

Panama History – A Brief Overview

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Panama's history has been shaped by its strategic location between the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean. The native Cuevas and Cocole tribes quickly disappeared after the Spanish arrived with their weapons and diseases in the early 16th century. Panama City, on the Pacific coast, thrived as Spain conquered and plundered Peru. Caravans loaded with gold traveled overland across the narrow isthmus from Panama City to be loaded on galleons bound for Spain. However, this wealth attracted pirates and, in the early 1700s, Panama's Caribbean shore was dotted with so many pirate strongholds that shippers chose instead to sail around Cape Horn to Peru. Panama's importance rapidly declined, and Spain did not contest its inclusion as a province of Colombia when that country won its independence from Spain in 1821.

Panama Canal History

The history of the Panama Canal is fascinating. In the 1880s, Colombia made a treaty with France for the construction of a canal across Panama's narrow isthmus, but yellow fever claimed the lives of more than 22,000 workers over a five-year period, and construction was halted. Over Colombia's objections, one of the French investors negotiated a deal to have the United States construct a canal just at the time that Panama's independence movement needed tactical and financial assistance. When Panama declared its independence from Colombia in November 1903, U.S. troops were already present to "protect" the new government. In return for constructing a canal, the new Panamanian government granted U.S. control over rights on either side of the canal "in perpetuity," and U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt's "Panama Doctrine" began with the eradication of mosquitoes, which carried malaria and yellow fever. The Panama Canal was completed in 1914 and has remained an important shipping route ever since. In 1921, the United States paid Colombia US\$25 million in exchange for revoking all claims on Panama, and in 1936, the United States finally gave up the legal right to use its troops outside the borders of the Canal Zone. With the onset of World War II, the canal became one of America's most valuable strategic assets and was heavily protected by fleets of U.S. warships.

Recent History of Panama

In 1968, the commander of the Panamanian National Guard, Omar Torrijos Herrera, seized control of the government. Although he ruled as a populist dictator, Torrijos Herrera is revered as a hero of Panama because he negotiated the treaty with the United States returning the canal and the Canal Zone back to Panama on January 1, 2000.

After Torrijos Herrera's death in 1983, General Manuel Noriega became head of the Panama Defense Forces. When Noriega's party lost the 1989 elections, Noriega's cronies physically attacked the winning candidate on national television, and Noriega remained in power with the income provided by drug trafficking. In December 1989, Noriega appointed himself dictator and formally declared war against the United States. The next day, a U.S. soldier was killed by Panamanian soldiers and the most powerful country in

the world sent 26,000 troops into the streets of Panama City and Colón. Thousands died in the fighting, and Noriega claimed asylum in the Vatican Embassy. The Vatican staff finally released Noriega into U.S. custody, partly to stop the assault of loud rock music that U.S. loudspeakers directed at the embassy compound both day and night. Noriega was arrested, tried, and convicted on money laundering charges and sent to prison for a 40-year sentence.

Still suffering from his beating by Noriega's cronies, Guillermo Endarra, the winner of the 1989 election, finally took office, but corruption and social unrest were hallmarks of his regime. Ernesto Perez Balladares (El Toro) won the 1994 election with largely fulfilled promises to fight corruption, improve Panama's economy, and implement nationwide health services. Running with the campaign slogan, "The Canal Is Ours" Mireya Moscoso, the widow of a popular former president and head of the conservative Arnulfista Party, won the presidency in 1999 and celebrated with her people when the year 2000 dawned with the canal finally belonging to Panama.

Panama Canal and Ecology

from TED Case Studies at www.american.edu/projects/mandala/TED/canal.htm

The Panama Canal is threatened by the depletion of the rainforests surrounding the canal. The canal is run on fresh water which only comes from Lake Gatun in the middle of the canal. The rainforests supply a continuous source of fresh water to the lake. The Canal Zone is the area surrounding the canal and which has been protected from depletion for many years by the fact that the area was under United States control in the form of military bases. A treaty signed between the United States and Panama is gradually reverting the canal zone into the hands of the Panamanian government. The government has so far been ineffective at preserving the areas they control as squatters and basic neglect are damaging the rainforests. The issue is: can the Panamanian government preserve the forests and what are the consequences to Panama and the canal if the rainforest are destroyed?

