

Climate change and the environment: Greening of the Mixteca Alta

U.S. consumption of resources has a profound impact on the rest of the world. In Maryknoll's voter reflection guide, "Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world," climate change and the environment are included in the five main themes. Maryknoll lay missionary Phil Dahl-Bredine is among those working with the poor of developing countries to counteract the devastating effects of climate change. Ironically, it is industrialized countries, not developing ones, which are responsible for the vast majority of pollution and over-consumption that cause global warming and climate change. The following edited version of "Greening of Mixteca Alta," an article by Sean Sprague that first appeared in the February 2003 Maryknoll magazine, explains the role of the U.S. and, historically, the Spanish, in the deterioration of the environment in southern Mexico and shows the link between environmental concerns and economic policy.

We stood on a hillside of the Mixteca Alta region in Mexico's southern state of Oaxaca (*pronounced wa-HA-ka*). "My dream is that one day all these hills will be covered with forest!" declared 40-year-old Aron Santiago Cruz. Looking across a valley, we noted several of the barren slopes had been scored with anti-erosion ditches and planted with pine seedlings in an attempt to reverse centuries of erosion. Santiago Cruz, a poor farmer, deeply cares about the land and with other farmers has planted thousands of trees over the last 15 years.

[Maryknoll lay missionaries are] involved with this ambitious project thanks to the expertise of Phil Dahl-Bredine. Living in Oaxaca with his wife Kathy, who works with an urban children's project called Niño a Niño, Phil works with CEDICAM (Spanish acronym for Center for the Development of Mixteca Campesinos) and its small staff of Indian campesinos and volunteer promoters, encouraging reforestation and crop diversification throughout the region. CEDICAM has established tree nurseries in 22 farming communities in the Mixteca Alta. The farmers plant not only their own land, but also abandoned tracts for the common good of greening the landscape and ultimately improving the climate and prosperity for future generations.

The pre-Columbian civilizations of the Mixteca Alta had safeguarded their environment for more than 5,000 years, Phil explained. Serious erosion of the land began with the arrival of the Spanish in 1500. They introduced the plow to hillsides that were too steep for row farming. Goats ate the vegetation like locusts. Tree cutting for charcoal was big business, as was digging for lime. Since the 1960s, the use of agrochemicals has further turned the soil to dust. The result is thousands of square miles of denuded hills scarred by ugly eroded canyons. A once green region is becoming a desert. For generations, rural Mexicans have been leaving their ailing farms to join the urban poor or flee to the United States in search of labor.

"Mexican farmers were encouraged to invest heavily in cash crop agro-industry," Phil says, describing the awful state of the Mexican economy. "But corn is subsidized in the United States and Canada, so thanks to free trade, cheap corn imports into Mexico are putting Mexican corn farmers out of business and into debt."

"The cheap imported corn also is used instead of the local cane to make fructose for sugar, so the Mexican sugar industry also is in crisis," he continues. "So are coffee, pineapples and other crops. There is a disaster going on in the Mexican countryside! Small-scale organic subsistence farming would have been much more appropriate. Although NAFTA's free trade zone has created a few pockets of prosperity here and there, spending power is 25 percent less than in 1994 and rural poverty has increased out of all proportion."

But the tide might be turning. CEDICAM and its farmers have planted more than 150,000 trees in the last five years in the Mixteca Alta. Besides reforesting the hillsides, they have experimented with new food varieties both to sell and to expand their diet beyond the staples of corn and beans. “The children are healthier since eating extra fruit and vegetables. You see it in their faces and sparkling eyes,” says Fidel Cruz Pablo, the Mixteca Indian president of CEDICAM. “They eat lettuce, tomatoes and broccoli grown with organic compost year-round, whereas previously the only greens they had were wild cactus and herbs.”

Pablo proudly showed us his land, replanted with trees over the last 15 years. Pines and cedars towered above as we stood in their cool shade. A stream now flowed again after several dry years. The climate was actually changing as a direct result of their greening efforts!

Then we saw the drastic contrast of a neighbor’s land that had not yet been replanted. It is barren, hot and dusty, with the soil long gone. Tons of topsoil get washed away by the rains every year, and the only way to check it is by digging contour ditches around the hillsides. The ditch holds the rain runoff and soil, which waters the pine seedlings CEDICAM plants alongside. Once they mature, the trees’ roots stabilize the soil, and their falling leaves build up mulch; flora and fauna flourish, and the entire biosphere changes for the good.

Last January, Pablo described CEDICAM’s rural project at a meeting of the United Nations, where, says Phil, “The voices of grassroots people are seldom heard.” Pablo, who started with CEDICAM as a local volunteer promoter in the 1980s, took classes from World Neighbors, a non-profit organization helping people in Latin America, Asia and Africa to end hunger, disease and poverty. He did so well and his small parcel of land flourished so much that he was elected president of the CEDICAM project. “The earth is like a mother,” he says. “If she is malnourished, so will her children be. We need to care for her.”

“We are helping them recapture both their land and their culture,” explains Phil. By being more prosperous and healthy, the indigenous people of the Mixteca Alta are more likely to stay on their land and preserve their rich cultural heritage.

Dahl-Bredine’s involvement in the CEDICAM project is an example of an initiative to which the U.S. can contribute its financial and technological resources and knowledge to help poorer countries adapt to the effects of climate change. One of the policy goals stressed in “Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world” calls on policy makers to “develop measures for adapting to and mitigating the effects of climate change.” As for mitigation, the United States must play a role in restoring the environment by limiting U.S. carbon emissions through the Climate Change Treaty process and by “powering down” its energy use and consumption.

As part of a commitment to the common good, U.S. Catholics should begin to examine their own lifestyles as well as insist that their lawmakers enact policies that will reverse some of the damage that the high consumption in the United States and in other industrialized countries has caused rather than inflicting more harm on the planet. Read Maryknoll’s recommendations in “Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world.”

**Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns:
Peace, Social Justice & Integrity of Creation**
P.O. Box 29132 Washington, D.C. 20017
phone: (202)832-1780 fax: (202)832-5195
ogc@maryknoll.org www.maryknollogc.org