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Forest Assessment Report

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Habilitación-Enganche: The Relationship of the *Patrón* and Labor within Modern  
Peruvian Forestry

**Introduction**

The Society, Economy and Nature class at the University of Richmond has worked in different groups to provide a comprehensive forest assessment report, analyzing various aspects of Peru's reformed forestry system. My research is part of the group focusing on *habilitación-enganche*, the system of bonded labor that has dominated Peruvian resource extraction since the rubber boom of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically, my report analyzes the role of the *patrón*, the actor who contracts labor and supplies access to credit and merchandise, facilitating the exploitative components of *habilitación-enganche*. The *patrón* is a key component of the pragmatic function of timber extraction in the upper Amazon. However, the historically exploitative relationship between the *patrón* and his laborers is not sustainable within the new system of concessions and increased government regulation. I aim to show that new partnerships between the two actors must be made to ensure long-term sustainable extraction, while detailing previous research relevant to the topic.

**Methods**

The method for this project was extensive literature review, with the reviewed literature obtained primarily through database searches. The literature was analyzed with the aim of identifying the historical and contemporary role of the *patrón* in Peruvian resource extraction, with the intent of determining that role's viability within the reformed Peruvian forestry system. Further, sources were

analyzed to identify the current relationship between *patrones* and laborers, as the relationship has changed over time. While some sources are based on direct accounts of Peruvian loggers and indigenous communities, other sources rely more heavily on historical research. In addition, this study utilized interviews with individuals who have engaged with indigenous communities and spent extensive time in the Peruvian Amazon.

## **Literature Review**

Several authors describe the *habilitación-enganche* system historically from the pre-rubber bust through the system's current function within Peruvian forestry. Sears and Pinedo-Vazquez (2011) describe *habilitación* as the force that drives Peruvian forestry. The authors explain that *habilitación* is an "...informal patronage system (610)", in which laborers are recruited and "hooked" into contracts that entangle them within a system of recurring debt. The laborers sign contracts for an advancement of merchandise on credit in return for extracted timber, and as Coomes and Barham (1994) explain, the laborers earn little more than subsistence returns. Laborers must continually extend their credit with their employers in order to obtain the equipment and materials necessary for timber extraction. This extension of credit results in an added quantity of logs the laborers must produce, positioning the laborer in a cycle of requiring greater merchandise to produce ever-increasing quantities of timber. Further, as Santos-Granero and Barclay (2000) note, the merchandise provided is always overvalued, with the timber extracted frequently undervalued, so it becomes very difficult for laborers to settle their debts. Salisbury (2007) and Killick (2008) explain that logging bosses immediately start a balance against the laborer's earnings by elevating the prices of transportation and food. The mounting debt may become inescapable for the laborer, who is then at the mercy of the individual to which he/she is indebted.

The *patrón* is the actor who recruits and enlists laborers, many of whom are from indigenous communities within the Amazonia region. Santos-Granero and Barclay (2000) detail the various methods *patrones* utilize to enlist laborers, which

include taking advantage of the laborers' illiteracy, providing alcohol to engage workers when their decision-making abilities are impaired, and utilizing political ties with authorities to further encourage laborers to sign contracts (Santos-Granero and Barclay, 2000). In addition, Santos-Granero and Barclay (2000) discuss methods of manipulation employed by the *patrones* to enlist the help of indigenous headmen in producing laborers. This information is in line with that which is presented by Bedoya (1997), Coomes (1994), Salisbury (2007), and Hvalkof (2006), who detail the methods of coercion exploited by the *patrones* to secure labor. While all of the information mentioned by these authors is important in explaining the origin of power for the *patrón*, it is necessary to also recognize the intersection of the social and economic relationships between the *patrón* and indigenous communities, a point central to the *patrón's* ability to obtain labor. Further, in reforming forest law it is important for legislators to understand the *patrón's* role in the functioning of Peruvian forestry, both as the supplier of capital, the organizer of labor, and the mediator between that labor and domestic markets.

