

SISTER CITY UPDATE

Number 10

Richland Center-Santa Teresa Sister City Project

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Destruction at Chacocente

In late December Santa Teresa's Chacocente Wildlife Refuge was violated.

Workers employed by Nicaragua's President Aleman began bulldozing a wide road across the refuge very near and parallel to the beach, destroying large hardwood trees and fragile dry forest vegetation. The felled trees were made into posts for a barbed-wire fence to keep fishermen and their families out of the property east of the refuge, which was given to them after the Revolution but was now leased by Aleman's brother.

The Alemans wanted a road to connect this land to their other property west of Chacocente in preparation for a resort hotel. Their long-range goal is a highway with tourist development along the Pacific coast from the beach near Managua all the way to the Costa Rican border.

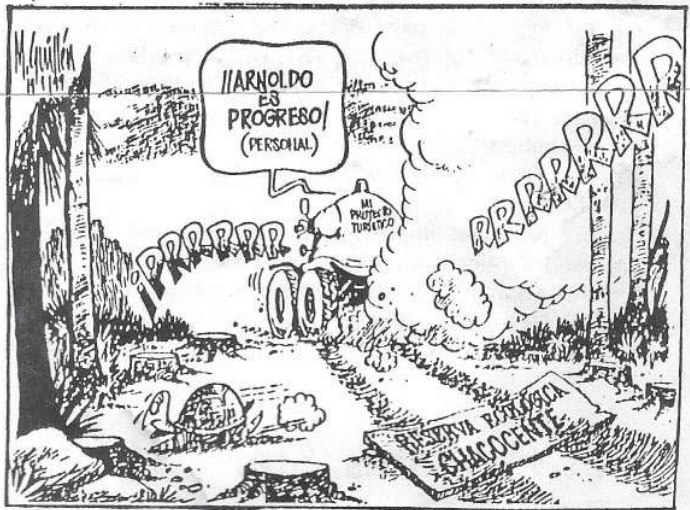
Santa Teresa's Mayor Jose Martinez soon heard about Aleman's destruction, which MARENA, the Nicaraguan department of natural resources, had not had the courage to prevent. He and the municipal treasurer went to Chacocente, where they confronted President Aleman as he directed operations from his four-wheeler.

The embarrassed President claimed he did not know this was a national wildlife refuge and blamed the bulldozer operator for the mistake.

The Nicaraguan press made much of this story and severely condemned what Aleman had done. As a result of the showdown, the bulldozed road was stopped before it went all the way across the refuge.

Mayor Martinez requested official letters from our Sister City Project and from Dr. Horwich supporting COMAREN, the local Santa Teresa conservation organization, in stopping the road-building and protecting the Chacocente Refuge. A recent letter from Mayor Martinez thanked us for our support. At this time the government ministries of transportation and construction have agreed to COMAREN's proposal to route the coastal highway, if built, to the north so it passes outside the Chacocente Refuge.

Mayor Martinez also noted that four desperately poor rural communities in their municipality would benefit from this siting of a highway, although the highway and related development will have a negative impact on the area's natural resources, including the sea turtles.



Cartoon from La Prensa, Managua's newspaper, showing President Arnoldo Aleman on his 4-wheeler driving through Chacocente Ecological Refuge. Aleman's shirt says "My Tourist Project" and he's repeating his election slogan "Arnoldo is Progress" with the added comment "(Personal)." Even the conservative La Prensa criticized the President's actions in Chacocente and his seemingly insatiable appetite for acquiring land for himself and his family.

"One important purpose for funding the Chacocente boat is symbolic. We're trying to work with the Santa Teresa community in ways they're interested in. The boat is their heavy priority. The goal is for the community to become experts in their own natural resource planning."

--Dr. Robert Horwich

Community Conservation Consultants

We're Near Our Goal for the Chacocente Boat Please Help with Your Contributions!

In addition to their frustration over the egg robbers who arrive in boats, Santa Teresans are concerned about the many dead turtles that wash up on Chacocente beach each year after having drowned in the nets of large fish or shrimp trawlers that have come too close to shore. A boat would enable the soldiers or guards to chase these trawlers away.

Mayor Martinez has made a high-priority request for a boat to use in guarding the beach. Our Sister City Project has promised that we will provide money for a boat by June, the beginning of turtle nesting, if the grant proposal has not already been funded.

The boat they need is a large, open "Mexican skiff" with an outboard motor, which would cost about \$5000 in Nicaragua.

We have already been fundraising towards this goal. Thanks to your many donations, we have \$4100 in our Santa Teresa Fund account at the Richland County Bank.

