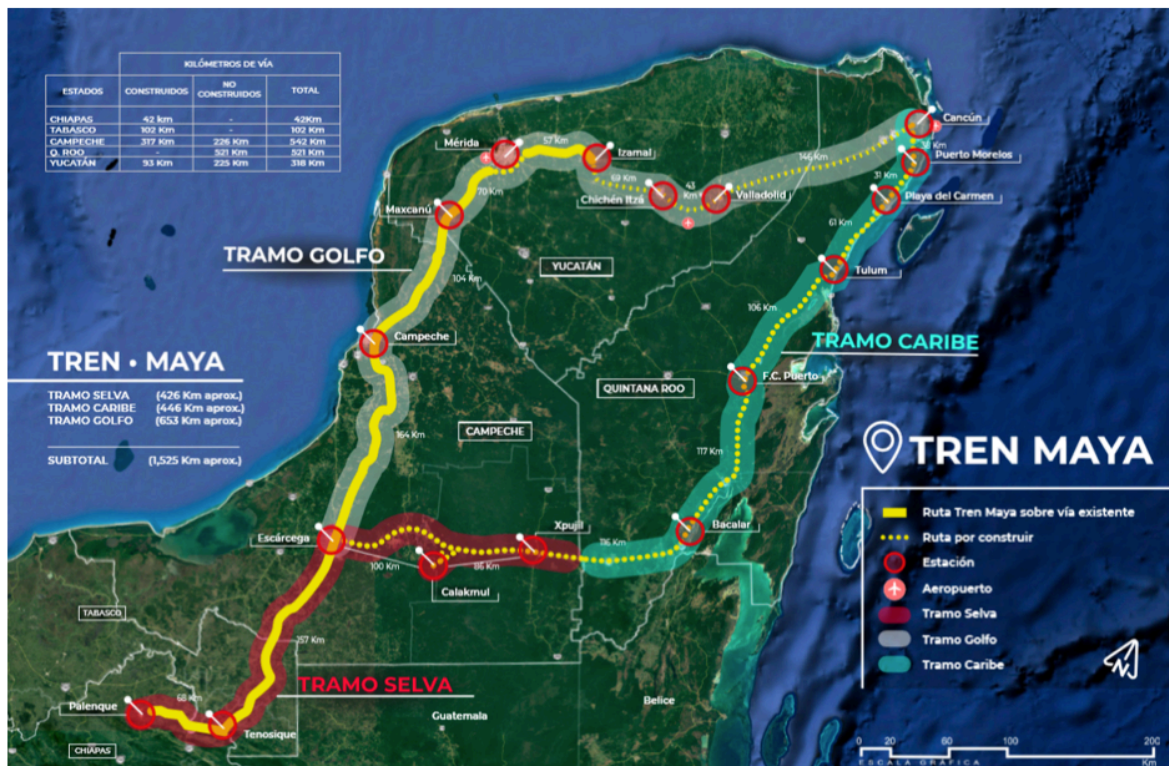**Mexico's 'Mayan Train' Is Bound for Controversy**

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President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's signature rail project would link cities and tourist sites in the Yucatan with rural areas and rainforests.
Martha Pskowski

The $6.5 billion Mayan Train would be Mexico's most ambitious passenger rail project in decades. // Press Office Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador

On December 16, two weeks after his inauguration, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador stood alongside politicians, businesspeople, and representatives of Mayan indigenous communities outside Palenque, Chiapas, in southern Mexico. Smoke rose from traditional *copal* incense chalices as the president-elect oversaw a Mayan ritual asking Mother Earth for permission to build his signature infrastructure project: *El Tren Maya*—the Mayan Train.

Running more than 900 miles from the beach resorts of Cancún to the Mayan archaeological site at Palenque, the $6.5 billion rail project would link towns, cities, and tourist attractions in five southern states. Planners expect a ridership of 8,000 passengers a day, evenly split between locals and tourists.

Speaking in his folksy style during the ritual, López Obrador, a former mayor of Mexico City elected in 2018 as the first left-wing president in modern Mexico, emphasized how the train would serve as a critical investment in Mexico's

economically depressed southeastern states. "This is an act of justice, because this region has been the most abandoned," said López Obrador, who made Mexico's stark income inequality a centerpiece of his campaign. "The moment of the southeast has arrived, and it's just in time. That's why [the train] is a very important public works project."

