

**From Private Property to Common Property:  
Costa Rican peasants mobilize to protect their forested mountains<sup>1</sup>**

by

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Deforestation has become a household word. Often it is associated with Third World peasants practicing their slash and burn agriculture as they struggle to make a living. Though peasants are usually forced by the prevailing political and economic conditions into situations of having to cut the forest, they are, indeed, often the ones to wield the machete against the tree. Environmental degradation and poverty has already been recognized to be mutually enforcing, bringing about a downward spiral of worsening conditions. Recognizing this fact, and recognizing, too, the benefits of a healthy environment upon which they depend for their livelihood and way of life, peasants themselves throughout the Third World are organizing to protect their lands, their forests, and their rivers.

One such peasant organization is the Committee for the Defense of the Mountains of Escazú (CODECE) in the Central Valley region of Costa Rica. The mountains of Escazú rise up on the edge of Costa Rica's capital city San José. The residents around the mountains are for the most part semiproletarian peasants who cultivate parcels averaging between 2 and 10 hectares. There are also some large landowners whose properties reach into the hundreds of hectares. The mountains of Escazú, in tandem with the rest of the country, have suffered tremendous deforestation, losing 80% of their forest cover mostly within the last two decades. The result of this has been harsher droughts in the summer, more flooding in the winter, massive erosion, as well as a marked decline in the wildlife.

As is common to many Third World grassroots organizations that have emerged to fight against environmental degradation, what motivated this group of peasants in the

Mountains of Escazú to mobilize was an external threat to their livelihood. Towards the end of the dry season in 1985, the local women began to notice that the water with which they cooked and washed was arriving as a trickle of mud. Farmers coming down from the mountains from grazing their cattle brought news of heavy machinery cutting away at the mountain and dumping tons of earth into the streams below.

Several local residents complained individually to the Municipalidad, or local government, but to no avail. Peasants of an already established agricultural co-op then formed a committee to deal with the problem.

The problem was a Spanish priest who had decided to build a basilica as a site of pilgrimage on one of the major peaks of the Mountains of Escazú. The basilica was to commemorate the 500 years of Spain's Christianizing influence in the Americas, and was to attract thousands of pilgrims each year up the mountains. The problem was also a situation of water scarcity which disrupted daily living, disrupted the irrigation of crops, and which contributed to a proliferation of infectious disease.

The members of CODECE arranged to meet with this priest and make their protest known to him. At the meeting the priest spoke glowingly about his "Spanish Heritage Park," describing the benefits it would bring the local communities. CODECE, on the other hand, pointed out how the works being carried out already were threatening their lives and livelihoods, and demanded a halt to the project. Eventually, by means of expressing their concerns among the community, in the mass media, to professionals and to government officials, CODECE was able to put a stop to the Spanish priest's project.

While this represented a resounding victory for CODECE, an organization made up officially of seven local peasants, the members of the committee realized that the need to care for their mountains, forests and streams went far beyond protecting them simply from periodic outside threats, such as the priest's. They recognized that the deforestation and general degradation suffered by the mountains of Escazú in the last twenty years, was in large part brought on by the peasants themselves. In order to protect their peasant way

of life well into the future, so that at least their children might benefit, the Mountains of Escazú had to be protected from the deleterious practices of the peasants themselves. CODECE began to work for the passing of a Bill that would make the mountains of Escazú a National Park, turning privately held property into state property.

This provoked impassioned resistance among some sectors of the communities around the Mountains of Escazú, in particular, among large coffee growers. They began to label CODECE a communist organization, a damaging epithet among the generally conservative Central Valley peasantry. But members of CODECE made arrangements to meet the coffee growers. Though this encounter threatened to be adversarial, after listening to the coffee growers' concerns, CODECE recognized that National Park status for the Mountains of Escazú would be impractical and ultimately damaging. Under this status no productive activities would be permitted, including agriculture, the livelihood of the majority of the population in the mountains. Because CODECE's concern for the environment was primarily for the benefit and sustainability of the local communities and their rural way of life, such an imposition would be unacceptable. Moreover, CODECE discovered that, in fact the Mountains of Escazú were already singled out for protection by a forgotten and ignored 1976 Bill declaring some 500 ha of the mountains a watershed Protection Zone.

