

Re: AGS Bowman Expedition México Indígena Ethics

To: Friends, colleagues, and co-investigators in the Huasteca, San Luis Potosí and in the Sierra Juárez of Oaxaca, including Assemblies and leaders of our study communities of Chuchupe, La Lima, La Pila, Las Armas, Cuatlamayan, Chimalaco, Tazaquil, Santa Cruz, & Tancuime in the Huasteca, San Luis Potosí; and San Miguel Tiltepec & San Juan Yagila in the Sierra Juárez, Oaxaca; To our host community and municipal authorities of Ixtlán de Juárez; To our colleagues at state (RAN, INEGI, CDI, UASLP, UNAM), national (INEGI-Aguascalientes, SEMARNAT), and international (IPAGH) institutions; and To our colleagues in our departments and places of work (KU, UASLP, Carleton)

From: Professors and Students of the American Geographical Society Bowman Expedition México Indígena

Cc: To all other concerned parties

Uncertain to whom we address this statement, we are writing to you in the communities that participated in México Indígena, our American Geographical Society (AGS) prototype for geographical research. We are also writing to the institutions that have been involved in or supportive of our research, and to a broader readership of those who have heard accusations by an NGO Union of the Social Organizations of the Sierra Juárez of Oaxaca (UNOSJO) that have been posted and reposted on blogs, listservs, and websites and that have been reported on in newspapers and other media outlets. The statement is also being released in Spanish.

This extended statement, written by Expedition Leader Peter H. Herlihy with other México Indígena professors and students, follows a press release issued by the American Geographical Society (available on-line in English and Spanish at <http://www.amergeog.org/media.htm>) plus a statement by AGS President Jerome E. Dobson concerning the UNOSJO denouncement.

If you are aware of them, you, like we, are probably dismayed by UNOSJO's false accusations claiming a lack of transparency in our research. Our project has been an open book, as you and others know, being closely observed by U.S. and Mexican government and university authorities and students, and the participating communities. Indeed, in academic circles our approach has been considered a model for integrating participatory mapping – with professors, students, and community investigators – in the development of multi-scale digital understanding of land tenure changes in México. In keeping with ethical guidelines, we informed participants about all aspects of the research and worked with community approval. We employed a participatory, community-based approach for constructing cartographic and geographic understanding. We hoped the approach would bring attention to the challenges you face, and we never imagined how it could be so misunderstood elsewhere.

The México Indígena team of professors and students has a deep respect for the indigenous communities where we worked, and for other indigenous peoples around the world. We developed our research among México's indigenous populations precisely because your communities are frequently marginalized and yet so greatly impacted by the new neoliberal land reforms. Thus, far from "geoprivacy," México Indígena provided your participating communities with the cartographic tools you need to understand and better manage the influence of the land privatization program and other problems in your communities. We gave our skills and heartfelt commitment to help you with the challenging field and computer work required to map your community's lands.

We do not understand UNOSJO's motives, but we do know that it is by no means a politically neutral organization. It is a very small, independent, un-audited NGO. It is neither the legal representative nor spokesperson of any other of the communities where we worked. The issues raised by the hostile discourse are important ones. As a research team we thoroughly discussed ethical issues before we started and then again in community Assemblies and team meetings. Indeed, as you know, most indigenous Zapotec communities in the Ixtlán (and Villa Alta) area are strongly autonomous and, like indigenous communities elsewhere in the country, do not like NGOs, or anyone else, claiming to represent them or interfering in their internal affairs. Informed consent for our research came directly from the legal Assemblies in the communities where we worked.

UNOSJO Director Aldo González claims that UNOSJO only recently discovered that our AGS prototype *México Indígena* received funding from the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas. We cannot imagine how this could be true, because we spoke of it regularly, as outlined below. UNOSJO also suggests

that our research is part of the Human Terrain System (HTS), which is absolutely false. The HTS embeds social scientists, mostly anthropologists, directly within military operations, putting them and their informants at considerable risk. We do nothing of the sort. The allegations are simply not true.

