

ADESMO

Asociación para el Desarrollo Ecológico de la Sierra Madre Occidental, A.C.

*Association for the Ecological Development
of the Western Sierra Madre*

(A Mexican Non-Profit Foundation)

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Begins as top headline on page 1 of State Section.

"THE FORESTRY POLICY APPLIED IN THE HUICHOL AREA IS A DISASTER" **"It Is Antieconomical and Antiecological"** (subtitle)

The forestry policy applied in the Huichol Sierra is an economic and ecological disaster, because it does not help raise the living standards of the natives, while it does foster the irreversible destruction of the forest, assured the president of the Association for Ecological Development of the Western Sierra Madre (A.D.E.S.M.O.), Juan Negrin Fetter, an authority on the art of the Huichol as well as on their resources.

Juan Negrin was born in Mexico City in 1945, and attracted by Huichol art he carried out his first pilgrimages with the Huichol more than 20 years ago. "I came to know their world because I lived it with them", and during these years he has been a leading figure in the defense of their resources. Here he talks about how this evolution took place:

"I shared their religious life with the artists, and once they knew me well in the Sierra, because they saw me more and more frequently, they practically demanded that I render service to them. This petition occurred when the leaders in the Sierra came to Guadalajara in 1978 to notify state authorities of the death of their Secretary of Communal Goods. While in Guadalajara, they were told:"

"In any case, gentlemen, what is important is that you have an excess of over 12,000 hectares among the 60,000 odd hectares which were assigned to your Community of Santa Catarina. You can settle among yourselves who will substitute your Secretary at your convenience, but you must deal with the land surplus issue at once."

"That is when the Santa Catarina Huichol named me Community adviser. I don't believe this has occurred before or after. It was a very unusual request, but they returned to Guadalajara with my communally approved appointment, that they could present to authorities. Upon their return, they were introduced to the head of a timber company¹ and told: "Look, maybe we can let you keep these lands, at least for the time being, but you will have to sign a timber contract with these gentlemen..."

¹ At the State Delegation of Agrarian Reform.

"We went to Mexico City's Ministry of Agrarian Reform. At the time, the University of Guadalajara's dean of Botanical Studies, Dr. Enrique Estrada Faudon, went to the Sierra and actively backed us. In the Sierra, he carried out an ecological survey, concluding that if a commercial up-to-date timber operation was carried out in that area, a complete and irreparable destruction of the land would follow in as little as one year."

"Fortunately, out in Mexico City, we were routed to an inspector from the Ministry, who came to Jalisco and recognized that the Huichol had a legitimate right to these lands, that specifically encompass their forests..."

"All the changes, that have recently occurred in the Sierra, derive from one factor: the dirt roads. The first road was finished to San Andrés Cohamiata, during the sexenium of Luis Echeverría. It was followed by another dirt road that went through Santa Catarina in 1977 or 1978, so all this previously worthless land was becoming extraordinarily valuable. That is when outsiders, from the very government, began to sow marijuana and poppies, which if later discovered would cause the Huichol to lose land..."

"In truth if things are bad now, they were much worse then, for I would not have been able to reveal them to you."

Q. "What is the Huichol's relationship to his forests?"

A. "Look, to the Huichol the forest was a barrier against the outside world; to the Huichol, it was home of the fauna, where he did not dwell, but while it represented a fantastic barrier to the outside world, it did not have commercial value to the Huichol..."

"With the first dirt-road to San Andrés Cohamiata, an ecological impact study was done by members of the Forestry Department and thoroughly manipulated. In it, the amount of wood was exaggerated as was its quality. That is how the first lumber contract was negotiated in the Community of San Andrés..."

Q. "And at the moment, what forestry exploitations are happening in the Huichol Sierra?"

A. "Right now, there isn't any legal exploitation, but they are constantly taking place under the table. It's a tragedy. In Santa Catarina, the Huichol saw that they began to remove their timber clandestinely as soon as the road was opened; they would say the land was not even theirs. So to protect the area, we set up a group of carpenter apprentices, who could always keep an eye on the roadside in the thick of the woods. As they developed a sense of the value of their timber, we set up a carpentry workshop. The Huichol carpenters began appreciating the value added to their wood as a finished product (in comparison to the prices offered by large sawmills, such as the one in Huejuquilla el Alto, which was the first and didn't pay them a fraction of the real worth of the timber). These sawmills were felling the trees because they were said to be infested with mistletoe, diseased; but they were extracting the timber they wanted, frequently the best. It was a disaster because until this sexenium (President Carlos Salinas de Gotari) they were ruled by the so-called Supreme Huichol Council, headed by Maurilio de la Cruz Avila, a man who lasted in power for about 10 years without ever being truly elected by the Huichol."

