



Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation

Information Service

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.

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

16. The ecological deterioration to which this oasis between deserts has been subjected affects the inhabitants of an enormous hydrological basin that extends over a large part of Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Sonora, Durango and the Rio Conchos River (Rio Grande) Basin, which stretches toward the Gulf of Mexico. This has caused a general reduction in the oxygenation process, together with rising summer temperatures, water rationing in the cities, and other consequences mentioned by experts in the field.

17. Tourism projects do not provide alternatives that will benefit the people of the Sierra. They are a threat. One example is the demand for drinking water and the generation of raw sewage. These projects are backed by interests external to the region and only benefit the executives of tourist services. They ignore the needs of the local population, and do not favor the creation of dignified living conditions for the indigenous people.

18. Reforestation programs have been ineffective for preserving and restoring the ecological balance. There have only been public declarations and good wishes, all of which amount to nothing before the millions of pine trees that are cut down each year. This reality is plain for anyone to see.

19. The recent proposals by the state authorities to get to the bottom of the problem cannot be limited to the bandaid approach when the situation is so serious. Their proposals do not address the root of the problem challenging the sustainability of the ecosystem. Furthermore, they will not improve the region's development.

gain and that outside intervention would be beneficial. 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.

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
March 29, 2000

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.

the people of the Sierra. However, we do listen to and gather their thoughts and feelings. We use them together with the demands of our faith as the foundation to denounce and criticize these social injustices, these crimes against creation, which should be for the fraternity of all people. For this reason we appeal to the conscience of everybody and urge all Christians to take responsibility for preserving life on this planet that God entrusted to our care.

32. We believe that the God of life has given us this world to be shared by all peoples, all world-views, and all cultures. Nobody owns nature, and nobody has more rights than anybody else to her fruits. We believe that God acknowledges all the efforts a person makes to preserve the life of our Mother Earth. We believe that we will come to understand everything we have done or have failed to do to care for this world of his.

33. All of this makes it our obligation to express these reflections publicly, to denounce the genocide and ecological devastation we are witnessing, and to demand honesty, justice and the life we all deserve, from the word of God, and from the people of God.

Signatories

Jose Luis Dibildox Martinez
Bishop of the Tarahumara

Celestino Villa Ayala, Pbro.
Vicar General Episcopal

P. Javier Avila Aguirre, SJ
Vicar of the Northern Territory

P. Javier Campos Morales, SJ
Vicar of the Western Territory

Rosendo Martinez Flores, CM
Vicar of the Southern Territory

Gabriel Parga Terrazas, Pbro
Vicar for Indigenous People

Francisco Chavez Acosta, Pbro
Vicar of the Central Territory

Translation from the Spanish original
by Carlos Agnesi, President,
Interreligious Council of Mexico
Guadalajara, Jalisco