In your formal community Assemblies, where we introduced our work, there were always lots of questions and discussions from community members about our objectives, methods, outcomes, and funding of the research. Indeed, we ended up carrying out the mapping research in only 9 Huasteca and 2 Sierra Juárez communities, because, based on these same discussions, many other Assemblies rejected our proposal to work with them. We have always maintained transparency, honesty and ethical conduct in our research, and we appreciate the study communities' willingness to work together with us as partners.

Outside your communities, many people took UNOSJO's unsubstantiated accusations at face value. Most do not realize that this NGO does not represent you, officially or otherwise. No indigenous community involved with us has ever complained about the maps being dangerous to them or causing exploitation of their lands. While statements characterize our involvement as geopiracy, secret military plots, and compromised intellectual property rights, we have never had a complaint come directly from any of you in the communities where we have worked. Quite to the contrary, your community leaders have openly expressed heartfelt appreciation for our hard work. And you recognize the usefulness of the maps we produced together with you, as well as the training received by the community investigators and university students involved.

Maps are powerful tools that can be used to exploit or empower. However, we remain firmly convinced that it is better for indigenous communities to be directly involved in making maps that show their lands rather than to be ignored in someone else's maps that show only empty spaces available for exploitation. Contrary to prevailing cartographic practice, México Indígena works with you, the members of the indigenous communities, to draft your own maps. We believe that our work provides insight into ethical issues surrounding research in indigenous communities, particularly the need to include indigenous communities not as objects of study but as partners in the research process. We respect the diversity of opinions shared by all actors in this debate. Indeed, we designed our work to show how indigenous communities, universities, and government sponsors could work together to do something beneficial for all.

Below, for you in the indigenous communities and public institutions where we worked, and for the broader community of scholars, and for our detractors in UNOSJO and elsewhere, we pose and answer questions that we believe are pertinent to the merits and ethics of our research.

### ***1. Are México Indígena and other AGS Bowman Expeditions of the American Geographical Society (AGS) connected to the Human Terrain System (HTS)?***

Absolutely not. The AGS Press Release explains that the Bowman Expeditions Program has never requested and never received any funding whatsoever from the Human Terrain System (HTS) Program. There has not even been any discussion between the two separate efforts. HTS is focused on anthropologists working in active war zones. The AGS program and México Indígena prototype focus on geographers working on academic research projects only in countries where they are welcome. Indeed, our posted ethical guidelines conflict seriously with the HTS' standard mode of operation ([http://web.ku.edu/~mexind/ethics\\_statement\\_prototype.htm](http://web.ku.edu/~mexind/ethics_statement_prototype.htm)).

To be clear, the México Indígena project is not in any way connected with the Human Terrain System, as claimed by the UNOSJO. It certainly is not part of any military plot against indigenous peoples, as claimed by UNOSJO. Nor does it represent a counterinsurgency strategy, as claimed by UNOSJO. There are no covert activities or secret data intelligence activities whatsoever. The AGS Bowman Expeditions Program represents the antithesis of the combat-oriented HTS Program, which we severely critiqued last year (see *Geographical Review* 98(3):395-415).

Each Bowman Expedition has a scholarly purpose, and no military purpose. They are conceived and designed by academics and not by military personnel. In contrast to the HTS, scholars and students, not military personnel, participate in the AGS Bowman Expeditions. Bowman researchers are not embedded in or in anyway connected to

U.S. military units. They have no operational or tactical military objective. They do not work in areas of active conflict.

Motivated by academic interests, Bowman Expeditions use and produce open-source (i.e., not secret or classified) results that are freely exchanged. Thus, I, Peter Herlihy, certify to you that it was I alone who determined that our research would focus on indigenous land ownership in the Huasteca and Sierra Juárez regions of México. The geographic data that we collected together with our study communities are meant to help and protect them, not hurt them. We also compiled related public cartographic and statistical information at regional, state, and national levels to understand the influence of the PROCEDE program on indigenous lands. Our modest results are not in any way designed for military application, as can be seen on our project website. Rather, the map results are vital for the communities and their exchanges with local and national governments to help better manage lands and resources.

