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Withering Drought Hurting Farmers, Fish Industry in Nicaragua

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
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Banana growers in the southwestern department of Rivas say they’ve lost 70% of their yield. Around Lake Cocibolca, Central America’s largest lake, fishers complain of dwindling catches and longer days spent on their boats, which have become harder to maneuver as the shoreline recedes. Elsewhere in the country, some riverbeds have dried out completely. There is even talk that the prolonged rain deficit might have something to do with a recent rash of deaths of howler monkeys. Across Nicaragua—and in much of the rest of Central America—people are praying for rain to end a drought that has stretched on for three years and impacted lives in myriad ways (NotiCen, Sept. 18, 2014). The dry-weather pattern is the result, say scientists, of a Pacific Ocean warming phenomenon called El Niño/Southern Oscillation (ENSO). The government, led by President Daniel Ortega of the leftist Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), has not declared an official state of emergency. Nor has it offered much in the way of definitive data. The problem is nevertheless a very real one, with clear and costly repercussions, most notably for people living in the so-called “dry corridor,” in western Nicaragua.

The drought has dealt a particularly heavy blow to the agricultural sector, which suffered losses of more than US$200 million in 2015 and continues to struggle this year, according to the Unión de Productores Agropecuarios de Nicaragua (UPANIC), a growers association. Most vulnerable are small-scale farmers who need the crops they produce to feed their families and can ill afford any loss to their already meager incomes. Olman Fuzez, a farmer in El Aguacate, a rural community in Rivas, told the Al Jazeera news service in February that the drought had cost him his entire corn crop for two straight years. His family of six now eats millet (instead of corn) and small portions of beans. “We didn’t eat millet before, but now we have no choice,” he said.

People who eke out a living from fresh-water fishing have also been impacted by the drought, which has had a noticeable effect in recent months on the water level in Nicaragua’s two major lakes: Cocibolca, also known as El Gran Lago de Nicaragua, and Xolotlán. Residents say the shoreline of Cocibolca, an 8,200-sq-km behemoth of a lake, has receded 200 meters in recent months. The water level in Lago Xolotlán, or Lago Managua, has visibly dropped as well, forcing fishers to walk far out into the shallow lake before starting the motors on their boats, the opposition newspaper La Prensa reported last month.

“In 2010, the lake filled up, rising all the way to the edge of the city,” Dinorha Briceño, a resident of San Francisco Libre, told the daily. “It stayed full for a long time. But now, this summer, it’s like the water got sucked out. Since February, it’s dried out an incredible amount.”

Fishers in San Francisco Libre, located on the opposite side of Xolotlán from Managua, the Nicaraguan capital, say they’re having to spend more time in their boats—which means spending more money on gasoline, ice and other overhead costs—and bringing home smaller catches. “People are left with, like, 200 córdobas (US$7) after five days of work,” Roldán Montes Sosa, the owner of a
fish collection center, told La Prensa. Montes Sosa estimates that about 60% of the town’s population fishes for a living. “So if the fishing is bad, the people really feel it,” he said.

‘Profound environmental crisis’

In a report made public on April 22—Earth Day—the environmental group Centro Humboldt noted that Cocibolca and Xolotlán have lost 2% and 4% of their water respectively as a result of the drought. In the case of Cocibolca, the water loss is equivalent to 2 million Olympic swimming pools, Víctor Campos, Centro Humboldt’s director, told reporters.

The report, titled “Nicaraguan Socio-Environmental Crisis Post-Drought 2016” and co-authored with a handful of other environmental groups, notes that four smaller lakes have dried up almost completely, as have several wetlands areas and a number of rivers. “We’re facing the most profound environmental crisis in recent history,” said Campos upon presenting the study. “The situation proves that we’re not doing things well at all in the country.”

A recent article by journalist Lindsay Fendt, of The Tico Times, an English-language news site based in Costa Rica, suggested that the rain deficit may also be playing a role in an apparent die-off of howler monkeys. A conservation group called Paso Pacífico collected evidence of nearly 300 howler monkey deaths in Nicaragua in just the first three months of the year. Similar reports have come out of Costa Rica and Panama, which have been touched by drought as well. Researchers wonder if the monkeys are perhaps succumbing to a virus. Tests have so far been inconclusive, fueling speculation that the dry-weather pattern may be to blame.

“In Nicaragua, Paso Pacífico received reports of howlers drinking from swimming pools, and in Costa Rica a spider monkey was recently observed by a Tico Times reporter drinking from a puddle in Corcovado National Park, in southwestern Costa Rica, a behavior the guide said he had not seen in his 23 years of leading tours,” Fendt reported.

Pleas for better planning

Nicaraguan authorities have made efforts to distribute drinking water in hard-hit areas. And in mid April, they urged people not to wash sidewalks or cars until early May, when the rainy season typically begins. Rainfall in recent weeks has brought some relief, but given the magnitude of the deficit, many wonder if it will be enough to replenish the country’s dry riverbeds, receding lakes and depleted aquifers.

Critics call the government measures “Band-Aid” responses, and suggest that to better protect people from this and future droughts, authorities need to come up with long-term water and land-management strategies, and better protect the country’s lakes and rivers from pollution (NotiCen, May 2, 2013). “Obviously, the drought isn’t the government’s fault. What is their fault, though, is the lack of foresight and action to reduce the effects of natural cycles that have been predicted down to the last hairs by scientists,” Gioconda Belli, a Nicaraguan poet and former revolutionary who is now openly opposed to the Ortega regime, wrote in an essay published April 29 in the independent news magazine Confidencial.

Belli places particular emphasis on the issue of deforestation due to cattle ranching, agricultural expansion and “predatory logging.” Centro Humboldt and other environmental organizations share her concern and say the government needs to step up efforts to stop the rapid depletion of forest land, especially in places like the Indio Maíz Biological Reserve in southeastern Nicaragua, and
the Bosawás Natural Reserve—the second-largest rain forest in the Western Hemisphere after the Amazon—along the northern border with Honduras.

Despite their status as “protected” areas, both are losing ground, environmental groups warn, to land invaders, illegal loggers, ranchers and even drug traffickers. Chris Jordan, a researcher from Michigan State University who has spent time in Nicaragua on a project to protect the dwindling population of Baird’s tapirs, the country’s largest land mammal, estimates that the Bosawás Natural Reserve is losing some 40,000 hectares per year (NotiCen, Nov. 14, 2013)

“The forest-water relationship is the foundation for keeping the ecosystems stable,” Centro Humboldt’s Campos said during his Earth Day press conference. “When this cycle breaks, there is an environmental deterioration that has all kinds of repercussions.”

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