THE ECOLOGY OF OIL

This book explores the social and environmental consequences of oil extraction in the tropical rainforest. Using northern Veracruz as a case study, the author argues that oil production generated major historical and environmental transformations in land tenure systems and uses, and social organization. Such changes, furthermore, entailed effects, including the marginalization of indigenes, environmental destruction, and tense labor relations. In the context of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), however, the results of oil development did not go unchallenged. Mexican oil workers responded to their experience by forging a politicized culture and a radical left militancy that turned “oil country” into one of the most significant sites of class conflict in revolutionary Mexico. Ultimately, the book argues, Mexican oil workers deserve their share of credit for the 1938 decree nationalizing the foreign oil industry – heretofore reserved for President Lazaro Cárdenas – and thus changing the course of Mexican history.

Myrna I. Santiago is Associate Professor of History at St. Mary’s College of California. Before earning her Ph.D. in history from the University of California at Berkeley, she traveled to Mexico on a Fulbright Fellowship and later worked in Nicaragua as a Human Rights investigator. Her work has appeared in *Environmental History*. 
THE ECOLOGY OF OIL

ENVIRONMENT, LABOR, AND THE
MEXICAN REVOLUTION, 1900–1938

Myrna I. Santiago

St. Mary’s College of California
to Josefa De Alba Martínez,
for giving to me the education she never had
CONTENTS

List of Maps, Figures, Tables, and Appendices  ix
Acknowledgments xi

Introduction  1

PART ONE: THE HUASTECA BEFORE OIL
1 “Paradise” and “Progress”: The Huasteca in the Nineteenth Century  15

PART TWO: THE ECOLOGY OF OIL
2 Controlling the Tropical Forest: The Shift in Land Tenure Patterns  61
3 The Anatomy of Progress: Changing Land Use Patterns  101
4 “Masters of Men, Masters of Nature”: Social Change in the Huasteca  148

PART THREE: CHALLENGING THE ECOLOGY OF OIL
5 “Coarse in Manner”: Mexican Oil Workers, 1905–1921  205
6 Revolutionaries, Conservation, and Wasteland  256
7 Revolution from Below: The Oil Unions, 1924–1938  291

Conclusion  343
Epilogue  349

Appendices  357
A Note on the Sources  365
Archives Consulted  369
Selected Bibliography  373
Index  397
LIST OF MAPS, FIGURES, TABLES, AND APPENDICES

Maps
1. Major Oil Fields in the Huasteca, Veracruz, ca. 1921  
2. Tampico and Its Environs, ca. 1924

Figures
2.1. Illustration showing property lots in Tepetate, 1919  
3.1. One of six earthen dams belonging to El Aguila Petroleum Company at Potrero del Llano  
3.2. Well on fire at San Diego de la Mar, better known as “Dos Bocas”  
3.3. The Dos Bocas site in July 2004  
4.1. Well No. 4 at Potrero del Llano was struck by lightning on August 14, 1914  
4.2. Mexican workers putting out the fire at Potrero del Llano No. 4, 1914  
4.3. Housing for the foreign employees of El Aguila Petroleum Company in Tampico, ca. 1914  
4.4. Housing for Mexican craftsmen in Mata Redonda, still inhabited in 2004  
5.1. Mexican worker next to potential oil drilling site, 1910s  
7.1. Mexican workers at El Aguila’s refinery in Doña Cecilia, 1920

Tables
1.1. Population Census for the Huasteca, State of Veracruz, 1868–1882  
1.2. Speakers of Various Languages in Northern Veracruz, 1885–1921
Maps, Figures, Tables, and Appendices

1.3. Land Divided into Individual Lots in the Huasteca 52
2.1. Acres of Land Owned or Leased Throughout Mexico, Selected Oil Companies 68
2.2. Acres of Land Owned or Leased in Northern Veracruz, Selected Oil Companies 68
2.3. Acres of Land Owned and Leased Throughout Mexico, All Companies 69
3.1. Refineries Located in the Huasteca and Tampico, 1887–1924 112
5.1. United States Warships in the Gulf of Mexico, 1912–1921 211
5.2. Oil Workers’ Strikes in Tampico and Northern Veracruz, 1911–1921 232
6.1. Huastec Speakers in Northern Veracruz, 1921–1950 277
7.1. Selected Oil Workers’ Strikes in Tampico and Northern Veracruz, 1924–1926 301
7.2. Selected Oil Workers’ Strikes, 1934–1937 320