What was needed against the environmentally damaging excesses carried out by landowners -large and small- such as construction, deforestation, or contamination, on their private property, was not the watchful eye of the state, which anyway lacked the resources even if it did wish to care over the environmental patrimony. What was needed was a greater awareness, concern and participation by the community itself for the well being and protection of their local environment, a sense of responsibility to respect the provisions in the Protection Zone Bill. What was needed was to make the Mountains of Escazú community property, if not *de jure*, at least *de facto*. For this, CODEC embarked on an integral approach for the protection of the mountains.

This integral approach included 1) the need for environmental education, in order to alert the community to the environmental problems, make them aware of the legal provisions protecting the mountains, instill in them a sense of responsibility, and generate among them solutions to the environmental problems; 2) the need for cultural revitalization, in order to reignite a sense of community identity among the local residents, wake up in the people a sense power latent in their united efforts, and a sense of worth in their local knowledge; and 3) the need for a multifaceted and broad base of support, in order to be able to call upon diverse forces when necessary.

One of CODECE's major efforts in environmental education was directed at the region's school children. It was CODECE's belief that through the children, who are open to learning, the consciousness of the parents themselves could be raised. CODECE produced a coloring book entitled *El Nino, El Agua, El Basque* (Children, Water and the Forest) geared at the primary school levels. In this book is depicted the relationship between the activities of a campesino family, and the fate of the forest and the rivers. The coloring book clearly illustrates the benefits of protecting the environment. Collaborating with the Ministry of Education, CODECE was able to introduce the book into the approximately 100 schools of the six counties around the Mountains of Escazú. After this success, CODECE began efforts to introduce the topic of environmental studies into the national curriculum.

Among the adult population, CODECE began, with the help of an environmental lawyer, to offer workshops on environmental law covering everything from construction codes and property rights, to hunting and tree cutting restrictions. This has served members of the community to be able to denounce law breakers. The threat of being thusly denounced by other members of the community who are well informed as to the legal restrictions, contributed to a marked reduction in tree cutting, burning and hunting.

CODECE's efforts at cultural revitalization are based on the conviction expressed by one of the members, that The loss by our communities of our cultural values and the

richness of our traditions is vitally linked to the environmental situation which we suffer today. To rescue cultural values and traditions is one way of focusing on the rational use of natural resources and valorizing conservation efforts."

One of the first projects CODECE embarked on was the organizing of workshops for area residents in order to collect their local knowledge. Workshops were held for hunters and farmers who, though-responsible in part for the diminishing animal populations, for the region's deforestation and soil erosion, also are the ones with the most intimate knowledge of the local flora and fauna, and soils. Moreover, they have a vested interest in maintaining the viability of their mountain environment. Workshops were also held for the old folk in order to gather information on medicinal plants, disappearing food recipes, and even songs and legends. The workshops were conducted on the democratic and non-hierarchical basis of mutual learning, with a reinforcing of individual worth, cultural pride, and environmental awareness.

CODECE also organized, and virtually instituted several "new traditional" cultural festivities. Among these are the yearly Festival for Ecological Painting and the Festival for the Song to Escazú. The theme of these festivals is environmental. The members of CODECE have mobilized to recover the "environmentalist" values of their own peasant traditions so that these aspects could serve as a charter for concrete actions in protecting the environment, and for their efforts in making environmental protection not only a community activity, but an integral component of community identity. Indeed, recent documentation shows that some of the most successful grassroots movements aimed at mobilizing people to protect and restore natural resources in degraded areas, have done so by tapping traditional knowledge systems.<sup>2</sup>

In its work to obtain a broad base of support, CODECE has been successful mainly because of the tireless efforts of its members at networking and coalition-building. Also, however, there is an awaking interest among the nation's people, and among professionals in particular, regarding the value of protecting the country's natural heritage. Often,

professionals are willing to volunteer their services to such groups as CODECE. The Committee has received valuable assistance from university professors, university students, professionals, technicians, as well as from state institutions, NGOs, international organizations, the private sector, and other community groups.

