

Trade pact won't save Mexico's environment

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ON WEDNESDAY a U.S. federal judge ordered the Clinton administration to prepare an environmental impact statement on the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement. By ruling in favor of three public-interest plaintiffs, the judge refocused attention on one of the accord's intrinsic flaws.

In Mexico, where the success of such citizen-initiated legal action is unimaginable today, environmental damage is already extensive and profound.

According to NAFTA's supporters, poverty is the main cause of environmental degradation in Mexico. Although they admit that there are problems with both environmental legislation and prevailing standards there, they consider the challenges primarily technical and financial: The budget of Mexico's environmental agency is too low; there are not enough trained personnel; and the country still lacks state-of-the-art environmental technology.

NAFTA, they assert, will solve all of these problems. It will make Mexico a richer country, which in turn will create the financial resources to clean up the environment and prevent further degradation of the natural-resource base. An increased budget will mean better oversight and enforcement, because more personnel can be trained and hired to ensure that the law is observed. Consultants from Canada and the United States can provide much-needed technology for natural resource management and conservation.

Human costs of economic change

What these NAFTA supporters ignore, however, is that it is precisely the NAFTA-style economic reforms implemented in Mexico over the past ten years that have accelerated growing poverty and environmental degradation.

Ask the *maquiladora* workers who have to drink water from polluted sources, the Tarahumara Indians who can no longer benefit from their forests because of massive deforestation by lumber companies, the coastal fishers who have been hurt by Pemex's oil drilling, or the millions of Mexico City residents whose health-care costs have risen dramatically due to air pollution. Large portions of Mexico's population are being seriously hurt by the country's economic liberalization program. NAFTA will only accelerate these trends and strengthen the government's unwillingness to tackle them.

The other major factor leading to massive environmental degradation in Mexico is the authoritarian nature of a 64-year-old one-party state that does not feel compelled to implement laws or to permit significant citizen oversight. The Mexican government has repeatedly promised progress in these areas, but given the record of the Salinas administration, the Mexican people remain rightfully skeptical.



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Without a true democratization of Mexican society, billions of dollars and rivers of ink will be wasted before any real progress is made.

Meanwhile, independent environmental organizations in Mexico face the problem of very limited access to information. Environmental impact assessments of major projects financed with World Bank and other loans are very rarely published in Mexico for public scrutiny. Grassroots organizations thus have to turn to colleagues in Washington to obtain this information.

Even when evidence of ecological destruction is in hand, it is unlikely that the Mexican government will be responsive unless pressure comes from outside the country. And even then, as the controversies over NAFTA have demonstrated, the Salinas administration will respond only with limited, short-term measures unrelated to the structural problems that must be addressed.

For example, more than a year after the deadly explosions in the Guadalajara sewage system, no one has yet been prosecuted, despite Salinas' pledge that those responsible would be punished.

When it finds it useful, the Salinas administration has invoked the issue of sovereignty, casting itself, for example, as Mexico's defender against the attacks of ecological imperialists. That sovereignty was sacrificed a decade ago, however, when Mexico opened its doors wide and gave what has become increasingly free rein to foreign corporations.

The issue of sovereignty is but a ruse. The Mexican government is on the offensive because, after decades of unrestricted use of public funds and violations of the public trust, it simply refuses to be held accountable to its own people.

In Mexico, as in most of the countries of the south that have adopted programs of privatization and deregulation simultaneously, wealth and power have become more dramatically concentrated and the majority of the people are more alienated than ever from their government. NAFTA, unless drastically overhauled, would only serve to perpetuate these frightening trends and leave a privileged few free to continue their manipulation of Mexico's natural and political environments for private gain.