Appendices

I. Selected Land Transactions Between Hacendados and Oil Companies, 1881–1927 357
II. Oil Fields Opened for Exploitation in the Huasteca, 1901–1921 359
III. Selected Oil Industry Accidents in Tampico, 1912–1929 360
IV. Selected “Gusher” Wells and Fires in the Huasteca, 1901–1927 362
V. Mexican Oil Production, 1901–1937 363
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A dissertation turned into a book such as this one accumulates more debts than can ever be acknowledged. However, a few are an absolute must. The intellectual debts reach back in history. When she was at Princeton, Linda Lewin never could have imagined that I would return to haunt her as a graduate student at Berkeley nearly a decade later. She has traveled the road from undergraduate professor to dissertation chair to colleague and friend with patience, grace, and a large supply of red ink that I have come to depend on. I am in her debt forever. David Abalos and Manuel del Valle share the blame for steering me into academia after a prolonged hiatus from the ivory tower: I owe them for pointing me in the right direction. Unbeknown to them, a group of scholars nourished this work: William Cronon, Donald Worster, Candace Slater, and Richard White. I owe them thanks for exploring the world with new eyes. Carolyn Merchant pushed me to go where no Chicana had gone before and thus influenced my formation as an environmental historian; for that I am truly grateful. John R. McNeill and Linda Lewin read and reread versions of the manuscript and provided the critiques it begged for, although I alone am responsible for the final product and its shortcomings.

I have many institutional debts as well. In Mexico, the staff at the Archivo General de la Nación, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, the Archivo General del Estado de Veracruz, the Archivo Histórico del Ayuntamiento de Tampico, the Biblioteca del Instituto de Antropología at the Universidad Veracruzana, the librarians at the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia at Chapultepec Castle, and Dr. Lief Adleson were good-natured beyond the call of duty. In the United States, the archivists at Occidental College, the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming at Laramie, Southern Methodist University, the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Southern California, and the Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley retrieved, photocopied, and even mailed to me rare gems as
Acknowledgments

well as the pedestrian lode that historians mine on a daily basis; I thank them very, very much. In Europe, the staff at the Institute for Social Research in Amsterdam and at the International Center for Research on Anarchism in Lausanne were not only helpful, but also extraordinarily welcoming and friendly. Graciela Jolidon introduced me to the archive at the International Labor Organization in Geneva and to its accommodating staff, and I thank them all. Joshua Borkowski produced the two wonderful maps under the expert guidance of Darin Jensen at the University of California, Berkeley, and I thank them both for their good cheer and assistance with all matters technical. Jan Williams did a wonderful index under a lot of time pressure and I thank her for that. Katie Greczylo and the team at Cambridge University Press were methodical, accommodating, and superb with questions and editing. My gratitude to them for all their hard work.

The financial support for this project came from many sources. St. Mary’s College provided me two summer travel grants for research in the United States and Europe. Southern Methodist University allowed me a visit through the Clemens-DeGoyler Research Travel Grant, and the American Heritage Center honored me with the Bernard L. Majewski Fellowship to complete my research. I owe my graduate education and the completion of the manuscript in large part to the Ford Foundation Fellowships for Minorities. Between 1990 and 2001, the Foundation granted me predoctoral, doctoral, and postdoctoral fellowships. Without that support, I would not have been able to join that infamous dozen, the Chicana historians. I can only hope that seeing the finished product born of their collective efforts can begin to repay the debt of trust I incurred with all these institutions and individuals.

Finally, I thank the men of my life, René G. Santiago, René Víctor Macleay-Santiago, and Garrett D. Brown, for sharing archival and other adventures in this lengthy but fun decade.
Map 1. Major Oil Fields in the Huasteca, Veracruz, ca. 1921.
Map 2. Tampico and Its Environs, ca. 1924.

Sources: Boletín del Petróleo, Map section, Vol. 4, No. 4 (October 1917); Boletín del Petróleo, Map section, Vol. 22, No. 4 (October 1926); Secretaría de Industria, Comercio y Trabajo, Departamento de Petróleo, Comisión Técnica, Carta de la Zona Petrolífera del Norte de Veracruz y de las regiones colindantes. Mexico City: Secretaría de Industria, Comercio y Trabajo, Marzo 1925.