Recently Peter Smith, a farm machinery repairman in Hillsboro, sent a very generous donation towards the boat. Peter took part in a WCCN tour to Nicaragua which made a day-trip to Chacocente. He saw the situation for himself and was impressed by the sincerity of Mayor Martinez -- "a man who had both public and environmental interests at heart."

Any contributions beyond the cost of the boat will be spent on buoys to mark the refuge, on a pair of oxen for local farmers, and for ongoing health and education needs.

Checks may be made out to "The Santa Teresa Fund" and sent directly to the Richland County Bank, 195 W. Court St., Richland Center WI 53581, or given to Tom Bachman at the Brewer Library, 325 N. Central Ave. Call Jane Furchgott at 583-2431 if you have further questions.

Bard Visits Santa Teresa

Neil Bard, a family physician from Richland Center, and his son Jon visited Santa Teresa for a few days in January. They stayed with Mayor Martinez, who had been Neil's host on his 1995 trip.

Neil delivered the \$1100 raised at our November Burrito Supper, presenting it to Mayor Martinez and an assembly of aldermen from the rural areas of the municipality. The money will be used for most pressing health and education needs in the outlying communities. Neil also took a box of basic medicines for the rural health outposts.

Mayor Martinez drove the Bards to Chacocente, where they saw a bulldozer scraping off the vegetation from one or two acres just across the Rio Escalante from the Refuge, in preparation for building the resort planned by President Aleman's brother. Dumptrucks were hauling fill along the newly-bulldozed road. However the Mayor could do nothing since this site was outside his municipal jurisdiction.

Neil was impressed by the unity and enthusiasm Mayor Martinez, municipal officials, and employees showed towards protecting Chacocente and by the appreciation they felt towards Richland Center's continuing solidarity with their cause.

Mitch Spares Sta. Teresa

Santa Teresa lies south of the path taken by Hurricane Mitch in October. The area received heavy rain, but nothing like the catastrophic torrents that fell on northwest Nicaragua.

During his January visit Neil Bard learned that three people had died from flooding, many crops were lost, and some wells were contaminated, resulting in illness. Neil found the community upbeat and hopeful in spite of these hardships brought on by the hurricane.

In February Emil Haney, economics and Spanish professor at the UW Richland, was invited to be part of a delegation sponsored by partners of the Americas Farmer to Farmer Program. The group was working with Nicaragua's National Agrarian University on a long term reconstruction plan for the area around Leon devastated by the hurricane. During the trip Emil saw Casita, the deforested volcano that collapsed after the hurricane and buried 2100 people.

Special thanks to all who contributed to the Sister City Project for Hurricane Mitch relief. Your money was channeled through WCCN to the Nicaraguan Council of Protestant Churches and the Network of Women Against Violence. These organizations provided hurricane victims with necessities such as corn, rice, beans, chlorine for treating

contaminated water, hammocks, blankets, and plastic sheeting to construct temporary shelters. Part of the money also went to the Bloomington-Posoltega Sister City Committee to help buy land for people who lost everything in the Casita mudslide.

Sea Turtle Symposium

After she learned that a coastal highway and resort development had been added to the list of threats to Chacocente's nesting sea turtles, Jane Furchgott decided to attend the 19th Annual Symposium on Sea Turtle Conservation & Biology held this past February on South Padre Island, Texas. She also raised money for Mayor Jose Martinez to attend this bilingual meeting. The Sea Turtle Restoration Project of Earth Island Institute helped pay for Jose's plane ticket, as they felt his presence there would be important. Ramon Duarte, the head MARENA guard at Chacocente also attended.

At the meeting Jane and Mayor Martinez learned about sea turtles worldwide and their struggle against extinction, met many biologists and community organizers working to save sea turtles, and informed the symposium participants about the threats to sea turtles on Nicaragua's Pacific coast and at Chacocente in particular.

Mayor Martinez made a poster presentation entitled "Environmental Disaster at Chacocente" with many news articles discussing Aleman's highway building attempt. They wrote a petition calling for protection of Chacocente's sea turtles and condemning Aleman's plans. The petition was signed by many scientists at the symposium and since then has aided the Mayor in his conflict with the Nicaraguan government.

Jane and the Mayor received much support from the turtle conservationists, which reinforced their belief in the importance of the Chacocente nesting beach. They learned that the greatest cause of sea turtle death worldwide is capture and drowning in the nets of fish or shrimp trawlers. Turtle excluder devices are available that allow turtles to escape, but the World Trade Organization will not require their use for fear of restraining free trade.

Possible Turtle Grant

Rob Horwich, with Mayor Martinez' approval, has written a grant proposal for a community co-management plan for the Chacocente Wildlife Refuge. We are still seeking funding for this grant from various environmental donor organizations.

Rob will be traveling to Nicaragua in August. He will be accompanied by a representative from a likely funding organization who wants to see the Chacocente situation firsthand.