Foreword

The Kuna of Panama have been learning the same hard environmental lesson as the rest of the world, that one must protect nature against oneself as well as against others.

Against external challenges and threats the Kuna have enjoyed remarkable success. Early in this century, they were menaced by intrusive rubber tappers, turtlers, and gatherers of ivory nuts; by manganese mines and two large banana plantations; by a government-sponsored colony; and by an official program to subdue the indigenous population and suppress its culture.

Provoked into a brief rebellion in 1925, the Kuna regained most of what they had lost through a happy combination of courage, organization, and good luck. They expelled the intruders, reincorporated the banana plantations as they succumbed to blight, and negotiated territorial guarantees and a *modus vivendi* with the national government. In 1938 Kuna territory was incorporated as the Comarca de San Blas, today known as Kuna Yala.

In recent years, new intruders have encroached on Kuna lands. From the West and the South, landless mestizo peasants have been sweeping across the Darién region, cutting down the forest and converting it to pasture. When the Kuna first awoke to the danger presented by this hungry pastoral army, the advance guard, coming over the mountains into Kuna Yala, had already stolen a march on them. In the East, impoverished black Colombians have also penetrated Kuna defenses, crossing the border to pan for gold and colonize Kuna land. This time the Kuna mobilized nonviolently. During the 1980s, teams of volunteers demarcated the borders of Kuna Yala, and through the PEMASKY Project, an effort financed by international agencies but initiated and run by the Kuna themselves, they worked to turn the mountainous boundary lands into a forest reserve.

The campaign against these external threats has not ended. In the course of the struggle, however, as the Kuna have taken stock of the

natural environment and their place in it, they have increasingly lamented losses and dangers that cannot be blamed on invading peasants: lobsters have disappeared from the daily diet; fishermen no longer find the huge schools of tiny fish used as bait; few sea turtles lay their eggs; game retreats into the mountains; blights destroy coconut palms; and farmland grows scarce.

As many Kuna see it, the problems come in part through loss of knowledge, the intimate knowledge of forest and marine environments retained by the oldest hunters, fishermen, agriculturists, and, especially, medicinal curers. As many young Kuna abandon traditional subsistence for paid labor, either in Kuna Yala or in the city, and as almost no one under thirty seriously apprentices to learn traditional medicine, the store of environmental knowledge rapidly diminishes and, with it, the intimacy of the Kuna's connection with the natural world.

This volume, the work of two Kuna biologists and a Panamanian colleague, confronts the environmental crisis in Kuna Yala by warning of the dangers at hand and by attempting to rebuild a connection with the natural world through a combination of traditional and scientific knowledge. For readers, non-Kuna as well as Kuna, it offers information otherwise unavailable on Isthmian human ecology—on hunting practices, agriculture, the medicinal use of plants, and even the commoditization of traditional forest products. Paradoxically, non-Kuna readers will gain something extra from this book precisely because they are *not* its primary audience. Because the authors are speaking most of all to their own people, the text allows the rest of us to eavesdrop, to listen as they exhort each other to wake up and to change.

The authors locate many of Kuna Yala's troubles in the market economy, in a perverse alliance between insiders and outsiders that makes cash-hungry Kuna the agents of foreign economic interests. While this criticism is well placed, there are other factors at play, and the predicament into which the Kuna have fallen is complex and extremely difficult to deal with. Also at work are population growth, careless practices, subsistence pressure, and other nonmarket sources of environmental degradation. And one should not underplay the Kuna's long involvement in the world economy—men may dive for lobsters less out of greed or boredom with traditional agriculture than to compensate for a declining trade in coconuts and a shrinking job market. The Kuna, like the indigenous peoples of North America who enthusiastically killed beaver so that Europeans could wear tall hats, have been drawn into a system vastly larger and more powerful than their own society. If they are to survive as a people into the next century, they must reconcile the subsistence and market economies as well as protect the borders of their small enclave.

Ever since the Enlightenment, sympathetic Europeans and Euro-Americans have looked to indigenous peoples, to Natural Man, for environmental wisdom. What the Kuna can teach us in this volume is that there are no easy solutions or innate ecologists, that even a people who see themselves placed on Mother Earth to care for her creation must confront the harm they do her. The struggle, it turns out, encompasses and implicates us all.

—James Howe
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