## **Analysis**

The Amazonian rubber boom, which took place from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, initiated the major facets of *habilitación-enganche* still in practice today. Both Rubber and timber extractors demanded large quantities of labor, and the *patrón* became the actor who organized the indigenous and local labor. The *patrones*, well versed in local human and physical geography, proved effective in this role. In the early periods of rubber extraction, *patrones* often utilized *correrías*, or slave raids, which involved the capturing of tribal women and young boys, and subsequently 'civilizing' them – or 'domesticating' them – in order to produce laborers more tailored to the *habilitación* system (Santos-Granero and Barclay, 2000; Hvalkof, 2006). The *patrones* then displaced laborers from their communities and inserted into rubber extracting camps, removed from their livelihoods and dependent upon merchandise obtained from tapping rubber.

During these earlier extractive periods in the Peruvian Amazon, indigenous tribes saw sharp population declines, particularly with the Asháninka (Hvalkof, 2006). These large indigenous population declines were in part the result of measles and other diseases introduced to communities by colonists, and had the effect of suppressing the ability of indigenous communities to organize themselves against colonizers and the *patrones* in search of labor. As indigenous resistance to colonial attempts at securing labor was inadequate, the Asháninka – along with many other tribes – were forced into labor through debt bondage (Hvalkof, 2006).

*Patrones* utilized relationships with indigenous headmen to obtain large sources of indigenous labor (Santos-Granero and Barclay, 2000). *Patrones* would outfit indigenous headmen with various western goods and merchandise in exchange for pools of labor, or even rubber procured via the headmen organizing his own community in extraction. The headmen had very strong influence on tribes and could orchestrate extraction even more effectively than the *patrones* within some indigenous communities. *Patrones* recognized and exploited this fact, as can be observed via Venancio Amaringo Campa of the Asháninka tribe (Santos-Granero and Barclay, 42). In addition, headmen would often accept firearms from *patrones* in exchange for rubber so they could better protect their communities from *correrías*. In this way, *patrones* extended the impact of *correrías* to indirectly coerce indigenous tribes to extract and provide them with rubber.

A main aspect of the functioning of *habilitación-enganche* in the rubber boom – a legacy of which still exists today, although as a reduced practice – is the use of direct force and coercion to procure labor and ensure its retention. *Patrones*, possessing large amounts of capital and political connections, utilized local authorities to force workers to accept merchandise against their will (Santos-Granero and Barclay, 2000; Bedoya, 1994). *Patrones* also possessed western firearms, largely inaccessible to indigenous tribes, and utilized this position of power to ensure laborers did not desert extraction operations after accepting advanced merchandise. In addition to direct coercion, *patrones* also used methods of indirect force to persuade laborers to enter into contracts. As Santos-Granero and

Barclay (2000) note, *patrones* often provided alcohol at religious festivals, and would then engage intoxicated workers to accept merchandise in advance. Upon accepting merchandise, the laborers were then bound to produce the demanded rubber with consequences of direct force.

As the rubber trade diminished with the onset of World War I, many *patrones* took their peons and established agroextractive operations along riverside areas. (Santos-Granero and Barclay, 2000). World War I had more of an impact than merely relocating agroextractive operations – in 1914, as a result of economic recession and the restricted maritime trade conditions of World War I, heavily reduced imports of merchandise limited the ability of *patrones* to uphold their end of the *habilitación* relationship with workers. The *patrones* could no longer enforce debt-peonage around rubber extraction, many workers abandoned the *habilitación* system, and rubber extraction significantly declined. Further, investment in rubber extraction and infrastructure rapidly lost value, as workers for extraction were much more difficult to obtain (Santos-Granero and Barclay, 2000). Without the *habilitación-enganche* system in place and the *patrón* to procure labor, rubber extraction significantly diminished and Peru's overall rubber exports declined, although this decline can also be attributed in part to international competition. As rubber was a major component of Peru's economy as a whole – in addition to the main source of income for many Amazonian communities and small-scale extractors – the rubber-bust was particularly challenging for the country to overcome. This highlights the key role *patrones* played in facilitating rubber extraction, as the rubber-tapping industry effectively disintegrated when the *patrones* could not serve as an intermediary for their peons and the market's available merchandise.

