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Guatemala Seeks Solutions to Extensive Environmental Degradation

by LADB Staff

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Growing civic awareness of environmental degradation in Guatemala has led to increased public pressure on the government to protect the country's natural resources. In recent months, debate has centered on the extensive deterioration of Lake Amatitlan, the nation's fourth largest freshwater lake and the capital's only long-term reservoir. Debate is also intensifying over rampant deforestation around the country as well as the alarming level of air and water pollution in the capital and other urban areas.

In recent years, domestic and international pressure to protect the environment has grown immensely in all the Central American countries, which led to the creation of the Central American Sustainable Development Alliance (Alianza para el Desarrollo Sostenible, ALIDES) in 1994. The birth of ALIDES has, in turn, focused an unprecedented public spotlight on environmental problems in each of the isthmian nations, encouraging the creation of dozens of ecology-related nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that aim to educate local communities and lobby for greater government action to protect the environment.

In Guatemala, public awareness and civic action have grown particularly in the past year, with a host of conferences and other public events aimed at raising national consciousness about the need to enforce sustainable-development policies. In August 1995, for example, the Comision Centroamericana de Ambiente y Desarrollo (CCAD), together with Guatemala's Universidad Nacional de San Carlos (USAC), organized a conference to develop strategies to protect Guatemala's biodiversity. About 150 environmental specialists and representatives from 25 NGOs attended the conference, which called on the government to recognize the "strategic national-security element" implicit in sustainable-development policies.

According to specialists at the conference, Mesoamerica (Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Belize) is one of the principal areas of biodiversity in the world. Guatemala, in particular, is considered one of the world's 12 recognized flora and fauna "megacenters," where 8,681 different species of plants have been identified. In April of this year, Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Ecologia (INE) and Guatemala's Comision Nacional de Medio Ambiente (CONAMA) organized a binational conference in Guatemala to explore joint efforts to enforce respect for environmentally protected zones.

Some 50 specialists from the USAC and two other private universities in Guatemala participated in the conference. In October 1995, Mexico and the Central American countries signed a joint declaration to protect the environment, and in June of this year, those governments agreed to create a Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (see EcoCentral, 08/08/96). Among other recent events, on April 22 some 1,500 people participated in a demonstration in Guatemala City to commemorate Earth Day. The demonstration aimed to draw public attention to environmental problems in the country.

"This event is to increase the awareness of Guatemalan citizens," said CCAD head Jorge Cabrera during the march. "We have to develop a collective consciousness that we are all responsible for what we do to the earth. We must work together to protect our natural resources."

And, more recently, community organizations from Rio Dulce the largest inland watershed in the far eastern department of Izabal launched a campaign to push the government to take action to stop industries and residential property owners from polluting Lake Izabal and the Dulce River, which have been officially recognized as state-protected ecological zones. The uncontrolled construction of houses, chalets, and hotels around Lake Izabal a major tourist attraction is leading to rapid deforestation and the dumping of toxic wastes and residential garbage in the lake and river.

In fact, in March, the international environmental organization Greenpeace reported that the French oil company Basic Resources International is responsible for various oil spills that have dumped substantial amounts of crude into Rio Dulce, the latest of which occurred in August 1995. Basic Resources pumps petroleum in the far northern department of El Peten, and it operates a 300 km pipeline that transports crude from the Peten down to Puerto Barrios on the Caribbean Coast, near Rio Dulce. "Tragically, Rio Dulce has become the victim of the most diverse ecological crimes," said the Rio Dulce Comite de Vecinos in a statement published by the local press in late July. In recent months, this growing civic concern over environmental affairs has riveted public attention on three urgent ecological dilemmas in Guatemala. Since June, the immense destruction of Lake Amatitlan which has been a source of controversy for more than two decades has gripped the nation's attention as never before, encouraging a series of government meetings to discuss strategies to clean up the lake.

