

Mennonites turned Paraguay into a mega beef producer: Now Indigenous people must pay the price

March 10 2020, by Joel E. Correia



South America's bi-oceanic highway, which will stretch from the Pacific to the Atlantic – cutting right through Paraguay – is scheduled for completion in 2022. Credit: Joel Correia, Author provided

The "[new Panama Canal](#)"—that's how some are hailing a [highway now under construction in South America](#) that spans the continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

The [Bi-Oceanic Corridor](#) cuts through the Paraguayan Chaco, Latin America's second-largest forest after the Amazon—and, these days, a hub of cattle ranching and soybean farming.

The Chaco—once a [flat, scrubby and supposedly inhospitable forest](#) – was transformed into a fertile [agricultural region](#) by [Mennonite settlers](#) who came to Paraguay in the early 1900s.

By 2017 this landlocked country of 7 million had become [the world's sixth-largest exporter of beef](#). When the new road is [completed in 2022](#), it [will markedly increase beef and other agricultural exports](#) by truck to [global markets](#) via seaports in Chile and Brazil.

The bi-oceanic highway is only one visible sign of the Chaco's agricultural boom: [Extensive deforestation also scars the region](#). Roughly [14% of the Chaco forest was cut down](#) between 2001 and 2014.

The Mennonites' success in [transforming the Chaco](#) into a ranching powerhouse now undermines their own long-sought solitude, endangers this famous forest and threatens the very existence of indigenous people who've lived in the region since time immemorial.



A sign near Loma Plata, Paraguay, announcing the bi-oceanic highway is underway, February 2020. Credit: Joel E. Correia

Latin America's Mennonites

The [Mennonites of the Paraguayan Chaco](#) who [now number around 40,000](#), first [arrived in the 1920s](#), escaping [persecution from Stalin's Russia](#) by way of Canada.

At least [2.13 million Mennonites](#) live in [87 countries](#), with [large populations in the United States, Canada and Ethiopia](#). Just under [10%](#) of Mennonites live in Latin America.

Among other core beliefs, the Mennonites—a [Christian religious](#)

[minority](#) originally from Germany—maintain a [strict adherence to non-violence](#), including refusing to fight in war, and to the separation of church from state. Their beliefs led to their [persecution](#) in Germany and later in Russia, resulting in multiple [migrations and relocations around the world](#).

In some Mennonite colonies, settlers still wear [distinctive conservative clothing](#) – often bonnets and long dresses for women and denim overalls with plaid shirts for men—and ride [bicycles and horses](#) as transportation. Other Mennonite colonies, like in [Filadelfia](#) or [Neuland](#) in Paraguay, [lead a modern lifestyle based on ranching and agriculture](#).

Taming Paraguay's "Green Hell"

When the Mennonites arrived to Paraguay a century ago, the country was [at the brink of war with neighboring Bolivia](#), which claimed the Chaco as its own.



Many Mennonites in Paraguay are beef and dairy farmers. Credit: Federico Tovoli/VWPics/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

The Paraguayan government [granted the new Mennonite arrivals citizenship and land](#) in the Chaco, with guarantees they could maintain their educational systems, speak their language and avoid military conscription. Allowing Mennonites to establish settlements in the Chaco reasserted Paraguay's territorial claims [but dispossessed many indigenous peoples from their lands](#).

With its [extreme heat, thorny plants, scarce water and difficult conditions](#), many early Mennonite settlers [called](#) the Chaco a "[Green Hell](#)." Nevertheless, their relative isolation and autonomy promised a long-sought freedom.

Mennonites [continued arriving to Paraguay through the late 1940s](#). They worked [collectively, in agricultural cooperatives](#), to develop the Chaco.

As their businesses grew, particularly [cattle ranching](#), so did the need for reliable transportation to get their products to markets more quickly. In the 1960s Mennonite organizations [helped get a highway called the "Trans-Chaco" built](#). Today it is a [partially paved, pothole-ridden highway](#) abhorred by truckers. It will soon [be completely reconstructed](#) even as the the Bi-Oceanic Corridor is underway.

With strong global demand for Paraguayan beef and other [agricultural exports](#), many Mennonite communities today are thriving. In one of South America's [poorest countries](#), they enjoy [living standards comparable to those in Spain or Portugal](#).

Changes on the forest frontier

The Mennonite's success has come at a high cost, though, when it comes to [environmental change](#), [land conflicts](#) and [indigenous rights](#), my [research in Paraguay](#) finds.



Heavy machinery lays the foundation for the new bi-oceanic highway through the Paraguayan Chaco in June 2019. Credit: Joel E. Correia

The growing beef industry and [expansion of soybean production from Brazil into eastern Paraguay](#) are [pushing ever more people into the Chaco](#). The population of [Boquerón](#) – the farming region of the Chaco where Paraguay's Mennonite colonies are located—increased from about [15,000 in 1982](#) to [roughly 67,000 today](#), according to government data.

Farmland, [once cheap and plentiful](#) for those willing to clear it, is getting [prohibitively expensive](#). And as more people move in, the Chaco [forest is disappearing ever faster](#). Deforestation is exacerbating [conflicts over land rights](#) with [indigenous communities seeking to regain their ancestral lands](#).

[Indigenous peoples](#) are the hardest hit by change in the Chaco.

Some Ayoreo Totobiegosode communities, for example, live in voluntary isolation from broader society. Expanding development [threatens their territories](#) in the Chaco, [undermining their right to life](#).

The [Chaco's deforestation](#) impacts other indigenous Paraguayans, whose traditional [livelihoods and cultural practices rely on the animals and plants](#) now being replaced by soybeans and cows. Many indigenous communities additionally complain that agriculture has limited their [ability to access the Chaco's scarce water](#).

Paraguayan President Mario Abdo Benítez says he expects many more people to settle in the Chaco after the [Bi-Oceanic Corridor highway is complete](#), drawn by the new [economic opportunities](#) it will bring.

The influx means the [Mennonite communities who converted](#) Paraguay's so-called "Green Hell" into a mega beef exporter are experiencing unforeseen consequences too. The solitude they once sought is slipping away.

As [new residents](#) move into the Chaco, the rhythm of life is changing. Once quiet streets buzz with the motorcycles that are now ubiquitous, as people ride to and from work. Bars have popped up, playing music late into the hot, dusty nights.

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