However, many *patrones* simply converted their established rubber operations into timber extracting institutions. As many workers had been displaced from their traditional tribal livelihoods (Salisbury, 2011), and become dependent on manufactured goods provided by the *patrones*, the new timber *patrones* did not have trouble securing a new generation of peons with manufactured goods. In addition, as Santos-Granero and Barclay (2000) detail, even with the onset of the

rubber bust *patrones* were able to maintain control over merchandise credit via their previous alliances with merchant houses and their control over local fluvial transport.

In the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, a significant extent of *patrones'* power was derived from their position as landed elite. As a result of their land-owning status, *patrones* had control over the appointment of local authorities, a reality that these individuals utilized to coerce laborers into entering contracts. Further, non-flooded terraces were few and scattered throughout the Peruvian Amazon, occupied almost entirely by former rubber and post-rubber *patrones* (Santos-Granero and Barclay, 2000). This *patrón* monopoly over land was key to the *patrón's* ability to retain rural laborers, as they often allowed indigenous and locals to live on these lands in exchange for peons' labor. Further, as Bedoya (1994) notes, when peons couldn't pay their debts, their land was confiscated by the *patrón* and returned only in exchange for additional labor. Santos-Granero and Barclay (2000) explain that when indebted workers die, their sons have been made to assume their fathers' debts. This multi-generational hold on laborers continues the cycle of bonded labor, as it becomes increasingly difficult for laborers to settle debts and escape the system. *Patrones* began to treat laborers as capital in themselves, which can be seen in the "transfer of debts". Santos-Granero and Barclay (2000) describe this as the process by which *patrones* sold their workers' debts to other *patrones*, which included their labor contracts. As the labor was the only item transferred, and not the individual in his/herself, this transfer was legitimized in the legal system unlike the historical transfer of slaves. Nonetheless, this shows that in some cases *patrones* view their laborers merely as an economic means to a profitable end.

The *patrones* connections to high-level politicians provide them with granted forest concessions, which they either use to legitimize their own extraction operations or may rent to other loggers (Sears and Pinedo-Vazquez, 2011). Within the reformed Peruvian forestry system, concessions are awarded via public auction to the highest bidder, the result being that large timber companies are often favored in obtaining concessions (Salo et al., 2009). As Smith et al. (2006) describes, the

2001 forestry reform law passed in Peru aimed at increasing the transparency of obtaining extraction rights by “introducing open competition (464).” The result, however, has been large timber companies pursuing and obtaining multiple small logging contracts in an effort to circumvent the restrictions that accompany large-scale concessions, rather than obtaining large logging contracts. These timber companies often sell their concessions to the capital-constrained small-scale timber extractors, or alternatively sell them to *patrones*. *Patrones* then become very important to timber extraction, as they possess capital to obtain concessions that many small, independent loggers cannot easily obtain. The *patrón* serves as the link between the local indigenous people, independent loggers, saw mill operators, and concessionaires. A chart displaying the various actors, as constructed by Sears and Pinedo-Vazquez (2011), is displayed (Figure 1).

As Salisbury (2011) notes, Peru’s forestry system “...facilitates the international markets that empower the *patrones* (165).” The current system allows global demand for timber to dictate the value of forest concessions, thus increasing the power of the concessionaires, as they are the actors who distributed the coveted concessions. Indeed, the concessionaires may negotiate their own terms with the *patrones* in order for extraction to take place; however, the fact that the rights to large areas of land for extraction are now available for auction positions the *patrón* at the center of highly profitable industry. Without the *patrón* to organize the laborers, and provide those laborers with the necessary means for extraction, the timber agroextractive industry would not function. The global markets thus empower the *patrón*, as he becomes an essential actor for timber companies – who have paid large sums for the rights to their concessions – to render profit from their acquired extraction rights (Salisbury, 2011).

The major presence of *habilitación-enganche* was strengthened in the 1980s, as new development schemes proposed by the World Bank, USAID and some European agencies led to an influx of new colonists to the Upper Amazon (Hvalkof, 2006). Forest was cleared at a very high rate to make room for cattle pastures, with all of the work being done by indigenous laborers, forced to work by debt-bondage

through the *habilitación-enganche* system. Hvalkof (2006) describes the coercive methods that were still in practice barely 30 years ago: “This labor was secured by institutional violence...includ[ing] imprisonment without food or water for several days, flogging...[and] regular beatings (Hvalkof, 209).” The coercive components of *habilitación-enganche* cannot be overlooked, as they are essential to its continual practice throughout the Amazon.

