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## OWNERSHIP FIGHT ERUPTS OVER MAYA RUINS

**A dramatic rise in tourism ignites a debate in Mexico: Should a private family own an archaeological treasure?**

By [Sara Miller Llana](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor  
from the October 17, 2007 edition

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**CHICHEN ITZA, MEXICO** - This ancient city, once the most important center of the Maya world, has stood in the jungle here for more than 1,000 years. Scattered across 100 acres, the remains of stone temples and a crumbling observatory offer an imposing glimpse into the innovative Maya civilization, which recorded the annual solar cycle with Swiss-watch precision.

Today tourists gape as they walk past Chichen Itza's most-recognized site, the 80-foot Temple of Kukulkan pyramid, where during the spring and fall equinoxes the sun casts a shadow in the shape of a plumed serpent. They walk across the Great Ball Court, the largest sports venue in Mesoamerica, where losing players were believed to be decapitated.

They also happen to be – unwittingly – walking on private property.

Over the last half century, the land within this archaeological site has belonged to the Barbachanos, a wealthy and powerful family in the state of Yucatán. The family purchased the grounds from an American diplomat, who excavated here in the 1900s but fell out of grace with Mexico for shipping artifacts back to the US.

It's an ownership issue that few Mexicans have known about or even cared about. Until now. This summer, a global contest to rename the Seven Wonders of the World brought renewed tourism and a corollary of unwanted curiosity to this ancient corner of Mexico. Now, suddenly, federal legislators are seeking to take over the land. Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) covets it, too. The Barbachano family is divided over what to do. And locals, most of Maya descent, claim it should be theirs.

In a country where property rights helped ignite a revolution, where peasants distrust large landowners and large landowners distrust the government – especially when it encompasses ruins that lie at the core of national identity – this has erupted into one of the most significant and sensitive property disputes in Mexico.

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"This has unleashed a national polemic," says Jose Alfonso Suárez del Real, a federal lawma ker who wants to expropriate the land. "And we are all asking, 'How can a Wonder of the World have owners?'" "

• • •

The Maya settled in Chichen Itza before AD 800. After the city was largely abandoned in the 11th century, the structures, though well preserved, were overlooked for hundreds of years. In the 19th century, Chichen Itza was a cattle ranch; cows literally grazed among the ruins. It was not until 1894 that the US consul in Merida, Edward Thompson, bought the plantation and surrounding ruins, where he did some excavating. Much of what he found he sent to the Peabody museum at Harvard University.

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Not long afterward, Fernando Barbachano Peon, the grandnephew of a former Yucatán governor, saw tourism potential in the ancient city. In 1944, Barbachano Peon bought the property from the Thompson family and laid the groundwork for the Yucatán Peninsula to become the most lucrative tourist area in the country. "We were a major force in making Chichen Itza significant," says Hans Thies Barbachano. "Nobody cared about it."

Today, more than a million tourists visit Chichen Itza each year, a number that officials hope will double as a result of its status as a "New Wonder of the World." Millions of people voted to designate it a "wonder" this summer as part of a commercial contest by a Swiss filmmaker. The results were announced in July.

Although the renewed interest in the site has touched off a small land war, many archaeological treasures in Mexico lie on private plots. The Barbachanos, for instance, also own the land under Uxmal, another nearby Maya city. While a 1972 federal law put archaeological ruins in state hands, the vast majority that dot the countryside sit on either private land or ejidos, farm cooperatives established in the mid-1900s.

It is Chichen Itza, though, that has touched off a national debate over cultural heirlooms. "A World Heritage site cannot be at the whim of a family," says Mr. Suarez del Real.

INAH seems to agree with his logic. Eduardo Perez de Heredia, head of the INAH in Chichen Itza, pulls up a charter adopted by an international group of architects in 1931. He points to a declaration that says private interests should be subordinate to the interests of the community. "It's just common sense," he says. "How can you protect something that is not yours?"

The INAH appears to have the money to buy the land. The agency's director, Alfonso de Maria y Campos, recently indicated that it has \$1.5 million to purchase property on which archaeological ruins

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lie. He decreed Chichen Itza a priority. The land was valued at \$750,000 last year.

But complicating a land transfer are the tensions that surface in many families over estate s. The Barbachanos are a diverse lot: Over the years, the clan has included a governor, a filmmaker, an archaeologist, and other notable members. One thing all of them agree on is that they are under attack, even though they feel they have honored the nation's heritage. Evan Albright, who is writing a book on Chichen Itza, agrees the Barbachanos have been "good shepherds of the land."

But the family has different visions of what to do with the property. Hans Thies Barbachano, who inherited a parcel from his late grandfather at the heart of the archaeology site, prefers to keep it in family hands. But since the government is interested in the acreage, he says he's open to selling it – for a fair price.

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The park is a big revenue generator. The entrance fee is about \$10, which more than a million visitors pay each year. "My family was vested in these properties long before anyone else," says Mr. Barbachano. "I will defend it because it's family heritage for me, as well as cultural heritage for the rest of the world."

But Fernando Barbachano Herrero, his uncle, doesn't want to sell the land. He owns the Mayaland Hotel within Chichen Itza. He wants the property donated to the federal government. In fact, he says that his grandfather already did this and produces a 1944 letter from the INAH thanking the family for its donation. He believes the government failed to register it because they didn't care about the site. "For three generations we have honored and promoted this land, and we have never considered it to be our own," he says.

The other major landholder today is Carmen Barbachano, who owns the hotel Hacienda Chichen, run by her niece, Belisa Barbachano. Belisa Barbachano will say only that she has always respected the Maya culture and the land. "We are not trying to put a big corporation in the middle of our land," she says, dressed in a floral dress. She calls herself the "fourth-generation keeper" of the land and a "clan mother" who helps many in the local population.

• • •

The land battle has become almost a spectator sport in the small communities that dot Chich en Itza. And that's the problem, says Rita Delgado, a housewife. "We are just spectators in the fight between the government and the Barbachanos." She believes the community should be the true guardians of the land. "Who created it? It was our ancestors," she says.

Scientists around the world worry about what impact the ownership impasse will have on the site's preservation. Already, an influx of small vendors is taxing the park's sewage and other facilities. "Right

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now the site is suffering terribly because there are many more people there than should be," says Geoffrey Braswell, an anthropologist from the University of California at San Diego. "It's a disgrace."

Yet for now a resolution seems far off. And a pyramid that has suddenly caught the world's attention for what it means to a nation's past is now a place where the complexities of modern Mexico – poverty, class wars, land rights, and fierce politics – converge.

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