Q. "Maurilio was the one who leased the forests?"

A. "He was an intermediary, part of a gang that was toppled in San Sebastián barely one year ago, which is when these Huichol finally realized that while the timber was selling cheaply, a score of families were receiving money under the table."

Q "And now, what is the alternative?"

A. "The alternative is not to sell wood as timber to a sawmill, but for the Huichol themselves to be able to at least make boards and have their own sawmill."

At this point in the interview, Juan Negrín talks about the carpentry workshop that his organization established in Santa Catarina, which has been constantly sabotaged by officials of the National Indian Institute, who intend to set up a sawmill in that area just to justify budgeted expenses.

Since late 1992, I advised the General Director of INI in Mexico City, about how inappropriate a large sawmill would be in Santa Catarina, "where the people don't need credit, to fall in debt, but only training to transform the wood."

"What happened in any case, adds Negrin, is that INI did not heed my words and decided to become an honorable witness to the contract signed with Ing. Niembro, the notorious sawmill owner, in April of last year. Later, it took a kind of internal rebellion in which the people of San Sebastián replaced their own authorities, in order for the contract with Niembro be invalidated after three months."

"In the meantime, we had informed INI that we had the funds to initiate our sawmill project in Santa Catarina, that we already had completed the ecological impact study estimating how many trees should be felled to prevent the spread of a mistletoe infestation to healthy trees.² We felt it was an extraordinary opportunity for the Huichol to start up their own industry without requesting any loans, and for the most industrious and experienced ones to earn the most."

"However, the moment came for us to tell the general assembly of Santa Catarina, that we had received the funding to mark trees that should be felled, based on the study we had already paid for, which had been approved by the Federal authorities in charge of Forestry (Ministry of Agriculture and Hydraulic Resources), as well as the Department of Ecology (Ministry of Social Development); suddenly (just before our turn), INI came to announce that it was ready to set up the grand prototype of its own sawmill program. It would need all the available people from Santa Catarina for this, and it would be far more efficient than ADESMO'S program."

"They pulled the rug out from under us just when the Huichol could have done it without getting in debt. In fact, I.N.I. has taken one whole year to set up its sawmill under the pretext that it was much more sophisticated, perhaps able to churn out 12,000 board feet a day (vs. 700 for ours) although it will cost a fortune."

² In a 570 acre area adjacent to the carpentry workshop.

"Meanwhile, we were told that the trained carpenters could not touch a tree, not a piece of wood, because the study had not been properly done even though the trees (about 5,000) had been legally marked."

Q. "What do you conclude about I.N.I.'s forestry policy in the Huichol Sierra?"

A. "I.N.I. wound up taking away our whole program, all working possibilities; they are building new structures at great and unnecessary cost. Eventually, they cut down trees that were marked, but instead of selling the timber to their Huichol brothers trained in carpentry, they are selling it to mixed-blood people from Los Amoles. One can only think that we are in the year of Hidalgo (in the sixth and final year of every presidency, known as 'año de Hidalgo' because politicians are reputed to squeeze out the remaining budget funds and line their own pockets with cash in anticipation of losing their clout). The government has not done anything at all, now they will put the icing on the cake (decorating our carpentry workshop) while the permit we worked for runs out on the 31st of this month (July)."

"I have no doubt that if we don't appreciate what we have in Mexico, if we don't respect each other, we are bound to destroy ourselves. We will never develop ecological safeguards without ethical principles."

Q. "At this time, to what extent have the Huichol forests been destroyed?"

A. "It has been fairly severe in San Sebastián, because it is the only Community where purportedly legal logging has been allowed."