Beyond the economic ties that *patrones* have with their laborers, there are deeper social relationships between the two actors. *Patrones* develop long-term partnerships with their peons, in which the former provides the latter with more than mere extraction merchandise. As Killick (2008) details, *patrones* provide their laborers with books, pens and other school supplies for their children. In addition, *patrones* have been known to take their laborers’ children to health posts when they are sick, and have brought government paid teachers to indigenous communities to set up schools. The *patrón* provides imported medicine that is inaccessible to remote Amazonian communities, and other items such as pots and pans. The *patrón* has become the link between indigenous communities and the domestic/international markets for more than merely extraction-related merchandise, but also goods that offer increased prospects for health and development. As Killick (2008) notes, the *patrón* provides many of these goods free of charge, or as “gifts”, to the communities as part of a social understanding of reciprocity. However, as Salisbury (2011) notes, the implications for the power relationship between the two actors cannot be overstated, as the *patrones* provide their laborers – and their respective families – with “...money, medicine and meals in times of duress (163).” While the laborers and their families need many of these items, they contribute to the increased dependency that the laborers have on their *patrones*.

Whereas in the rubber boom the *patrón* primarily maintained the role of provider of capital, exploiting the laborer for maximum economic profit, this relationship has changed over time. As Killick (2008) describes, the relationship can be more accurately described as *patrones* facilitating the laborers own production of

Table	Identity and Role
Concessionaires ( <i>habilitadores</i> )	Business people who largely control the timber market in Ucayali. They provide their concession documents and capital to selected loyal loggers with whom they have worked in the <i>habilitado</i> system for a long time.
Patrones	Individuals well connected to high level politicians. They rent their concession documents to loggers who work independently of timber companies.
Mill Owners	Mainly families involved in timber processing for generations; they source timber from independent loggers and timber thieves. In very few cases do they finance expeditions of independent loggers.
Moneylenders ( <i>prestamistas</i> )	Individuals who finance the extraction activities of independent loggers to mainly extract the most valuable timber species.
Facilitator ( <i>tramitadores</i> )	The <i>tramitador</i> plays a key role in connecting loggers and <i>habilitadores</i> , and loggers and lenders, as well as helping them to obtain the required paperwork to extract and transport the timber.
Logging Boss ( <i>encargado</i> )	Individual who is enabled by the <i>habilitado</i> and assembles and leads the logging team.
Independent Loggers	Comprising the largest number of loggers in the Peruvian Amazon, they are financed by moneylenders and depend on <i>tramitadores</i> to obtain official documents.
Laborers	Mainly composed of poor people from the cities, many of whom have migrated to the cities in search of employment and educational opportunities.
Woodsmen	Local people who sell their knowledge of location and access to timber to loggers. Their role is critical for supplying timber, particularly high value species.
Private Landholders	Individuals and communities are sitting on a great deal of timber. Loggers develop informal agreements with them to access timber and sometimes help them to obtain formal documents for extraction.

**Figure 1. Actors within Peruvian forestry system.** This chart displays the various actors involved within the Peruvian forestry system, along with descriptions of their roles. From Sears and Pinedo-Vazquez, 2011.

timber. The indigenous workers do not possess the materials and equipment necessary to harvest timber – an essential component to indigenous livelihoods – but become empowered in the extraction process by the *patrón's* advancement of necessary equipment. Killick (2008) discusses that quite often *patrones* are themselves poor and indebted to others higher up in the extraction chain – whether that be merchant houses or moneylenders – and thus depend on the laborers to procure the timber previously determined in the labor contracts. In order for *patrones* to ensure that laborers do not merely disappear with the extracted timber, the *patrones* may work to form a relationship with their laborer that encourages trust and dependability (Killick, 2008). This relationship is fostered via the provision of goods previously discussed – such as medicine, books, etc. – and via social arrangements that extend beyond mere material exchange.