The Panama Canal was completed in 1914 by the United States. The 51 mile long route cuts through Panama at the narrowest conceivable spot to connect the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans. The Canal was made in a series of locks, three on each side of Lake Gatun. The Canal is not built at sea level as the two different bodies of water are at much different levels. The lock series elevates or lowers the marine traffic along the waterway to compensate for the different levels. The locks work by means of gravity. No pumps are used. Only fresh water is used in the Canal, no sea water. Lake Gatun, situated roughly in the middle of the waterway, provides all of the fresh water to run the locks. A 10 mile wide watershed area spans both sides of the Canal to ensure a continued supply of fresh water. This watershed or Canal Zone and the running of the Canal have been under the control of the United States with U.S. military bases serving as de facto ecological reserves. By building this canal, shipping has been given an enormous advantage as ships no longer have to sail around the tip of South America to reach either ocean and sailing time is drastically reduced.

A treaty made between the United States and Panama in the late 1970s has the Canal and the Canal Zone gradually being turned over to the control of the Panamanian government. By midnight December 31, 1999, US military presence in Panama and control of the Canal will completely cease. The issue of control had been a major source of contention during the time of the treaty signing but times have changed. Panamanians want the canal...but fear it will be mismanaged.

The problem which now exists is that the areas that have been turned over to the Panamanian, as per the specification in the treaty, have not been well maintained. The rainforests under

Panamanian control are disappearing due to squatters, farmers and general neglect. Should the rainforest be depleted to the point where the water Lake Gatun is no longer adequately replenished, the canal will no longer be able to operate.

Why have the rainforest under Panamanian control been neglected to this point? The history of the Panamanian government has not been one of stability or efficiency. Former military controlled governments placed limits on the amount of land farmers could clear and required them to obtain permits before cutting trees in forested areas. But these rules were seldom enforced. Nor did the government set a good example. In addition to allowing illegal logging, the military participated in the destruction of the land and the new civilian government has impounded more than 1.5 million cubic feet of timber sold to China by the former de facto ruler, General Manuel Noriega.

The government has been better since Noriega has been out of power and recent elections have brought new people into positions of authority over the fate of the canal. In 1947, more than 70 percent of Panama was forests, whereas now, less than 30 percent remains forests and expectations are that the figure will be 15 percent by the end of the century. Farmers, loggers and industry have over 2,000 acres of land being cleared each week.

Loss of any rainforest have become a major issue in terms of possible global warming and ozone depletion but loss of the rainforests in Panama will have a direct impact on the people in the country. Should the watershed area be depleted and Lake Gatun could no longer provide enough water to run the locks, the economy of Panama would be devastated. As it is now, over 5,400 Panamanians are employed at U.S. bases. The Panamanians will be able to make up the losses from those jobs and more as the military pulls out by taking over the jobs the US personnel had in running the Canal. Should the Canal go dry, all of those jobs will disappear.

Another consideration for the more than 700,000 people who live in Panama City and the surrounding areas, is the loss of fresh drinking water. Lake Gatun supplies the water to Panama City and with the loss of the rainforests, the availability of fresh water dwindles.

Special report: Panama Canal handover

By BBC News Regional analyst Nick Caistor

Former American President Jimmy Carter signed over control of the Panama canal and the 10-mile-wide enclave surrounding it at a ceremony on the banks of the waterway on 14 December.

With this ceremonial handover, Panama finally recovered control of the canal linking the Pacific and Atlantic oceans after more than 80 years.

The handover was set in motion by the treaty signed in September 1977 by Jimmy Carter and his Panamanian counterpart Omar Torrijos.

For many of the three million inhabitants of Panama, December's handover is the moment of true independence.

Until 1903, Panama was a province of Colombia. When the idea of building the canal became a reality, the United States encouraged local politicians to break away on their own.

Panama did secede from Colombia, but in return for US backing it surrendered territory to Washington's control for the construction of the canal.

Nationalists insulted

After its completion in 1914, the US kept territorial rights over the Canal Zone area, a strip of land on both sides of the canal.

This was seen by many Panamanian nationalists as an insult and there were frequent periods of tension between the two countries, as in 1964 when 22 Panamanians were killed while trying to raise a Panamanian flag over a US school in the Canal Zone.

This potentially explosive situation was one of the reasons that led President Carter to sign the treaty in 1977.

Now, almost 100 years after formal independence, Panamanians will recover all their territory, and be in charge of their own economic destiny.

Not everyone in Panama is happy with this idea. Some economists argue that if the North Americans are no longer running the canal's operations, there will be a drop in use of the waterway.

They regret the loss to the economy of the spending power of the US troops, canal administrators and their families, and worry that the Panamanian government will be tempted to use revenues from the canal for other purposes than maintaining and modernising the facilities.

Security fears

Others say that now the North Americans have pulled out of their bases in the Canal Zone, the security of Panama could be at risk.

On the one hand, they fear that the war being fought in Colombia between the state, left-

wing guerrillas and paramilitary groups could spill over into Panama.

