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Low Scores For Region On Ability To Protect Environment

by Mike Leffert

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Yale University has released its 2005 Environmental Sustainability Index (ESI), and Central America, with the exception of Costa Rica, fared badly. "The ESI benchmarks the ability of nations to protect the environment over the next several decades," says the document. It ranks the environmental practices of 131 countries from best to worst, giving each country a score from 1 to 100.

Costa Rica came in 15th in the rankings. Panama was 37th, and it was all downhill from there. Honduras was 52nd, Nicaragua 56th, Guatemala 58th, and El Salvador, the worst, 73rd. The ESI arrives at its ratings by integrating 76 data sets tracking natural-resource endowments, past and present pollution levels, environmental-management efforts, and the capacity of a society to improve its environmental performance into 21 indicators of environmental sustainability. "These indicators permit comparison across a range of issues that fall into the following five broad categories: * Environmental systems * Reducing environmental stresses * Reducing human vulnerability to environmental stresses * Societal and institutional capacity to respond to environmental challenges * Global stewardship." The higher a country's score, says the report, the better positioned it is to maintain favorable environmental conditions into the future.

Water, water everywhere...

Generally, water resources buoyed the region's scores. The abundance of ground and surface water gave the region a score of 99.1 out of 100. Points were lost elsewhere in the ratings, however, because much of the surface water is polluted and access to it for large numbers of people is limited (see NotiCen, 2000-11-09). Dr. Marco Gonzalez, executive secretary of the Comision Centroamericana de Ambiente y Desarrollo, explained the problems underlying the apparently high score. "We have lost a great deal in terms of quantity and quality of water across the region," said Gonzalez. "Of six legal water projects in the legislatures, none has been approved. Again, we need long-term national plans."

Quality and delivery of water, especially the surface water, is another problem that transcends quantity. Nicolas Guzman, an engineer at the Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales (CEUR), Universidad de San Carlos (USC), said, "Although the quantity of water is sufficient to sustain the population for a long time, the problem is that many people cannot reach the water.

That requires a lot of money. There has been a lot of pollution, as has occurred in Lake Amatitlan [Guatemala] or Lake Nicaragua. Because of this, the water is not safe to drink and requires purification," another expensive proposition. Aside from these perhaps obvious considerations, Guzman went on to tick off other issues, from loss of aquatic life and erosion to deteriorating plumbing and problems related to hydroelectric plants. He said more effective regulation is needed along with public education. "People do not know how to use the water," he said. "There is a lot of waste." All that is solid melts into air. It was in air quality that the isthmus fared worst.

Guatemala got the lowest score, 32.6 of 100; Honduras, 39.5; El Salvador, 42.5; Nicaragua, 50.5, then Panama and Costa Rica, with slightly more respectable 58.6 and 60.6, respectively. Guatemala also distinguished itself as having the highest ozone levels in the Americas and as being among the worst in urban particulates (see NotiCen, 1996-08-15). CEUR's Isabel Cifuentes explained, saying, "Pollution in the city, especially during rush hour, is a serious issue, in part because vehicle emissions are not regulated. Years ago there was an attempt at regulation, but it was ineffective, and now we're back where we started, or worse."

The UN Environment Program (UNEP) says that the main sources (80%) of this particulate matter are heavy and light vehicles, with the rest from factories. Cifuentes sees small hope of any near-term improvement. "Factories are an important source of noxious gases that ought to be regulated. Although they have to meet some requirements, it is administratively easy to get around them. It's a question of professional ethics. You can pay to pass or to alter a report," she said. Responsibility in this area belongs to the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, which has done little along these lines. "The problem is that we don't want to," added Cifuentes.

Similar problems exist in the other Central American countries, according to the report. Even Costa Rica gets its lowest marks on air quality. In El Salvador, Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources spokesperson Ernesto Lopez hedged, but admitted the Yale findings. "Although we do not exceed the established limits on the majority of atmospheric contaminants, in big cities like San Salvador we have problems with ozone and sometimes sulfur and nitrogen," he said. "The population suffers from a number of respiratory illnesses, which can be seen in clinics and hospitals."

Far from being set to do something about air quality, El Salvador has reduced its 2006 budget for the ministry by 42% from the previous year, to less than 0.5% of the national budget. Fundacion Nacional para el Desarrollo (FUNDE) director Roberto Rubio said this "demonstrates how unimportant this issue is to the government."

Nicaragua and Costa Rica appear to see it differently. They have increased their environmental budgets by 70% and 56% respectively. It bears noting here that the ESI recognizes that the relationship between environmental sustainability and economic development is complex. It concludes that developmental status is not environmental destiny.

Beacon unto the nations

Costa Rica, ranking 15th in the world, is a beacon for environmentalists elsewhere in the region. The CCAD's Gonzalez noted, "Costa Rica's achievements are the product of profound reforms, placing health and education at the top of its agenda. It has been a positive influence on environmental issues in all our countries." Gonzalez's comment reflects a tenet of the ESI, that governments benchmark their results against a relevant peer group. The case of Costa Rica can, in the words of the report, "help to highlight superior environmental programs, technologies, strategies, and approaches."

But in general, says an unpublished UNEP report quoted by Inforpress Centroamericana, "Environmental construction in Central America is constantly a work in progress. The conditions in which it is developing are still insufficient to guarantee sustainable development in a region with extraordinary biodiversity, but with asymmetries and vulnerabilities. Because of this, more local efforts are needed, more civil society participation, and more international support to complete the work that is still pending."

This report finds that Central America has one of the highest deforestation levels on the planet, more than 1% per year in some countries. In the ESI, El Salvador stands out as one of the most seriously deforested, although this has been contested elsewhere. Nevertheless, it is rated as the second-most deforested country in Latin America, after Haiti.

Walter Gomez of the organization CESTA Amigos de la Tierra said there are a number of causes for this. "Human intervention has meant that some of the areas ideal for agriculture have been used for large-scale industrial projects like maquiladoras, displacing farmers who in turn begin to destroy the forest," he said. "In addition, the development of infrastructure has destroyed a lot of resources." For Gomez, it is not a question of legislation. "There used to be a forest law, but it was weak. Now there is a new, stricter law, but it is not enforced, it exists only on paper," he said. "Private industry is more powerful than the law, and the state does nothing."

The 2005 ESI report claims to provide: "(1) a powerful tool for putting environmental decision making on a firmer analytical footing, (2) an alternative to GDP and the Human Development Index for gauging country progress, and (3) a useful mechanism for benchmarking environmental performance." At the same time, it recognizes some shortcomings. It does not, for instance, cover quality of waste management, wetlands destruction, or exposure to heavy metals such as lead and mercury because countries do not collect or report the data in a way that permits cross-country comparisons.

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