Bowman Expeditions conduct academic research to learn about peoples and places around the world. The AGS sends a team of geographers (professors and students) to a selected foreign region to increase U.S. and international understanding of that region. It gathers cultural and physical GIS data, conducts original research on a geographical topic chosen by the lead investigator, builds collaborative relationships with foreign scholars and institutions, and reports findings in scholarly journals and popular media. The AGS Bowman Expeditions is an academic and scholarly way for providing much-needed geographical understanding of the world.

We endorse the AGS Bowman Expeditions because they operate under strict ethical and professional guidelines of the AGS together with the collaborating universities that ensure the academic freedom of the expeditions and the protection of the rights of everyone involved. And we agree that geographic ignorance of the world is one of the primary reasons for the failed foreign policies decisions that have plagued the United States and other countries in recent years. Accordingly, we embraced the opportunity to develop the prototype Bowman Expedition as a new model for producing geographical understanding.

## ***2. Has the AGS Bowman Expedition México Indígena been open and honest about who funded the research?***

We were always open and honest about our funding sources (see list in the AGS Press Release). Along with support from multiple government agencies and universities, the main source of funding for our México Indígena research and the AGS Bowman Expeditions Program has been the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO). The FMSO had no relationship with the collaborating universities outside the U.S. and provided them with no funding.

All the México Indígena funding sources were discussed in community Assemblies, were posted on the AGS and project websites, and were announced in our presentations, listed in our publications, and discussed in workshops and other public forums. When we sought Assembly approval to work in any given community, as detailed below, we explained everything to the community members and their Assembly about our research, including its funding. Indeed, many community assemblies we approached refused to work with us, perhaps because of this funding matter.

The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) is not a monolithic, homogenous entity. Contrary to popular opinion, there are many people of good will employed by the organization. The AGS Bowman Expeditions Program has tried to support and advance them in their courageous struggle against costly mistakes caused by geographic ignorance among their colleagues and the voting public. Some of them recognize the shortcomings of HTS, and they insist on the need for and importance of developing better peaceful alternatives to achieve geographic understanding and help prevent conflicts from occurring.

As academics and geographers, we contemplated long and hard before accepting funding from the FMSO, and we found nothing inherently wrong with it. We would not have accepted the funding if the FMSO had not endorsed these provisions: accepting our academic independence and university standards, agreeing that nothing would be secret, and agreeing that all our final results would be freely available to everyone. The FMSO truly maintained a “hands off” policy that allowed our scholars the freedom to do their own research projects. Indeed, we found no conflicts between the FMSO and our deep commitment to work in partnership with the indigenous study communities.

### ***3. What are the research objectives of México Indígena?***

The Bowman Expeditions prototype México Indígena was an academic research investigation and collaboration between the American Geographical Society (AGS) and the University of Kansas, which convened an academic collaboration agreement with the Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí. The development and implementation of the research theme and methodology, and even the selection of the study areas and communities, was exclusively the work of the professors and students on the expedition. Our project goals were: a) to develop the AGS Bowman Expedition prototype for improving geographical knowledge and b) to study how neoliberal land reforms in México and the gargantuan cadastral mapping and land certification program (PROCEDE) are influencing the land use and resource conservation of indigenous communities.

Our research analyzes public cadastral records on the PROCEDE program from the National Agrarian Registry (Registro Agrario Nacional, RAN) and geographic information from the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, INEGI) offices, and we did participatory research mapping with 11 indigenous communities (9 in the Huasteca Potosina and 2 in Oaxaca), to investigate how México's neoliberal land reforms due to the modification of Article 27 of the Constitution are influencing indigenous life in México today.

Our research suggests that while the privatization of parcels and communal lands can bring benefits to some sectors of Mexican society, they threaten indigenous lifeways through the introduction of individualistic and capitalistic practices. The land certification process changes the historic guarantees of the inalienability of *ejido* and other communal property, and it puts at risk the patrimony of indigenous and other rural families. The community maps from the México Indígena prototype have helped communities understand their new cadastral boundaries and changing property regimes better and they are already being used by community leaders for a variety of technical, educational, and legal purposes.