Amatitlan, the country's fourth largest inland lake with 15.2 sq km of water area, is located 30 km south of Guatemala City and is the only long-term water reservoir for the capital. The city of Amatitlan is an industrial center, and the lake is a key source of water for some 225 medium and large factories located there. It also provides water to some 125 residential settlements in the area and to about 25 large coffee estates. In addition, the lake has traditionally been an important source of income for local fishers, and Amatitlan is a bustling tourist center, especially for domestic weekend vacationers. And, the state electric institute (Instituto Nacional de Electrificacion, INDE) has a huge hydroelectric dam located on the lake that generates 12% of the country's energy needs.

Nevertheless, the lake is a recipient of human and industrial sewage, not just for the surrounding area, but for Guatemala City as well. Hundreds of factories are located along the two central rivers that wind down from the outskirts of the capital and feed into the lake. Most of those factories dump toxic materials into the rivers, although a recent study by the congressional Comision de Medio Ambiente indicates that 45 large factories are responsible for the majority of toxic-waste dumping. The government estimates that about eight metric tons of industrial and residential waste from the capital and the areas around Amatitlan find their way into the lake every month. The rivers that feed the lake provide outlets for about 75% of the water drainage from the capital and its surrounding zones. In large part, the recent surge in debate over the fate of Amatitlan was caused by the dumping of a huge amount of processed crude into the rivers that feed the lake in early June. The government is now investigating how much oil was actually unloaded and which industry is responsible. In the meantime, however, the incident generated a flurry of government meetings and

public pledges to enact programs that will both protect the lake from further destruction and begin to clean it up once and for all.

The Banco Centroamericano de Integración Económica (BCIE) has already approved US\$70,000 for a study of environmental damage to Amatitlán and has offered to contribute US\$20 million to help clean up the lake. Still, some independent organizations estimate that an effective program to reverse the damage done to the reservoir during the past few decades would require nearly US\$375 million. Apart from Amatitlán, rampant deforestation around the country has been a second focal point for public debate in recent months. The Guatemalan government estimates that about 90,000 ha of forest is cut in Guatemala every year. Given that reforestation efforts only manage to replant about 1,500 ha per year, the country is losing an average of about 89,500 ha of its forests annually.

According to estimates by the directorate of the Plan de Acción Forestal para Guatemala (PAFG), in 1980, about 51.2% of the country's land area was covered in forests. By 1992, however, the forested areas only accounted for 31.1% of national territory, meaning that forests were reduced by nearly 40% just in that 12-year period. The timber industry accounts for an important part of the annual deforestation, including illegal logging of trees that are sold as contraband to neighboring countries. But, according to the PAFG, the central cause of deforestation is the unsustainable practices of the country's campesinos, as well as owners of medium-sized and large farms who indiscriminately chop down timber for firewood and clear land for planting.

"Contrary to what many believe, illegal activities by timber merchants are not the central problem, but rather the use of the land, which is reducing forests for agricultural purposes," said PAFG coordinator Claudio Cabrera. "The growth of the agricultural frontier is generally commensurate with the increase in deforestation. As a result, the only way to protect our forests, apart from those zones that are already designated as protected areas, is through sustainable management of resources."

Consequently, government programs are focusing mostly on re-educating farmers about sustainable-development policies. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), for example, has provided US\$14.4 million for a new program to work with some 150 indigenous communities along Guatemala's Rio Chixoy watershed to carry out reforestation and soil-conservation works to prevent erosion and to protect a major hydroelectric project in the area. Severe soil erosion and sedimentation threaten to shorten the life span of the huge 300,000-kilowatt Chixoy hydroelectric plant, the country's principal source of electric power. Since much of the deforestation is caused by the extensive use of firewood for energy, the program is helping farmers install stoves that use 60% less firewood than traditional stoves. The program also encourages farmers to plant trees on their farms and adopt soil-conservation methods by "paying" them with tools, improved seed, veterinary supplies, and egg-laying hens.

