Mexican Catholic Bishops Issue Pastoral Letter on Forest Protection in the Sierra Madre

Summary: The Catholic bishops' of Northern Mexico have issued a pastoral on the forests of that region. Their emphasis is that forest conservation has become a life and death issue for the Tarahumara Native people. They say that we must rethink our basic attitudes toward the forests if we are to save not only the forests from commercial exploitation, but also the villages which depend upon the forests for their livelihood. The full text of their pastoral letter follows.

DECLARATION OF THE DIOCESES OF THE SIERRA TARAHUMARA ON THE EXPLOITATION OF THE FOREST

Mexico City, DF
March 29, 2000

As servants of the Church of the Tarahumara, we are deeply concerned and angered at the way the forests of the Sierra Madre in the State of Chihuahua have been destroyed throughout the Twentieth Century, and especially following the ratification of NAFTA. This exploitation has brought virtually no benefits for the majority of mestizo and indigenous inhabitants.

This has happened because it occurs in a framework of cultural clash in which the members of the dominant culture take advantage of the indigenous people and believe that they have fooled them. At the same time, the wretchedness of the invaders affirms the identity of the indigenous people.

The lack of local employment is a serious problem. Because it is one of the main sources of jobs in the Sierra, the forest must be treated and worked in a sensible manner in order to preserve it for future generations.

We are obliged to express our reflections publicly because the avarice and racism that have been part of forest exploitation are destroying God's creation and undermining its fraternal destiny.

The Social Costs of Desertification
1. Desertification is moving rapidly forward in the Sierra. The once abundant and lush forests are becoming a rocky desert. The situation is coming to a breaking point. Moisture loss has undermined the survival of the region’s inhabitants. Without ignoring the planet’s thermal inversions, which are often used to explain our regional problem, it is plain to see that the forests of Chihuahua form a fragile ecosystem in the desert belt of the world. The difference between what they are today and what they once were is abysmal. Undeniably, today’s desertification is the result of irresponsible forest mismanagement.

2. We have come to the point of no return. If we take one more step in the direction of ecological destruction, desertification may never be halted.

3. We are witnessing the unjust sentencing to death of an entire ethnic group. The forest is being devastated in the name of a development that has proven itself to be both racist and disenfranchising.

4. An uncontrolled economic system is being imposed on the region, call it neo-liberalism or any other name. Its effects are damaging all of the Sierras inhabitants as well as those of regions neighboring Chihuahua: Sonora, Sinaloa, Durango, Coahuila, and the states of Southwestern United States.

5. The proponents both governmental and private of this economic system have allowed the pillage of these forests because they are beholden to external interests and care little for the people who live here.

6. The social impacts are disastrous. The springs are going dry for want of moisture; there are almost no livestock left; planting crops is extremely difficult; and the harvests are meager. This is the main cause of emigration to the cities.

7. Traditional ethnic groups are witnessing the death of the environment that is vital for the continuation of their culture. The natural processes that once permitted hunting, gathering and the regeneration of agricultural lands have been shattered. The life that the forest used to nourish has virtually been destroyed.

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8. The Cycle of Corruption

8. With few exceptions, lumber companies, including fly-by-night sawmills, have been the greatest cause of this devastation. They have no vision of the future and have placed us on the brink of disaster. Now we must either take emergency measures or go headlong into the abyss.

9. Those who work for this system of plunder see it as something natural. The slightest objection makes them feel that they are being attacked. Because they must work every day just to survive, it is hard for them to have a vision of the future.

10. With all of its implications, the drug trade that has taken root all over the Sierra, is both a reflection of the lack of opportunities and a chance to survive in such a deteriorated environment.

11. The indigenous communities continuously complain about the violation of their most basic rights. In their own way, they have said time and time again that they do not want their forest to be plundered.