### ***4. Has México Indígena been transparent with the indigenous communities where it works and protected the confidentiality and other rights of research participants?***

As the AGS Bowman Expeditions prototype, México Indígena aimed at the highest standards of transparency and respect for the rights, dignity, and cultures of the indigenous communities where we worked. As a university-based project working with professors, students and community representatives, México Indígena has always kept the participating community well-informed about every aspect of our research, also informing authorities at the municipal, state, national, and international organizations. We always conducted the research in accordance with protocols and ethical standards established and monitored by the AGS, by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Kansas, as well as by the official leaders and Assemblies in the communities where we work.

México Indígena researchers have never misrepresented themselves or the prototype project and have never concealed any aspect of it. To gain informed consent of our study communities, during 2005 (in Huasteca) and 2006 (in Oaxaca), we participated in community Assemblies, which are the representative political body and highest legal authority in México's indigenous communities, to explain that we were an AGS-university-based project for the study of open-source geographic information that was funded by multiple U.S. and Mexican government sources, which we displayed in PowerPoint when there was electricity and verbally when there was not.

We provided additional details and contact information on all our collaborators and funders whenever asked. Concerning support from the FMSO, we explained it was a small, military research center of the U.S. military at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas that was supporting the AGS Bowman Expeditions, and our prototype México Indígena, as an appropriate way to develop geographical understanding of the world. A FMSO representative was, for example, present at the very first workshop with all the indigenous study communities of the Huasteca region of San Luis Potosí, where he was introduced and spoke to community leaders (*comisariados*), municipal authorities, and local investigators about the FMSO support of the AGS Bowman Expedition Program.

We explained to the Assemblies that our research was about how the new land reforms and PROCEDE program influence indigenous communities. We explained that we could study this while doing participatory research mapping of their communities to help them combine their own indigenous place names (that they recognize are falling from use) and other local information they choose to display, together with their community's public cadastral information from the RAN and topographic information from INEGI, to produce their own community map in printed and digital formats. No maps or Geographic Information System (GIS) in México combines the INEGI geographic and RAN cadastral information with the detailed and highly accurate community knowledge: the resulting maps are of enormous utility for the local community.

We informed the Assemblies that these resulting community maps would be published and that they would include their community's involvement in the credits. We also explained no personal information that we collected would ever be released outside the research team and we also guaranteed the confidentiality of each individual who completed one of the 140 household questionnaires on land use and land tenure. We explained that the remainder of the information used in the México Indígena investigation was public information collected from government offices and that all the information would be available to the communities at any time.

##### ***5. Did the México Indígena have the Informed Consent of the Communities where they worked?***

Yes. Our research was approved by the well attended community Assemblies. These Assemblies were usually long, with considerable debate in both Spanish and indigenous Teenek, Nahuatl, or Zapotec. Then, after receiving Assembly approval, we continually followed protocols of the community leaders and their local investigators while doing the research. In all the communities where we worked, our progress was checked periodically by Assemblies, in meetings with community authorities, and through our own workshops. Individuals who participated in the research and who acted as community representatives did so without being pressured.

Indigenous communities recognize they need standardized maps of their lands for boundary considerations, resource management, educational, and other purposes. As far as we know, this is the first research project in México that has ever facilitated the salvage of the fading cartographic knowledge of place – including native place-names -- of indigenous communities and has put it into a standard cartographic format. Indigenous authorities recognize that the maps had to be understood and exchanged between indigenous and state authorities to help communicate their problems and needs. This was a primary motivation for them to participate. Elders in particular were motivated to help document toponyms and other aspects of the cultural landscape that were in danger of being forgotten but which are now carefully documented.

Local investigators, along with students, professors, and other community representatives worked together to plot the trails, streams, roads, cultural sites, boundaries, place-names, and significant physical features that each community wanted on their maps. Local investigators were elected for the job by their Assembly and they were paid for their time by the project. From GPS collection of coordinates, to sketch mapping, to drafting standard maps, and carefully reviewing place names and other details for final publication, the local investigators worked side by side with professors and students, and the developing map results were reviewed by interested young and old alike.