There have already been several cases of the Colombian army pursuing guerrillas into the jungles of southern Panama. Also, several thousand peasant farmers fleeing the conflict have crossed the border into Panama.

There are also fears that the illegal drug trade from Colombia and other South American countries could undermine Panama's new-found independence.

Drug wars

In 1989 Panama suffered an invasion by more than 20,000 US troops aimed at capturing the de facto ruler, General Manuel Noriega, who was suspected and subsequently convicted of aiding and abetting the Colombian drugs cartels.

Some observers argue that without a continued US presence in the country, Panama could once again become prey to the corrupting influence of the drug traffickers, especially as its army was dissolved in the wake of the 1989 invasion.

Now the country relies solely on a police force.

On a more general level, some international observers are concerned that any instability following the transfer of the canal could affect Panama's position as an offshore banking centre.

Panama presents itself as the "Switzerland of Latin America", offering secrecy and excellent financial terms for investors from other countries in the region.

Next to the canal, the banking sector is Panama's most important source of revenue and employment.

It was badly hit by the US invasion 10 years ago, and any sign of uncertainty in the future could adversely affect the sector once more.

Smooth handover

But the Panamanian government under President Mireya Moscoso is confident these fears are unfounded.

They point to the fact that there has been a 20-year transition period since the signing of the Carter-Torrijos treaty, which should ensure that the handover and the future operating of the canal go smoothly.

They say that the empty US bases can be used for many things: to set up new hi-tech industries, specialised institutes and facilities for more tourism.

US officials have gone out of their way to stress they are sure the Panamanians will administer the canal efficiently.

And in case of any threat to the canal, they have in reserve another treaty which allows them to intervene if its operations are at risk.

The Panama Canal as a natural biological invasion experiment from the Smithsonian institution at www.si.edu

Invasive species may cause severe economic losses. Thus the hot debate regarding the ecological mechanisms determining the outcome of biological invasions is of equal interest to scientific and business communities. Do invaders bump residents out by competing with them for scarce resources, or do they merely move in without causing harm to their neighbors?

In one of the first environmental impact studies ever, the Smithsonian Institution's 1910 Panama Biological Survey provided baseline data for Panama Canal construction, a project creating the largest man-made lake in existence at the time. The Canal, completed in 1914, rerouted the Chagres River on Panama's Atlantic slope into the Pacific Ocean--connecting watersheds across the continental divide. Since then, fish from the Atlantic and Pacific sides of Panama have intermingled, but the mix has not resulted in extinction of fish in tributaries on either slope according to new research published in the Proceedings of the Royal Society of London (online) by Scott Smith and Graham Bell of Canada's McGill University and Eldredge Bermingham, Staff Scientist at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, concern about human-induced environmental change was already on the agenda. Faced with the imminent flooding of 500 square kilometers of lowland tropical forest in Panama, the Panamanian government authorized the Smithsonian Institution to conduct the Panama Biological Survey (1910-1912), an extensive biological census of the region to be covered by Lake Gatun, the Panama Canal waterway.

The U.S. Bureau of Fisheries assigned Seth E. Meek from the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History and Samuel F. Hildebrand, his assistant, to census the fish fauna of the Canal area. They made lists of fish in the Chagres River on the Atlantic slope and in the Rio Grande, on the Pacific slope, rivers that would become part of the Canal waterway, a new freshwater corridor between two oceans.

It did not take long for fish to move from Atlantic to Pacific slopes and vice versa. When Hildebrand returned to Panama in the 1930's many species had already moved into streams on the opposite slope.

In 2002, the authors of the new report returned to the Chagres and the Rio Grande to collect fish. In total, they found that three fish species had colonized the Chagres River and five had colonized the Rio Grande. Both sides of the Isthmus became more species rich as a result of the Canal connection. All of the original species found in each stream in Meek and Hildebrand's initial, 1916 survey, are still there.

This is a significant contribution to our understanding of biological invasion because it shows that dispersal played a more significant role than local ecological interactions in the structure of the fish communities in these two rivers, even after many generations in this great natural experiment.

Interesting facts about the Panama canal.

- A ship traveling from New York to San Francisco can save 7, 872 miles by using the Panama Canal instead of going around the tip of South America.
- The highest canal toll was US \$141,344.91 paid by the Crown Princess
- The lowest toll was 36 cents paid by swimmer Richard Halliburton in 1928
- In 1994 there were 14,029 ships crossing the canal carrying a total of 170.8 million tons of cargo and paid US \$ 419.2 million in tolls.
- The average time spent in transit from port to port is 8 – 10 hours.