The relationships between the *patrón* and the indigenous communities in which he/she enlists labor are often highly personal. As Killick (2008) notes, the *patrón* is at times elevated to the status of *compadrazgo*, or godparent, in the eyes of his laborer, in which the laborer trusts his *patrón* to help his children reach their salvation in the eyes of God. Indigenous communities do not choose *compadrazgos* lightly – they are individuals who the communities hold a great deal of respect for and trust as the guardian of their children's spirits (Killick, 2008). Oftentimes, the laborers refer to their *patrón* as *amigo*, or friend, portraying a relationship that is deeper than exploiter and exploited. In other instances, the *patrón* has asked his laborer, or the family of his laborer, to act as nanny for his children (Salisbury, personal communication). As all individuals are protective of their children, these acts help demonstrate the familial bond between the two actors that go beyond economic relationships.

Further, there have been instances in which the *patrón* has married the daughters or sisters of his laborers. In fact, it has been reported that one of the prominent Asháninka women leaders of the Upper Amazon region is currently dating and living with the *patrón's* representative in her community (Salisbury, personal communication). The role of the *patrón* has evolved to more than merely the provider of employment to indigenous communities, as the *patrón* has developed a familial stake in these communities' success and prosperity. These relationships further strengthen the social ties between the *patrón* and the indigenous communities in which he concurrently obtains labor, provides essential goods for, and may participate as a significant member of the extended families.

## **Conclusion**

The current forestry system provides concessions in a manner that favors large extraction companies (Salo et al., 2009). This may reduce the need for small extraction activities facilitated by *patrones*, with the larger companies likely already possessing the necessary equipment for extraction, diminishing the role of the *patrón* and his/her provision of capital and merchandise via established lines of credit with merchant houses. As noted in this paper, large timber companies often distribute their obtained concessions to smaller loggers and *patrones*, creating a new extraction network in which large companies, small loggers and *patrones* function together. However, regardless of whether extraction activities are orchestrated by large companies or small loggers, the fact remains that the *patrón* is the actor most knowledgeable of human geography from city to forest within the Amazon, and likely has the strongest connections to indigenous communities. This is particularly important to many of the large-concessions holders, as they often tend to be migrants from other regions of Peru – namely affluent coastal regions (Smith et al., 2006) – with limited knowledge of the distribution of indigenous communities throughout the forests. The *patrón's* cultural and geographic knowledge of the Amazonian forests may be very important for these concessions holders in order locate pools of labor.

The *patrón* may have a new role within Peruvian forestry as he/she no longer needs to be the actor possessing capital, but rather continues to serve the role as intermediary between indigenous/local communities and the agroextractive industry. Various companies may retain the *patrón* so that his/her relationships with various communities can be utilized in order to obtain workers, thereby placing inherent value on the ability of *patrones* to establish stronger social relationships with the communities in which they are involved.

Previous research suggests the ability of the *patrón* to establish ties to various communities has value insofar as it helps him to increase the retention of that community's labor to generate personal profit, whether or not it involves exploitative debt-peonage practices. Killick (2008) has discussed the development of social relationships between *patrones* and indigenous communities, but it appears that these relationships come about as a result of the *patrón's* initial presence in these communities. This initial presence was foremost motivated by a need to retain labor, the mechanism that allows some *patrones* to obtain merchandise credit, and thus the motivation was inherently exploitative. In this new system, the *patrones* would need to work to establish strong mutual relationships built not upon economic entrapment, but rather the potential for mutual benefit between the *patrón* and the communities in which he recruits labor.

The *patrón* is an essential component to the functioning of Peruvian forestry. In the absence of the role of the *patrón*, many independent loggers would have no means to participate in the timber industry, as they rely on the *patrón's* access to capital in order to obtain necessary extractive equipment (Sears and Pinedo-Vasquez, 2011). Many poor laborers from urban areas and indigenous communities throughout the Amazonian forest depend on the *patrón* as well, with unemployment high in both areas and logging often the only opportunity for income. The *patrón* links these workers to extraction companies and independent loggers, who might not otherwise be able to procure the organized labor as efficiently without the *patrón*. One approach at reforming the *habilitación-enganche* system may be for the Peruvian government to take steps to reduce the high unemployment that is

pervasive in these areas. If employment opportunities can be expanded, labors from the urban and rural areas may have less of a dependence on timber extraction, where great exploitation of the labor force continues to exist, the result of laborers having few employment alternatives.