The final community maps have been formally presented to all the study communities in paper and digital formats. For the first time, the maps document community boundaries together with topographic data and geographic and cultural information provided by the communities themselves. These maps combine the information needed for improved management of their lands and natural resource, and are valuable for future generations as they document the knowledge of elders of places and sites of historical and cultural importance.

What “dangers” are there to the community? What “geopiracy” has occurred? Our research and methodology put sophisticated geographic information and tools in the hands of the communities where we worked to empower them with the use of their own geographic knowledge. The communities themselves report their utmost satisfaction with our team and describe proudly their developing uses of their new maps. At any time, they are aware that they can use any other information from our research project that is stored on a small database with original copies at KU and UASLP; the Huasteca study communities have already begun to use it with the help of UASLP professors and students to develop their own new community projects.

Neither the communities nor the researchers have seen negative applications in the use of México Indígena project results to date. Indeed, various community members have begun using them independently in very positive ways to lower their property taxes, identify conservation areas, develop ecotourism plans, educate their youth about their culture and history, and to try to correct errors in the delimitation of their territorial boundaries.

More broadly, for nearly 20 years now, the maps that we have made using our participatory research mapping methodology have fortunately produced positive outcomes for the indigenous communities involved. While we have heard discourse from a politically-motivated NGO or two over the years about the threatening work we do with indigenous communities, we have never heard a complaint or an example of harm that they have caused from a single community.

#### ***6. What about the accessibility of results to the general public?***

The AGS ethical guidelines meant the final research results would be freely available to the general public. Our participatory mapping also required this provision to be able to produce a consensual map that would be exchanged between indigenous and state authorities. To reiterate, this policy was explained to the communities beforehand, and they knowingly agreed to have their final community maps published.

The geographic data we analyzed came from publicly available sources, which we had to process and georeference so that they could be displayed and mapped in our GIS. We collected data from INEGI and RAN offices related to the use of lands and natural resources. This was the first time the villagers themselves had been able to see this sort of national data in a form that they could compare with their own precise knowledge of their lands and limits.

No personal data has ever been released beyond the research team and examples of our public access results are available on-line at our website. The disseminated results come from either public information, or are aggregated or otherwise modified to maintain the confidentiality of individual participants.

#### ***Final Remarks Concerning the Recent Accusations***

UNOSJO is a small NGO that works with Zapotec and other indigenous communities in the Sierra Juárez of Oaxaca on development initiatives. It is not the political or official voice of the Zapotec communities where we did our research. Nor does the NGO speak for the other nine Tenek and Nahua communities from the Huasteca region of San Luis Potosí where we have also worked. Our approval to do research was granted directly by the communities and their Assemblies.

UNOSJO has done community development projects in support of the indigenous communities of the Sierra Juárez. That is why in 2006 we initially involved them in our project and we held a training workshop for potential local investigators at their Guelatao office, even allowing them to evaluate our database with full transparency. We stopped mapping and training with them in Guelatao, however, when we became uncertain of UNOSJO's role in political developments in Oaxaca that were far too conflictive for the community mapping work we were doing, and some communities where we worked did not agree with UNOSJO politics. As we said previously, Zapotec communities are politically active, autonomous, and not very welcome to outsiders or NGOs interfering in their internal affairs.

At that point, and in response to the political turmoil elsewhere in Oaxaca at the time, we changed our indigenous coordinator, finding someone who was not affiliated with UNOSJO, which was active in the APPO protests. However, the political unrest, anti-U.S. and anti-globalization rhetoric did reach our study area, and we were asked to stop mapping in one community. In another community, leaders were very supportive, but the assembly voted against participating in the research, and we of course fully respected that decision. We continued working only with the two Zapotec communities that were happy to work with us.

Although we had no obligation or relationship with UNOSJO, we did try on several occasions to meet with the UNOSJO director in 2007 and 2008 to keep them involved and aware of our activities, but contact and presence in

their offices dropped off significantly after the outbreak of the APPO protests. Additionally, our research required us to work directly with community authorities and we only wanted to work in communities where there was enthusiasm for an active partnership.

