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LADB Staff

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## **Garbage, Debris Ruin Sumidero Canyon National Park in Chiapas**

*by LADB Staff*

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Some areas of the Canon del Sumidero national park in Chiapas, one of Mexico's most beautiful natural sites, have become overrun with garbage, chemical wastes, and municipal discharges, a problem exacerbated every year during the rainy season between May and October. In a given season, an average of 5,000 metric tons of trash and debris are extracted from the Rio Grijalva, which runs through the canyon, the Comision Nacional de Areas Protegidas (CONANP) said.

The accumulation of garbage in some stretches of the Rio Grijalva is not only a potential ecological disaster, but also a major health hazard and a possible drawback for the tourism industry. The problem has been especially bad in recent years in the aftermath of Hurricane Stan, which created a lot of debris that eventually made its way into the river (see SourceMex, 2005-11-02).

The spectacular canyon, which contains some walls as tall as 900 meters, is the second-most-popular tourist destination in Chiapas state, surpassed only by the Mayan ruins of Palenque. At its southern entrance, the canyon begins near the town of Chiapa de Corzo, and the river flows into the reservoir of the Manuel Moreno Torres (also known as Chicoasen) hydroelectric dam.

The canyon is so important to the state of Chiapas that its image forms the base of the state coat of arms. This year, the television network TV Azteca has listed the canyon among the dozens of sites competing in a contest to name the 13 wonders of Mexico. The campaign is similar to one recently held by the New7Wonders Foundation, in which voters selected the seven new wonders of the world.

That list included the Chichen Itza Mayan ruins (see SourceMex, 2007-07-18). "At some points on the river, the idyllic image of the canyon is ruined," said Infosel Financiero. "Exactly at one of the most imposing points, where the walls of the canyon reach about 1,000 meters above the water, you begin to see accumulations of trash that start to clog the river."

### ***Problem worsens during rainy season***

Federal and Chiapas state authorities conduct a major cleanup operation at the end of the rainy season every year, allocating about 1.5 million pesos (US\$135,000) to the effort. Officials had to step up cleanup operations at the end of August this year because of an unusually high level of trash and debris, CONANP said. A wide range of items is collected from the Rio Grijalva every fall, including plastic bottles, cans of motor oil, discarded home appliances, and wrecked automobiles.

"In a given year, we have to extract the equivalent of four soccer fields of trash," said Pedro Hernandez Martinez, director of the Proyecto Canon del Sumidero. "This is not an easy task."

Accumulations of natural debris also must be extracted, including tree branches and dead animals, which attract vultures to the area, said Hernandez. "The tourists are telling us that this is no longer the Sumidero Canyon but the Basurero (trash can) Canyon," one tour guide told Infosel Financiero. Authorities have been promoting the Sumidero national park as an ecotourism destination. "We are ashamed to show this to visitors," said tour guide Laura Diaz.

Despite the problem with trash, the number of visitors to the park has not dropped significantly in recent years, as many parts of the park remain untouched by the problem. But a major decline in tourism remains a real possibility if the situation is not resolved. The early part of the rainy season coincides with the peak of the tourist season during the summer months. In 2005, authorities had to shut down the tour-boat operations on the Rio Grijalva for a week because of extreme accumulations of trash on the river.

The situation is somewhat similar to the one that Mexican tourism officials are facing in coastal areas around the country, where dirty beaches threaten to reduce tourism (see SourceMex, 2003-02-19 and 2007-08-01).

### *Problem linked to poor management of municipal waste*

Even with intensive cleanup efforts, the problem occurs every year. The situation, in part, reflects the government's inadequate policies to deal with municipal waste. The lion's share of the trash that clogs the Rio Grijalva is dumped by 14 municipalities on the river or one of its tributaries, accumulating at Canon del Sumidero national park. Almost half the contamination comes from the Chiapas capital of Tuxtla Gutierrez, which dumps waste in the Rio Sabinal, which flows into the Grijalva.

The communities of Chiapa de Corzo, Villacorzo, Acala, San Fernando, and Berriozabal are also considered major sources of the contamination. Odetta Cervantes Bieletto, deputy director of Chiapas national parks for CONANP, said the problem lies in the practice prevalent in many Mexican communities of tossing garbage almost anywhere. Many of those communities are unable to afford the infrastructure to dispose of waste properly, so much of it ends up in the river. "If we don't change our habits and start to become aware of the damage we are causing to the environment, we will never be able to eradicate this problem of trash in the Sumidero Canyon," said Cervantes.

Authorities said the cleanup effort poses some health dangers to the 100 or so persons hired annually to collect debris from the river. The personnel have to contend with toxic materials that have been dumped in the water, including bleach, motor oil, agrochemicals, and disposable diapers. "This is a risk for the workers who are cleaning the park," said cleanup coordinator Mauricio Martinez.

Even with the pollution, some local villagers insist on catching fish from the river. "The fish are caught and taken to market," said Martinez. "Without knowing it, some consumers are eating fish full of toxic materials." [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Sept. 12, reported at 11.10 pesos per US\$1.00]

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