*Habilitación-enganche* is an informal system of norms that prevails because its actors effectively coordinate capital, labor and resources. These norms help to provide many individuals with employment, and at the same time help logging companies obtain labor cheaply. Unless a reform policy is enacted that provides a solution for both of these problems – unemployment and availability of low-cost labor – the *habilitación-enganche* norm will likely continue to maintain its presence within the forest sector despite future legislation.

As a result of the diverse geographic complexity of the Amazon territory, it is very difficult for the government to effectively enforce laws. This is in part due to funding constraints, inadequate equipment for monitoring and transport, and available personnel. In fact, part of the reason that reformed governance structures have funding constraints are due to a lack of proper collection of timber dues. As Smith et al. (2006) note, “only 8% of outstanding [timber] fees had been paid...(465)”, referring to timber duty collections by the Peruvian government in 2003. As the authors detail, this lack of proper tax collection undermines effective enforcement as the taxes are a major part of the resources utilized to fund government enforcement structures (Smith et al., 2006). One positive step for the government may be to better utilize the resources available, as well as increase the penalties for extraction companies that fail to pay mandated timber taxes. These steps may significantly aid in government regulation and enforcement of forestry laws. Increased governmental presence and strengthened enforcement within the forest may encourage extraction companies and *patrones* to engage in more sustainable relationships with the laborers whom they depend on for extraction operations to take place.

The new Peruvian forestry policy aims to reform the system and enhance regulation of illegal logging practices, from harvesting to interaction with indigenous communities. However, as *habilitación-enganche* is an informal system that operates outside of the laws to begin with, it is not likely that reforming laws alone will have a great impact on improving the system. Currently, as funding for enforcement is inadequate to monitor every facet of the forestry sector, the majority of government efforts in regulation focus on aspects of illegal logging pertaining only to logs in transit (Sears and Pinedo-Vasquez, 2011), with inadequate attention paid to the informal system of *habilitación-enganche* and its impact for rural communities. As Smith et al. (2006) suggest, successful forest policy reform must address improvements in governance beyond the transportation of harvested timber for effective enforcement to take place. Further, forestry policy reform must recognize the positive aspects of *habilitación-enganche* and conserve them into new laws, as any radical law is unlikely to eradicate the system altogether.

The current system of *habilitación-enganche* has evolved from its historical roots of exploitation and labor bondage, to a system where benefit can be derived for both laborers and *patrones* via strong partnerships. Over time, the *patrón* has become more involved in indigenous communities and the laborers' families, so networks of trust and mutual dependence may come to replace methods of coercive debt-peonage in order to retain labor. These coercive aspects of *habilitación-enganche* on the part of the *patrón* are unsustainable in the current system, as the need for the *patrón* to retain labor demands a supportive relationship between the two actors. The *patrón* may still serve as the critical link between laborers and extraction companies within the Amazon, but this will only be the case insofar as the *patrón* can nurture the trust of the indigenous communities in which he/she works to secure labor. The *patrón* and his/her laborers are both dependent on timber for a source of income. However, neither actor can function within the current timber extraction system without recognizing the co-dependence each actor has on the other. Laborers provide necessary labor and local geographic knowledge to extraction companies, while the *patrones* coordinating that labor. If effective forest

policy reform is to come about, it must recognize the importance of this relationship and its pragmatic function in the Peruvian forestry sector.

Timber extraction continues to expand in the Peruvian Amazon, placing the *patrón* at the center of a very profitable industry. Governments should recognize this point, and work with the *patrón* to try and increase the sustainability of logging practices on behalf of the extracting companies and the laborers themselves. The *patrón* serves as an intermediary between both sides of *habilitación-enganche*, so he/she could work to improve sustainability at both ends. It is important for the government to understand the importance of the role of the *patrón* within the system and the relationship the *patrón* has with all parties involved if reform is to be effective and durable within the Peruvian forest sector.

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