¡Error! Nombre de archivo no especificado. Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador takes part in an indigenous ceremony to mark the start of work on the Mayan Train project in Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico. (Office Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador/Handout via Reuters)

The Mayan Train represents just one part of López Obrador's ambitious agenda to reduce poverty and integrate the rural and indigenous populations that have been left out of development in the NAFTA era. But since its announcement in February 2018, the project has sparked fierce debate in Mexico. Some see it as a promising new tourism and economic development tool. And as the most ambitious new passenger rail line to be built in Mexico in decades, there are hopes that the Mayan Train might even usher in a new golden age of Mexican train travel. But others fear it's destined to become another of Mexico's notorious white elephant projects—and an ecological disaster in one of the world's most environmentally and archaeologically sensitive places.

López Obrador is hardly the first politician to dream of connecting the Yucatan Peninsula by train. Natural gum (*chicle*) was the region's principal export in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and private companies constructed their own railroads to move gum from the rainforest interior to nearby ports. In the 1920s, Amado Aguirre, governor of the newly formed federal territory Quintana Roo, wrote to the president calling for a train to be built from Quintana Roo to Yucatan. But a decade later, the first highways were built in the Peninsula; railroads lost the race.

More recently, López Obrador's predecessor, Enrique Peña Nieto, set out to build a train from Cancún to Mérida at the start of his administration in 2012, but canceled that project amid austerity cuts in 2015. His other major rail project was a train linking Mexico City and Toluca—a span of just 35 miles. That one is still under construction, six years later; activists have protested trees being cut down for its construction and the project's budget has ballooned by 50 percent.

Despite such previous setbacks, López Obrador has laid out an even more ambitious railroad agenda, promoting the development of Mexico's scanty passenger rail infrastructure as a candidate and now as president. Ever since his first presidential bid in 2006, he's promised to build high-speed train lines around the country. In 2012, he said trains would be the "motor of development" in his presidency.

That's the thinking behind the Mayan Train scheme, which was masterminded in a bid to link the rural communities of the Yucatan and encourage tourists to explore beyond the Maya Riviera, as the string of beach destinations along the Caribbean coast is known. The project is also designed to create more regional jobs, so people

no longer have to migrate from rural areas into the tourism centers to work low-wage jobs at hotels and resorts. According to the Quintana Roo Department of Labor, as many as 300 people move to the northern part of Quintana Roo every day in search of employment.

Spearheading the Mayan Train scheme is the National Fund for Tourism Development (FONATUR), a federal agency responsible for tourism infrastructure led by Rogelio Jiménez Pons. Thus far, the federal government has not carried out an exhaustive cost-benefit analysis for the train. What little the government has specified about the project relates to costs. López Obrador says that Mexico's national tourism tax will provide $1.5 billion in initial funding and the train will be built over several stages during his six-year term. In a January interview, Jiménez Pons named Canadian company Bombardier, the China Railway Construction Corporation, and the Spanish firm Construcciones y Auxiliar de Ferrocarriles (CAF) as a few possible bidders on the project.

FONATUR will use both existing railroad tracks and construct new ones. Where new tracks must be built, FONATUR assures they will use land that is already federal property, either alongside highways or electrical transmission lines, to avoid deforestation and land disputes. But indirect environmental impacts are harder to control for, critics of the project have pointed out: New commercial or residential development near stations could cause deforestation and tax public services in the region.

¡Error! Nombre de archivo no especificado. Concept renderings for proposed Mayan Train stations. (FONATUR)

Before construction begins, however, Mexican officials need to meet a litany of legal requirements. First is the Environmental Impact Statement to show that the train does not violate Mexico's environmental regulations. According to the Mexican Center for Environmental Law (CEMDA), the train will traverse 15 federal-level Natural Protected Areas and 20 state-level protected areas. FONATUR says that reforestation projects will accompany the train's construction. Impacts on fauna, water resources and biodiversity have not yet been quantified.

On February 19, the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN), one of Mexico's most important research universities, announced it would be carrying out the feasibility study and environmental impact study for the train. "We are prepared to face the challenges of the Mayan Train and are convinced that it will boost the economic and social growth of the region, where there are concerning levels of inequality," IPN's director Mario Alberto Rodríguez Casas said in a statement.

Once the impact statement is completed, the consultation process can begin. Under Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization, Mexico is required to consult indigenous communities that would be impacted, and these communities must give their free, prior, and informed consent for the train to be built.

In November, López Obrador held a public "referendum" on the Mayan Train across the country. Approximately 1 percent of Mexicans voted, with 89.9 percent voting in favor of the project. However, it did not meet the requirements of an indigenous consultation, which must take place in all impacted communities, with information accessible in indigenous languages. Construction plans are moving ahead anyway, without meeting this vital requirement.

