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# Sister City Update

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## Sea Turtles and School Supplies

### Area Delegation Visits Santa Teresa

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*Another chapter in the Richland-Santa Teresa story unfolded last month as 5 area residents visited our Sister City. The delegation's members included Dr. Rob Horwich, a zoologist from the Gays Mills area, area teachers Bonnie Wright and Martin Clearfield, and Jose Marroquin and Jane Furchgott, long-time supporters of the Sister City project. Jose, Bonnie, and Marty served as interpreters for the group.*

*The primary goal of the delegation was to learn more about threats to the sea turtles that nest on Chacocente beach, a region that is part of the Santa Teresa municipality. The travellers also delivered donations from Richland area residents and followed up on earlier supply shipments.*

*All the participants have been kind enough to provide us with some reflections on their collective experience:*

Jane Furchgott...

#### *Watching the Turtles*

Our group of sixteen observers arrived on Chacocente beach at dusk after a 20-mile truck ride that took three hours over a boulder-strewn, river-crossing dirt road. We spread our blankets on the sand and went to sleep.

In the middle of the night we were awakened by the Sandinista soldiers patrolling the beach. They told us that turtles had arrived and were laying their eggs. As each turtle emerged from the ocean, she made a track up the beach resembling that of a small garden tractor. By following these tracks, we were able to find three separate turtles laying their eggs.

Each "tortuga paslama" (olive ridley turtle) was about three feet long. When she reached a spot she liked, she

dug a hole in the sand with her back flippers. She was so intent on her ancient ritual of egg-laying that she seemed oblivious of us standing around her with flashlights and flash cameras. After the hole was deep enough, we saw her eggs emerging and dropping into the hole like wet ping pong balls. During the egg-laying process, we could put our hands on her shell and she didn't seem to notice. When she was finished laying, she covered the eggs with sand and turned back towards the ocean.

She dragged herself slowly, resting a few times as if exhausted. After she entered the water, we could see the hump of her retreating shell each time a wave passed, until the water was deep enough that -- back in her element -- she could swim away.

#### Burrito Supper and Dance on November 13

The Sister City Project will be holding a benefit supper and old-time dance on Friday evening November 13. Come out and enjoy yourselves while raising money for projects in Santa Teresa.

The 6:00 Burrito Supper will feature tortillas and all the fixings, Central American style rice, and delicious homemade desserts. Starting at 8:00, the Kettle Creek String Band will play and call old time dance music—including squares, reels, polkas, and waltzes. Dances are taught and all ages are welcome. \$7.00 per adult and \$4.00 per child includes both dinner and dance. \$4.50 is the adult price for either event alone. Family prices are available.

Come eat and dance on the hardwood floor at Blue Highways (former Masonic Temple), 165 N. Central, Richland Center. If you can help with the supper or contribute a dessert, please call Mary Bard at 647-2594.

We learned that there are times during the nesting season when not just a few turtles lay eggs on the beach but thousands arrive at once. These crowded nights are called "arribadas." That is when the turtles are most at risk, when people steal their eggs and many turtles are trapped and killed in fishermen's nets.

### *Looking for Gloria*

When the Richland area delegation visited Santa Teresa in the spring of 1996, they realized that even though the city schools had many needs, the rural schools were even needier, often lacking the basic necessities like pencil and paper. They met Gloria Rivas, Santa Teresa's superintendent of schools, who impressed them as a sincere person, truly concerned with the welfare of the children. She also stressed the need for basic supplies.

In early 1997 the Sister City Project sent Gloria Rivas \$500 to spend on rural schoolchildren. A year later, we knew she had received the money but had heard nothing more.

So when Jane, Jose, and Rob went to Gloria's house this September, they were very pleased that she immediately brought out receipts and photos documenting the school supply project.

Gloria had bought materials in Managua and made up a packet for each student containing three notebooks, two pencils, two pens, an eraser, a pencil sharpener, and a box of crayons. She walked to sixteen of the rural schools to personally deliver the packets. (When asked why she hadn't sent this news earlier, she said she didn't trust the mail to arrive.)

### *Distributing Donations*

Early in our stay we paid a formal visit to the small building that serves as Santa Teresa's City Hall. We were pleased to see that the walls of the public area were covered with posters and newspaper clippings concerned with environmental preservation and the plight of the sea turtles at Chacocente.

The whole staff crowded into the mayor's office to witness the presentation of our \$800 donation and to be introduced to us. They all seemed to like the mayor, who told us that City Hall had received no money from the federal government for six months, during which time he had been paying the salaries out of his own pocket. In Nicaragua five percent of the federal budget is designated for the municipalities. This is the money that should have been paying the city employees. The federal party in

power, the right-wing Liberal Alliance, opposes the socialist Sandinistas. As a result, a Sandinista town like Santa Teresa suffers, because the federal government gives them as little support as it can get away with.

