

SAVING JUAN CAMPOS

Published in the Howler, February 200)

Progress is our most important product.

Advertisement for General Electric circa 1960

His death was not only tragic, but symbolic. Juan Campos, 68 years old, the oldest brother of many of my neighbors and friends was killed while driving an ox cart, struck from behind by an automobile. One of the oxen also perished and the *carreta* was reduced to splinters.

The news came just as I bid farewell to a group of students from the University of Vermont after a hectic two weeks course on ecological restoration of the Rio Andamojo watershed. In numerous meetings with locals the students learned that the river used to run year round, that fish, waterfowl and wildlife were abundant and that the land-based culture is rapidly disappearing in Guanacaste. Medicinal plants are harder to find one woman recounted tearfully. Typically they grow in the understory of native forests but have no place in the monoculture teak plantations which are being planted. Young people have no desire to work the land—or no land to work-- many traditional foodcrops are becoming scarce. The soils seem *cansada*, worn out, and wells go drier earlier than they used to.

During the course we heard from Nat Scrimshaw, Director of the Monteverde Institute, that they are working on a “food security” program. The vagaries of a tourism based economy leave Costa Ricans high and dry --and hungry--when tourism takes a downturn as it did in the wake of the Twin Towers attack. The folks at Monteverde are taking a step beyond conservation of biodiversity toward the legacy of the Quaker settlers of the area-- abundant food production in harmony with nature.

Written a century and a half ago, the words of Abraham Lincoln seem more relevant than ever:

"The Greatest Fine Art of the future will be the making of a comfortable living from a small piece of land."

Local food production—and where possible, processing-- provides the fulcrum for moving rural economies to a more sustainable economic footing, argued Will Raap, the organizer of the course. As a case in point he argued that Ben and Jerry’s Ice Cream breathed new life into the dairy industry of Vermont, his home state.

The problem is not confined to Guanacaste. Anyone who read about the floods on the Caribbean coast may have noticed that many emergency shelters were unable to provide food for those who sought refuge from the deluge. Some were authorized to make purchases at stores, but when the road system is down, the trucks don’t move and entire regions can now experience the perils of dependence on a globalized food supply.

Costa Rica has been successful at spurring growth in production of crops for export, like pineapples, bananas and melons. This growth parallels a decline in the production of staple crops like rice, beans and corn—formerly the domain of small producers who now compete with global giants like Cargill for whom grains are merely another commodity to be traded within the cold blooded calculus of international finance.

The marriage of religión and politics that brought down the World Trade Center, Islamic fundamentalism, first captured the world's attention with the overthrow of the Shah of Iran. According to at least one análisis, the Iranian revolution which swept Ayatollah Khomeini into power had its roots in the displacement of thousands of small farmers—conservative rural Muslims—by the cheap, imported, “food for oil” policy of the deposed Shah. What was seen at the time as “progress” and the logic of the marketplace had consequences far beyond the foresight of urban policymakers.

In Latin America, urban elites have increasingly emulated the western model of industrial agriculture and used exports to pay for industrial imports and boost GDP. There has been scant concern for both social and environmental consequences. The burgeoning growth of urban slums from México City to Lima, Peru—where cholera returned to plague the Western Hemisphere—bear chaotic testimony to the failure of policies which turn a blind eye to the rural and agricultural realities of Latin America. San Jose has its own versión, La Carpio where 10,000 residents are crammed into a violent, lawless shantytown.

In many ways, its a story as old as civilization itself. Metropolitan areas from Athens and Rome to Chichen Itza and Macchu Pichu siphoned resources out of far flung empires to fill their granaries, construct their warships or erect monuments to appease their deities. Inhabitants of rural areas were denigrated by calling them *heathens* (from the heath), *pagans* (from the countryside) and *barbarians* (unshaven). Nonetheless the stream of money, resources and population from the country to the city has generated a series of consequences with which confronts mankind as a whole.

Global warming, biodiversity collapse and depletion of soil and water supplies were several of the interwoven themes which emerged in the course on watershed restoration. The students were quick learners in spite of the all-nighters at nearby cantinas. Costa Rican professors gave a thorough explanation of the possibilities—and limitations—of current policies and monetary incentives to conserve forests and protect watersheds. A restoration specialist from the US gave us a clear picture of how the channel flow in any watercourse is a clear indication of what has happened upstream. The present levels of support—about \$50/ha. per year—are nowhere near enough to encourage effective restoration techniques—pruning, planting, fire protection, erosion control and channel stabilization-- both for biodiversity and for watershed health. There is no incentive for smallholders to participate in conservation efforts of any kind.

As resources have concentrated in cities, entire regions—such as Guanacaste-- have been stripped of the natural wealth which formerly sustained healthy rural economies—and healthy people. Don Blas Campos, the father of the man who died on Sunday was my neighbor, friend and one of the generation of Costa Rican men who just earned world

recognition for having the highest longevity rate of men over 80. He was walking miles and wielding a machete into his late '80's, his life largely unaffected by the kind of "progress" which overtook his son.

As our course learned, restoring healthy watersheds goes hand in hand with restoring healthy, land-based economies. From "gardening the forest" to enjoying rafting and fishing in a restored river, we need to implement a vision of turning some of the resource flows back into the natural realm which sustains us. Our path towards the future needs to be inclusive enough to acomódate Doña Irma and her medicinal plants, long enough to restore the fond memories of Doña Abigail and her abundant catfish dinners and wide enough for Juan Campos and his oxcart. Only that way can we all tread on the earth with a gentler step.

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