For a year CODECE's greatest efforts went to establishing an intercounty committee for the defense of the Mountains of Escazú. CODECE's vision was to widen its support base so as not to have to shoulder alone the responsibility of watching out for the mountains. If filial groups emerged in every county around the mountains, the efforts at protection would be multiplied. But the perennial problems of grassroots organizing undermined these efforts. Lack of time and lack of money, especially for hard-working campesino men and women prevented community residents from a significant and regular participation in periodic meetings and workshops concerning environmental issues.

Eventually, CODECE returned to focus its efforts primarily in the county of Escazú, though always remaining on the alert to assist other environmental efforts the might appear in the region. By means of a small grant from the Inter-American Foundation (IAF), several members of CODECE were able to dedicate themselves fully to the work of environmental education and environmental protection, at least for a limited amount of time.

By 1990, CODECE's efforts were substantially successful. Deforestation in the Mountains of Escazú had virtually stopped. Knowledge of the Protection Zone Bill regarding the mountains became prevalent among the residents of the region. Increasingly, residents brought complaints to CODECE against people breaking Protection Zone rulings, such as cutting down trees, especially near the streams, without a permit, carrying out burnings, or engaging in construction. With an environmental lawyer, provided by the IAF grant, CODECE was able to follow through with these complaints, making community participation more relevant, and giving substance to community pressures against individual acts of environmental degradation. While property regime in

the mountains had not changed, a growing sense of stewardship was emerging among the residents.

Many cases continue, however, of individuals threatening the well being of the community by means of environmental misdeeds. Romano, president of CODECE enumerated some of these at an open hearing by the Municipal government. 1) a wealthy foreigner constructing his house in the Protection Zone, endangering neighbors with mud slides, and representing a water hazard for the entire community; 2) the diversion of municipal water to wealthy families in order to fill their swimming pools, while farmers are fined for digging wells because of diminishing water supplies; 3) the contamination of the region's rivers with people's trash and sewage; 4) illegal dump-grounds used by municipal dump-trucks; and 5) pesticide use near municipal water catchments. These were pointed out, not to direct an accusing finger at the Municipal government, but to request that it work with the community, especially with CODECE, to address the community's needs, and problems threatening them.

Because of the persistence of such problems, CODECE is convinced of the benefit and need to make the mountains communal property. CODECE hopes to create a community park in the Mountains of Escazú, designed especially for the education and recreation of the region's school children, and for the creation of forestry nurseries of native trees to be used in reforestation efforts. In order to create this community park, CODECE is pushing for the municipal government to invest money in buying land, bit by bit, to be able to consolidate a significant area of the mountains to be managed by the local communities, and for the benefit of these communities.

By first creating a feeling of community by means of projects of mutual learning, and by the rescuing and invention of traditions, CODECE has paved the way -so to speak- for the creation of common property in order to protect the mountains from the tragedy of irresponsible exploitation on private property. Though threats to the environment continue, deforestation has been substantially reduced in a small corner of Costa Rica,

the country with the highest rate of deforestation in the world: This successful halting of deforestation is a worthy tribute to the power that simply a *sense* of community offers in the protection of the environment for future generations to enjoy.

<sup>1</sup>This paper is based on anthropological fieldwork carried out in the Mountains of Escazú during the summers of 1989 and 1990. I was able to carry out this research with the help of a University of New Mexico Student Research Allocations Grant, and a grant from the Inter-American Foundation. All deficiencies in this paper are, of course, my own. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily represent those held or endorsed by the Inter-American Foundation.

<sup>2</sup>Durning, Alan B. (1989) *Action at the Grassroots: Fighting Poverty and Environmental Decline*. Worldwatch Paper # 88. (Jan. 1989) Washington, DC Worldwatch Institute.