The UNOSJO accusations first came to our attention when the study community of San Miguel Tiltepec held an Assembly of all its *comuneros* (community members with voting rights) on December 13, 2008. The meeting was organized so that we could formally present the final map (printed in color and protected in plastic, and in digital format), but community authorities had already used it to evaluate a boundary error with their neighboring community of Santa Maria Josaa (resulting from RAN cadastral work to certify their communal lands in 2007). UNOSJO Director Aldo González was given time by the Assembly authorities to present his accusations about our research to the community.

México Indígena Expedition Leader Herlihy, together with University of Kansas Ph.D. student John Kelly, responded directly to the leadership and the entire Zapotec Assembly of Tiltepec concerning each and every one of UNOSJO's accusations that were later restated in the UNOSJO press release on January 14, 2009. We answered all the related questions from the *comuneros* during the four-hour long meeting and we respectfully offered to remove the maps from the project website and destroy the printed and digital map formats, if the community wanted.

The Assembly then debated among themselves in Zapotec and in the end the *Comisariado*, as leader of the Assembly, stood up to speak. A highly regarded leader, he first apologized to the México Indígena researchers for the unannounced UNOSJO presentation. He then expressed his deep appreciation for all the hard work of all the professors, students, and community representatives. He said that he and the community were very pleased with the project results and published maps. He also asked us to extend our work with their community. Then, in fact, the Tiltepec *Comisariado* reprimanded UNOSJO for not sharing their concerns about our project until its end, after two years of community involvement. Before departure, Herlihy explained again to the *Comisariado* and Local Investigator that their map would remain posted on the México Indígena Website and that we would be happy to remove it if ever requested by the community.

We are disappointed in the inaccurate representation of our project by UNOSJO, but we seek no higher endorsement of our México Indígena project or the AGS Bowman Expeditions Program than we have already received from the communities where we did our research. We hope to continue working with and supporting them and the AGS Bowman Expedition Program.

Finally, we want to reassure everyone in our study communities and other concerned institutions that as a team of professors and students we did this research with a deep commitment to help the indigenous communities develop their own maps and understanding of the serious threats the neoliberal land reforms bring to their autonomy and control of land and resources. We were equally committed to developing the AGS Bowman Expeditions prototype for foreign geographic scholarship.

As the participating community members have seen and experienced, living and working with us first hand, the participatory mapping research was time-consuming and arduous field work that combined with equally laborious GIS computer work. We are proud of the results that demonstrate the accuracy, precision, and cultural richness of the maps we were able to produce working together with the communities.

As Expedition Leader of the AGS Bowman Expeditions México Indígena Prototype, I, Peter Herlihy, would like to explain that I would never have accepted AGS President Jerry Dobson's offer to lead the Bowman Expedition Prototype and I would certainly never have brought the project to our study communities and supporting institutions if I thought it would bring any harm or negative impact.

Over the years, I have been privileged to lead similar participatory research mapping projects among indigenous populations of the Darien in Panama and of the Mosquitia in Honduras. The results of these projects have, as far as I know, never been used in any harmful way against the communities involved. And, while an NGO might like to suggest otherwise, no community where I worked ever made accusations about our work being threatening or dangerous to their communities. Almost uniformly, the literally hundreds of indigenous communities and leaders have praised our involvement with their communities, including my own and that of the hundreds of community investigators, university students, and professors we have worked with. Today, results from these projects have,

indeed, safeguarded native lands and they have been instrumental in the establishment and management of semi-autonomous homelands, biosphere reserves, and conservation areas in favor of indigenous populations in these two regions.

I believe, as do my fellow research team members, that our study communities and supporting institutions will find the maps and results we produced to be useful and sometimes powerful tools in the development and protection of indigenous community lands and resources where we worked. We are very happy to have had the honor of developing the AGS Bowman Expeditions Prototype and the privilege of working and living in your indigenous study communities.