can create a dialogue between civilizations—but it also helps us protect the environment where indigenous people live."

Back in Maywak, Velásquez and his fellow map-makers think little about national politics, the international movements of indigenous people, or the broader impact of their work for biodiversity conservation. They simply know that the land means everything to them. In fact, *kowantok* not only means "homeland" in their language. It also means "life."

Velásquez walks with a staff now. His vision is weakening, making it impossible to go hunting the way he used to. The

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Mountains to the west. “But I always tell my grandchildren to continue living the legend of the Pemon,” he says. “And I hope that after I die, this land will still be ours.”■