The mayor introduced a young woman, Lucrecia Cardenas, who is in charge of environmental education in the municipality. She asked if we might help them get a TV, VCR, and environmental videos to show in the schools. We said we'd see if anyone had used equipment to donate. TVs are much more expensive in Nicaragua. (At Managua airport, nearly every returning Nicaraguan was bringing home a TV.)

Later in our visit, on the road back from Chacocente, we stopped at the schoolhouse in Aguas Calientes, where the mayor had arranged a community meeting. People from this rural area told him about their problems.

A woman named Ana Pastora Palma approached me with tears in her eyes. She said that her 2-year-old child still could not walk, and that other children in their community were also very slow. She had been told that calcium deficiency was the problem, but she had no money to buy supplements. The mayor said he would send a doctor to correctly diagnose the condition. We earmarked \$300 of our contribution to help with treatment.

El Nino may have been partly to blame. It had caused a severe drought in the area resulting in crop failure and rural malnutrition. Fortunately good rains returned late this summer and fall.

While taking shelter from the rain, Jose Marroquin and I talked to an old farmer along a country road. He said there were problems with land ownership. Somocistas returning from Miami were reclaiming land that had been given to peasants during the Sandinista land reform. A further problem for farmers was the lack of available credit for purchase of seed. He said that some banks offered loans to farmers at such unbelievably exorbitant interest that those who took the loans often lost their land.

The rest of the money we took to Santa Teresa went to two projects. We contributed \$300 to construction of sanitary latrines in rural communities, an improvement that we have helped finance before. We gave \$200 to the lunchroom in San Francisco elementary school. Every school day, Juana Paula, the school cook, serves free lunches to the pupils and any other Santa Teresa children who want to come eat. She serves about 120 kids foods like rice and beans, potatoes with meat, spaghetti, or atole (corn beverage).

It is our hope that we can continue to support efforts of this type with future donations. We are also working to connect Santa Teresa with CHISPA, a low-interest loan fund partially supported by Wisconsin contributions.

Jose Marroquin...

The people in Santa Teresa were so nice to us -- we felt more than welcome and made many friends there. Although there is a lot of poverty in Santa Teresa, it is a safe place to live.

Our brothers there need as much help as we can give them. Our impression was that politics plays a negative role. Because Santa Teresa's city government is not allied with the party in power in Managua, Santa Teresa is not getting its share of aid from the federal government. That's why they can use any help we can give.

Marty Clearfield & Bonnie Wright...

Staying with Mayor Jose Martinez was a kind of historical shape shifting. On one wall of the large living room in his rambling compound hung a portrait of Che Guevara; facing Che on the opposite wall hung a silhouetted image of the Nicaraguan national hero Sandino. I flashed back to our kitchen in some remote time and saw clearly a picture of Malcom X on the door to a closet and on the refrigerator stood out a poster of Che Guevara. Mayor Martinez's house was a complex consisting of many rooms leading off of a central patio where tropical plants and parrots intertwined. As many as fifteen people lived there in addition to his own family of three. Kids who would otherwise have been out in the street were residents. Sister Gabriela, a teacher, was also a member of the household. Food was served to whomever was at the house. Rice, beans, occasional meat, salad and plenty of tropical fruit juices were the daily nourishment. Even for the Mayor's house, however, there was barely enough food for everyone.

The "barely enough" situation was a very common theme in the remote towns and countryside we visited. After many years of civil war, the small towns and villages are steering on an austere self-sustainable course. There is little federal help. In Managua, on the other hand, we saw the familiar Pizza Hut, Chinese restaurants and one cappuccino coffee shop. There seemed to be a lot of foreign capital and a large number of 4X4 auto-trucks in Managua. In the countryside the familiar sight was horses carrying two or three people and a lot of people on foot. Where tractors had once plowed the small plots and fields,

teams of oxen were now prevalent, just as in Cuba. Sustainability is the current state of peasant agriculture. The average salary of a public school teacher is \$80.00 per month, as that of government workers in general. A hotel clerk makes half that amount. Next to Haiti, Nicaragua is second lowest in per capita income for the hemisphere.

Regarding the biological aspect of our trip, the estimable Rob Horwich, a biologist from Gays Mills, led us in discussion about endangered species including the olive ridley sea turtle. Also discussed on many occasions was how environmental groups operate and how to incorporate community management of endangered species with the donor environmental groups. Rob's main concern centered on the beach of Chacocente which is part of the Municipality of Santa Teresa and under the supervision of the Mayor. Because Chacocente is the third most important beach for the olive ridley turtles to lay their eggs, Rob wanted to investigate ways of insuring that this nesting center would continue to be viable. After a three hour demanding ride through the dry jungle forest we arrived with the Mayor and his group to observe the phenomenon of ridley turtles laying their clutch of 90-100 eggs and burying them into the sand. All under the full moon of September.

We visited schools in Santa Teresa and saw familiar sights: Classrooms with little or no materials, lunch served to youngsters of rice and beans and stories of children not having shoes or at best sharing one pair between siblings in order to attend school.