FONATUR's Rogelio Jiménez Pons says the government will work closely with communities along the train's path to achieve equitable development. "What we have to avoid is another Atenco," he told Mexican online news site *Animal Político*, in reference to the town where police violently cracked down in 2006 against people protesting a new airport. "We're not going to foolishly try and displace people or pull wool over their eyes…. We're going to do things totally differently."

Some residents in remote parts of the Peninsula are glad the federal government is finally paying attention to the region. "In the previous presidential administration, the government paid for a lot of advertising for Calakmul, but there wasn't any investment to improve services here," says Arturo Agüero, a tour guide in the Calakmul area who has been participating in community meetings.

But there's less enthusiasm for the project among indigenous communities in the region. "This project isn't planned for us, the common people," community representatives wrote in an open letter sent to López Obrador in November. "It's a tourism project that will only benefit the wealthy and foreigners. We, who are the owners of the land, will only see it pass by, because there aren't stations planned for most of our communities."

That community resistance could lead to construction obstacles. Along the Caribbean coast, 11 *ejidos* have protested for decades to receive fair compensation from the federal government for the land seized to build federal highway 307, along which the Mayan Train will be built. (*Ejidos* are a type of communal land tenure formed during Mexico's agrarian reform in the mid-20th century.) In a January meeting with a FONATUR representative, the communities made their position clear: "Pay us what's fair according to the law, or the train won't go through."

Another challenge is the topography of the Yucatan Peninsula. The highly porous terrain is a karstic region, characterized by *cenotes,* subterranean caverns filled with water that form when the limestone bedrock collapses. It will take careful engineering to build the tracks and adjoining infrastructure, and some observers are skeptical that the government can pull it off. Cuauhtémoc León, an expert in rural development and director of the Center for Environmental Specialists (CEGAM) in Mexico City, wonders why FONATUR, a tourism agency staffed with architects and urbanists, is directing what could be the largest infrastructure project in Mexico in the coming years. "Where are the engineers?" he says. "This project can't be taken on by the tourism sector alone."

The most controversial section of the train will pass through the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, one of Mexico's largest natural protected areas and most important Mayan archaeological sites. During the Classic Period of the Mayan Empire in the 7th century, Calakmul was one of the largest Mayan cities, with a population of up to 50,000 people. It's now part of a UNESCO World Heritage site. The Mayan Train will run approximately 80 miles through the reserve and adjoining protected areas. The rural communities around it are *ejidos*—the types of long-neglected communities that López Obrador says the train will benefit.

But there's a problem with putting an infrastructure project designed to draw tourists inside a region of great ecological importance, many locals say. Mexico has been down this path before, with its mega-tourism developments in place like Cancun. Once a small fishing village, Cancun became a vacation mecca in the 1970s under the newly created FONATUR. Today it is now a city of three-quarters of a million people that attracts millions of visitors every year. But with little foresight or planning for their environmental impact, Cancun has suffered from deforestation, pollution, sewage problems, and habitat loss.

That cautionary lesson looms large over the Mayan Train, as dozens of scholars—including anthropologists, geographers, and ecologists—wrote in a letter to López Obrador in November. "After all of the ecological disasters of the past decades in the name of 'development'… …you can't start a project of this nature without a broad study of the ecological, cultural and archaeological impacts."

Jiménez Pons' response made the government's priorities clear: "People go first," he told *Animal Politico. "*We do not gain anything as a country having fat jaguars, but starving children; there needs to be a balance."

Meanwhile, rumors of land speculation are already rippling through the region in anticipation of the train's construction, according to Agüero and León. In Bacalar, a town that is already experiencing rapid development due to tourism, Linda Argáez Calderón, director of the Bacalar hotel association, says that foreign investors have been acquiring land rights in the *ejido.* "Unfortunately, speculation is already starting," she told the local media outlet *Noticaribe* in September. The same developers that already dominate the industry may have the upper hand, and the people who were supposed to benefit from the train could be the first ones pushed out to make way for powerful investors.

Locals are determined to make sure that economic development doesn't follow the same path it did in Cancún and destinations like Tulum, Holbox, and Bacalar. Even if FONATUR manages to clear the regulatory and financial hurdles and build the train, it will still need a detailed strategy for steering its benefits to local communities, and avoid repeating the cautionary tale of Cancún.

"Cancún is like an economic hurricane that can't be stopped," says Cuauhtémoc León. "The train will just feed that."