Finally, the alarming level of air and water pollution in the capital and other urban zones is now also a central point of public debate. Guatemala City, together with San Salvador, are now considered the two most polluted urban zones in Latin America and the Caribbean after Santiago de Chile and Mexico City. According to CONAMA, there are three central problems in the capital: the lack of adequate waste-disposal areas and treatment facilities, the lack of water-treatment plants, and the

exhaust from motor vehicles. CONAMA estimates that about 1,500 MT of garbage is produced each day, but only about 900 MT is disposed of at the only major city dump downtown. The rest is strewn throughout some 325 illegal neighborhood dumps and in the ravines that dot the capital.

Given the critical conditions in the capital, the IDB is now evaluating a US\$39 million loan for cleanup projects in the city. Among other things, about US\$21 million would go for construction of five waste-processing plants, which would be the first such mills to operate in the city. According to Greenpeace, an adequate processing and recycling program would significantly reduce pollution from residential and industrial debris since an estimated 60% of the city's waste is organic and could be recycled. Some of the IDB funds would also be used for water-treatment plants. The country has 34 such plants, but only two are currently functioning, and even those two are only working at 10% capacity.

Meanwhile, the government is planning a series of other measures to fight environmental degradation around the country. President Alvaro Arzu's administration has announced a strategy to improve the efficiency of state programs by centralizing them under a new "environmental cabinet" within the executive. The environmental cabinet, to be headed by the vice president's office, would include the Ministries of Agriculture, Energy, and Mines, as well as CONAMA, the tourism institute INGUAT, and the Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas (CONAP), among others. As part of this initiative, the government will create an "environmental fund" with an initial US\$7 million in capital to finance private-sector projects that contribute to sustainable development and environmental protection.

Among other things, the government is also seeking approval of new environmental laws. For instance, in June the Arzu administration sent a bill to Congress to create a general law for water use (Ley General de Aguas). The bill would regulate all aspects of water use around the country and would set heavy fines and other penalties for industries and citizens who dump waste in rivers and lakes. Notwithstanding the government's efforts, however, independent groups criticize the government for not doing enough. "The fact is, environmental concerns have occupied a very low position on the government's political agenda," said Gina Sanchez, spokesperson for Greenpeace in Guatemala. According to Sanchez, there are 50 areas around the country that have been recognized as potential environmental-protection zones, but to date the government has not extended protected areas beyond the two currently recognized zones: the Maya Biosphere in the north of the nation and the area around Lake Izabal.

Moreover, the government has yet to energetically enforce the environmental laws that already exist. Critics say the government must yet demonstrate the "political will" to force compliance with environmental legislation. Moreover, rampant corruption is largely paralyzing the few state institutions that have been set up to protect the environment. "The level of environmental degradation has reached the extreme that it has because destroying natural resources in Guatemala is cheap, and those responsible enjoy absolute impunity," read a recent editorial in the influential *Prensa Libre*, the country's oldest and largest daily newspaper. "It is extremely easy to bribe authorities to obtain a license to damage and contaminate the environment, and until now, there has been no indication that the government will make any concerted effort to change business as usual in Guatemala." [Sources: Agence France-Presse, 02/24/96; Agencia Centroamericana de Noticias-

Spanish news service EFE, 08/18/95, 02/24/96, 02/26/96; Notimex, 04/10/96; The IDB-Inter American Development Bank report, June 1996; Inforpress Centroamericana (Guatemala), 05/09/96, 06/13/96; Siglo Veintiuno (Guatemala), 04/26/96, 05/12/96, 05/27/96, 05/31/96, 06/02/96, 06/04/96, 06/09-11/96, 06/13/96, 06/29/96; Prensa Libre (Guatemala), 04/16/96, 04/21-23/96, 05/05/96, 05/29/96, 06/01/96, 06/03-05/96, 06/09-11/96, 06/16/96, 06/17/96, 06/30/96, 07/01/96, 07/02/96, 07/21/96, 07/27-29/96]

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