

## ENVIRONMENTALIST OF THE YEAR

### RICHARD HANSEN

President, Foundation for  
Anthropological Research and  
Environmental Studies

**ACHIEVEMENTS** Hansen leads the development of the Mirador Basin Project, the largest privately funded archeological and environmental conservation project in the world. His Foundation for Anthropological Research & Environmental Studies (FARES) has invested more than US\$3 million to support excavation and published more than 180 scientific articles on archaeology and the environment.

**BACKGROUND** A chief senior scientist at Idaho State University, Hansen's work in the remote rainforest of northern Guatemala started in 1978. Known for his research in the Mesoamerican region and Mayan civilizations, Hansen and his colleagues established the idea that ancient Mayan rulers had centralized their roles far earlier than once supposed. He founded FARES in 1996.

// We never dig to see what's there. We're digging to answer scientific questions. What was the process that launched the Mayans into one of the world's great civilizations? //





# SAVING MAYAN CIVILIZATION

*When Richard Hansen came down to the floor of a pyramid in northern Guatemala 30 years ago, he discovered pottery that was 1,000 years older than it was supposed to be. The find meant that the entire model for the evolution of Mayan society was wrong. Hansen had found his life's work. Today, the Mirador Basin Project is the largest privately funded archeological and environmental conservation project in the world. Hansen, president of the Foundation for Anthropological Research and Environmental Studies, talks with LATIN TRADE about his efforts to preserve the 810,000-acre site.*



surrounding it. We've mapped and investigated 35 ancient cities. There are nine cities larger than Tikal in the Basin alone, 26 cities as large as Tikal, and probably another 60 to 80 cities that are smaller. We have 82 research institutions and universities involved in the project. Of the 40 PhDs, nine of them are world's leading authorities in their subject. We are doing the largest ceramics study in the Western Hemisphere. When we are done with this project, it will be the greatest single ceramics study in the history of archeology. We are doing the same thing with stone tools, bone, botany, pollen, isotopes, DNA and on and on it goes. It all fits in with the macro model of the origins, dynamics and collapse of Mayan civilization.

## WHEN YOU MADE THE FIND, WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?

I've found royal tombs, jade masks, and carved monuments, but nothing was as meaningful as the discovery of broken pottery on a floor. When I realized the anomaly there, I was the only guy in the world for a minute that understood that the entire model for the evolution of Mayan society was wrong. I realized as a lowly grad student that I had a huge uphill battle, because I had to go up against the big guns at Harvard, Yale, and Stanford and all these other guys who had already determined the evolutionary sequence of Mayan civilization.

## WHY HAS THE PROJECT GROWN SO LARGE?

To understand what was going on at Mirador, we have had to work the areas

## ARE WE ANY CLOSER TO UNDERSTANDING WHAT HAPPENED TO THE MAYANS?

What is it that makes a society walk away forever and never go back? The reason that the Mayans could not go back is because of environmental factors. The problem was conspicuous consumption. I discovered that the plaster floors were getting thicker and thicker and thicker. So I wanted to understand what are the consequences of making lime plaster, what's the process. It took enormous amounts of wood and enormous amounts of limestone to make a small amount of lime. Why were they putting another yard-thick slab of floor on top of an existing floor? Because they could. Well, when they burned the trees, they deforested the area and the clay washed into the swamps. The swamps were the economic engines of their entire economy. They were mining the muck to create terraces in their cities to grow corn, squash, beans, gourds, cotton and cacao. When they couldn't get the muck any more, they couldn't feed their populations, and that's why they had to leave. Hundreds of thousands of people in a city couldn't sustain themselves. When things went to Hell in a hand basket, it went fairly quickly, probably in 15 to 20 years.

## HOW CAN THIS AREA BE PRESERVED?

I realized a long time ago that we were not going to save the forest because it's pretty and green. Good ideas without funding are only dreams. We have to save it because of economic justification. The only way to save the area is to have it declared a protected area and a roadless wilderness area. ■