Q. "The loggers haven't fulfilled their legal duty to reforest where they cut the trees?"

A. "Do you imagine that concerns them?"

Q. "Then they leave the hills barren?"

A. "The Huichol forest is not going to be reforested because of anybody's good will... Now, let me give you an example of how our work is hindered: Recently Santa Catarina selected a decent and respectable person like Guadalupe de la Cruz Carrillo, a bilingual teacher, as its President of Communal Goods. But then, we are informed at the last meeting of the Union of Huichol Communities (U.C.I.), in San Andrés, that he has been picked as the sub-attorney general for indigenous affairs of Jalisco state, which in effect makes him an employee of Ignacio Bonilla Arroyo, who is both the State's Attorney-General for indigenous affairs and the Federal Delegate for the National Indian Institute (I.N.I.). How can we then appeal to I.N.I. for help? The problem is rooted in the prejudice felt against indigenous culture ('malinchismo') especially on a local level, where the exploitation of the natives by their 'neighbors' has been tremendous. Yet, who but Ignacio Bonilla was once the municipal president of Mezquitic?"³

³ Mezquitic is a 'mestizo (mixed blood population) township which controls the political destiny of the three principal Huichol Communities. The latter have petitioned the state and federal governments for the right to form their own municipal government.

Q. "What role has Mr. Bonilla played in the deforestation of the Huichol mountains?"

A. "For us it has been constant and absolute sabotage. We have the funds to enable us to work, but he will not let us do anything."

Q. "How do you explain this?"

A. "This will allow him to plagiarize our project and carry it out poorly."

Q. "In other words, the government does not want social interest groups participating in the Huichol Region?"

A. "That is correct. The government wants to exercise complete control in the Sierra. At present, they are promoting an incredible degree of corruption in the Huichol region, both socially and politically. Out there, service was the foundation of all social functions: if a Huichol was going to be elected as the president of Communal Goods or traditional governor, and he caught wind of it, he would most likely leave the community, because he would be serving for as much as three years, without any personal compensation...."

"The Huichol will become radically transformed, as I began complaining since Miguel de la Madrid's sexenium. At the time, I warned: What is beginning to happen is that the leaders of the Huichol Region are going to become exclusively bilingual teachers; these are people who are not formed in their own culture and not very well versed in our own, but they are very opportunistic because they have not been given ethical values corresponding to either culture, which is the heart of the problem; as today these are the only intermediaries between the government and the Huichol... If their brothers see that it is the least scrupulous who fares well, they begin to note that the values that allow them to survive are a complete lack of ethics."

Q. "What should the Huichol ultimately do with their forests?"

A. "The potential is extraordinary since the whole world is aware of what the Huichol can do in the realm of crafts. The Huichol should realize that by working carefully with this raw material to make finished products, he can create crafts that can be sold nationally and internationally with extraordinary results."

With respect to the big logging projects which are contemplated in the Huichol area, Juan Negrín refers to what Dr. Estrada Faudon said: "If the forests are hacked down commercially, not only will the woods be lost, but also the soil and even the freatic or underground water."

Written by Javier Medina Loera
Translation and notes by Juan Negrín Fetter

The photographs were all taken by the newspaper's staff, which approached me for an interview after having done considerable background research of their own in the area. The interview was extracted by the reporter from a 2 1/2 hour taped interview. For this reason the points that are emphasized highlight the reporter's overall perspective about what issues deserved greatest attention.

Photographic captions:

Page 1: Photo of a Huichol cutting a tree with an ax. Caption: "The Forestry policy applied in the Huichol Sierra by the National Indigenous Institute in the Huichol Area, situated in the Northernmost part of Jalisco, is qualified as an economic and ecological disaster by the president of ADESMO, Juan Negrín, it does not improve the living standards of the Huichol, instead it does foster the irreversible destruction of their natural resources."

Page 2: Photo of fallen and standing diseased trees. Caption: "The Huichol forest should not be exploited now on a large commercial scale because that would eradicate them, all the fertile soil and even the layers of freatic water."

Idem: Photo of interviewee. Caption: "Juan Negrín Fetter, with more than 20 years of direct contact with Huichol culture, saying ` I got to know their world because I lived it! warned about the mistaken forestry policy of I.N.I. in the Huichol area. He also denounced the corruption which is promoted by public officials through bilingual teachers."

Idem: Photo of a loaded logging truck. Caption: "Two decades ago the first dirt road penetrated the Huichol Area. These roads may have served to take supplies to the Huichol, but they have also provoked the unmerciful exploitation of their resources with the involvement of public officials. Political methods that corrupt Huichol society have also been introduced."

Idem: Photo of Huichol women and children temporarily relocated in the forest. Caption: "For centuries the forests represented to the Huichol a barrier against the outside world, without any commercial value; but the dirt-roads came and the loggers with them, to fell the pines; now the Huichol know about the financial value of the forest, but not how to take advantage of it."

The enclosed Editorial Cartoon was published on the following day.