

Felipe Arreaga

FELIPE ARREAGA is a peasant—a poor farmer. He has spent his whole life in the Petatlán mountains in the Mexican state of Guerrero about 350 kilometers to the southwest of the capital, Mexico City. When Felipe was growing up in the 1950s, life was difficult for the peasants in the mountains. There were few schools or roads, little electrical power, and medical services were very poor.

In the Petatlán mountains—as in the rest of Mexico—most of the land is communally, not privately, owned. In 1917, after the Mexican revolution, parcels of land, called ejidos, were given to every village in the country. This land could not be sold. It belonged to all the villagers, and they, as a group, decided how the land was going to be used.

Up until 1950, the forests covering the Petatlán mountains were almost completely undisturbed, but during that time, commercial logging began. Because they owned the land in the ejidos, the villagers expected that they would be able to use the profits made from selling the trees to improve their lives. They thought they would finally have schools and roads and hospitals and electrical power.

However, that is not how things turned out: The logging industry actually damaged the peasants' lives. By 2000, forty percent of the forests in the Petatlán mountains had been destroyed by logging. But the peasants still didn't have good roads or schools, or hospitals, or much electrical power.

The Mexican government and the Guerrero state government granted licences to private companies including foreign-owned companies to log the mountains—and allowed them to keep the profits without compensating the peasants. By the 1970s much of the forest had been cut down. This was causing erosion and having a bad effect on water supplies. In addition, some of the cleared land had been planted with marijuana and opium poppies—once again for private profit.

It was during that time that Felipe and some other peasants began working together to protect their mountains and valleys against the inroads of private business. They approached the Governor of Guerrero State, Rubén Figueroa, to ask for help. However, as Felipe explained many years later, instead of helping them he sent soldiers to attack them.

In those days there was fighting in the mountains —between rebels and the Mexican army. Because Felipe's group had asked the government for help, the army thought they must be rebel supporters. So, in 1976, they attacked Felipe's village, Fresnos de Puerto Rico. His mother, Leonor, and his aunt were killed. Felipe was wounded and captured. He would probably have been hanged if a friend who worked for the government had not managed to persuade an army colonel that he was not connected with the rebels.

During the years that followed, Felipe continued to work to improve the life of the mountain peasants. He tried, as he puts it, to continue being a 'moral leader'. Despite the efforts of Felipe and others, the logging continued, and the forests continued to disappear.