12. Pressured by lumber companies, the “ejidos” [local rural cooperatives that own land in the name of the Native people or peasants] sign ambiguous contracts that call for standing pines, which must then be transported. This has a negative impact on local jobs and ejido dividends.

13. A circle of corruption, comprised of bosses within the ejido and lumber companies, allied with forestry engineers, and public officials makes all this possible. The result is impunity, which thwarts all legal efforts to stop the destruction. Proof of this is the accumulation of more than 400 unresolved complaints over the past four years.
14. Such corruption filters into the *ejido* administration, which is often controlled by the lumber companies. In this way internal divisions and cultural differences are fostered and exploited to benefit a few. This works to the detriment of the already deteriorated family economy.

15. It is commonly claimed that rural people are not capable of managing their forest resources for their own benefit. We do not agree. Corruption is what has kept the people of the Sierra from taking control of their own forest resources and learning how to manage them.

The Inevitable Ecological Consciousness

20. The market orientation, which places economic incentives before all else, has created a devastating logic. If we do not stop it, it will drag us all to our deaths. For this reason, it is absolutely vital to achieve a new ecological consciousness that defends life for everybody instead of material benefits for just a few.

21. Multinational market pressures have made the legal framework become increasingly flexible. Both forestry police and silvicultural practices are at the service of industry, mainly for the production of cellulose, paper, and plywood. Legal reforms have facilitated the flight of unimaginable wealth from our forests, in contrast to the extreme poverty in which our people live.

22. The society affected by this general deterioration does not react to the magnitude of this problem. It is everybody's duty to apply pressure, demand responsible action from legislators and governmental authorities. It might even be a good idea for forestry to come under state instead of federal jurisdiction.

23. Education must become a priority at all levels. Whether within the schools or outside of them, a new consciousness about our forests and the natural environment must be created. We must realize that the world is a living being that deserves our respect, care and attention.

24. The ancient traditions of the Indigenous Peoples offer great ecological wisdom. Despite the historical changes they have been subjected to, they still possess a worldview that stresses a profound communion with nature. As governmental authorities, industrialists, and citizens at large, we must change our conceptualization of nature and see it, not as a resource to be exploited,
but as a world with which to live in harmony. We need to adopt a more integral vision of life, like the one that the Indigenous People offer us.

**Urgent Action**

25. The protection of forest resources requires urgent measures. It is vital to reconsider and revise forestry management plans, visualize their environmental impacts, restore the areas of forest that have been lost, and seek out advice in an ethical way. In this fragile ecosystem, we must understand the value of the forest. It is not mere food for industry that chops it down and gobbles it up; it is the giver of life for its legitimate owners and inhabitants of the state of Chihuahua and extensive neighboring territories.

26. Culturally sensitive training programs that will not alienate the inhabitants are desperately needed so that a rational forest policy can become a reality, and so that people can become self-sufficient. Until today this has been blocked systematically.

27. Training in sustainable forestry management is a road that opens many doors. In Mexico there are experiences of self-sustaining forestry management by indigenous people that can be shared with the inhabitants of the Sierra of Chihuahua.

28. The commercial forestry production chain should be implemented in the Sierra so that the waste of raw materials can be minimized. This would also create more local jobs, reduce both emigration and the tendency to participate in the drug trade.

29. The studies and information at the governments disposal must be made public. NGOs that do not profit from the forest and seek to defend biodiversity should be allowed the right to participate and collaborate in, for example, forest management programs, the State Forest Council and other governmental departments.

30. All governmental and industrial initiatives must guarantee long-term actions designed to promote the sustainability of the Sierras ecosystem. Without this orientation, aid programs become handouts designed to support political parties. The exploitation of the image of indigenous people for opportunistic profit and other such tendencies must come to an end. The international agreements that Mexico has signed, like Covenant 169 of the International Labor Organization, must always be respected.

**The Demands of Christian Faith**

31. By formulating our concerns and displeasure in this way, we are well aware that we are not the voice of all Tarahumara

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