Serving as interpreters we were able to appreciate the intricate financial and bureaucratic difficulties Santa Teresa has in trying to be sustainable after many years of national upheaval. Most of what we experienced was concentrated on how to best survive on whatever the individual could manifest by him/her self with very little help coming from Managua.

Two ideas came to us that would be appropriate for Santa Teresa: Raise \$500.00 for a team of oxen to be shared by a community outside of Santa Teresa for plowing, and to build a solar dryer to preserve fruits and tomatoes. If anyone wants to work on these projects, we would like to hear from you.

Rob Horwich...

*Conservation of the Dry Tropical Forest and Turtle Nesting Beach at Chacocente*

I became involved in the Richland Center/Santa Teresa Sister City Project when Dan Hendricks showed me a letter received from Jose Martinez, the Mayor of Santa Teresa, requesting help in protecting the sea turtles at Chacocente, a reserve under their jurisdiction. I was interested since I am Director of Community Conservation Consultants, a conservation organization based in the Gays Mills area. Our interest has been in catalyzing community group to protect their area natural resources in Belize and Wisconsin as well as other areas of the world. CCC was responsible for a proposal that catalyzed the Kickapoo Reserve from the unfortunate La Farge Dam project,

As I talked with Jane Furchgott and others it became obvious to me that the reserve at Chacocente was an important protected area. But it was only after I went with the sister city delegation to Santa Teresa this past September that I was impressed how vital the area is. Through conversations with the Mayor as well as conservationists from Fundacion Cocibolca and Nicambiental and from reading information the mayor gave to us, it was ascertained that the 3 kilometer beach is the most important sea turtle nesting beach in Nicaragua and probably the third most important nesting beach for the olive ridley turtle in Central America and internationally. Although estimates of the population are not well documented, it has been stated that these female turtles come to Chacocente between June and December in synchronized arrivals or "arribadas" as high as 10,000 within short periods. Estimates are that over 20,000 female olive ridley turtles may arrive there each year. The beach is additionally important for nesting leatherback turtles, which arrive individually.

The second reason the Rio Escalante Chacocente Wildlife Refuge, as it is formally called, is so important is because it additionally protects a 4800 hectare tropical dry forest. Although not as widely publicized these dry forests which are found on the Pacific side of Central America are extremely endangered as ecosystems. Over the years, more than 98% of these forests have been cut and few of the remaining fragments are in protected status, making Chacocente so important for Nicaragua's conservation program. As a primatologist, the forest interests me since it provides habitat for the mantled howler monkey as well a small population of spider monkeys and white faced capuchin monkeys.

For me, the result of our trip was a commitment to write a proposal for instigating a community co-management plan for the area. The plan would seek to protect the forests and wildlife of Chacocente while helping to provide some economic incentives for the villagers living near to the refuge. Currently, community members are allowed to harvest about 20% of the turtle eggs for food and sale. The eggs are reputed to have aphrodisiac qualities, which is why they are sought as a resource.

In the weeks since I have returned, I have completed a proposal for the next year and will be seeking funding from interested conservation groups and foundations. The proposal has 8 main objectives. First there is some concern that reversal of land policies instituted by the Sandinista regime has brought the land title of Chacocente into question. We need to research the title issue so the government can compensate any existing landowner requests. In conjunction with this, there are many studies and documents about the refuge that must be brought together in one place for use by all parties interested in the area. Thirdly, we would like to support and encourage the Municipality of Santa Teresa to move ahead with the agreement they have with Marena, the government national resource department to co-manage the refuge. The proposal would thus provide salaries for a project coordinator and an extra park guard from the local communities to coordinate activities of the existing Marena staff and army guards who are already on site at Chacocente. With staff of Fundacion Cocibolca the proposal would provide some initial training for Chacocente staff and members of COMAREN, the community based group which has been formed by the inter- institutional agreement that the Mayor has signed with Marena and other interested groups.

The fifth objective would provide funds to build a modest building to focus the management activities. This building, would additionally provide a place for researchers and tourists to stay at Chacocente, Management and ownership of the building would reside with COMAREN who would work with local community members to provide meals for the visitors, Thus, income from the building would pass to COMAREN to help support the program, while meal services would provide a small supplementary income for some community members. An offshoot of this building would be to encourage scientific research on the turtles and the flora and fauna of the dry forest and to begin to look at an ecotourism plan for the refuge. Another goal would be to create a multi-use bilingual booklet about Chacocente. Such a booklet could provide information to tourists and local residents alike on the natural history of the area and

its flora and fauna. Finally, through the services of CCC's assistant Director, Dr. Jon Lyon from Edgewood College, we would create a GIS vegetation map for the refuge. This would be the first step to developing a management plan for the refuge.

If this year and a half project were successful then we would like to continue with a larger long term grant for a successful community co-management plan for the Rio Escalante Chacocente Wildlife Refuge.

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Richland Area - Santa Teresa  
Sister City Project  
%Brewer Library  
Richland Center, WI 53581