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Beautiful San Miguel

Marcela Andre Lopez (Mexico)

[Presentation Report]

Marcela Andre Lopez, permaculture's representative from Mexico, was the first person to represent Mexico at an International Permaculture Conference. During the IPC6 Marcela showed slides of her home town, San Miguel de Allende, in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico.

San Miguel de Allende is a 500-year old community graced by beautiful carved stone buildings on cobblestone streets and an ideal climate. It is located in the high central plateau of Mexico, about four hours north of Mexico City. It is now an international artists' colony renown for its two important art schools and its rich cultural and architectural heritage.

The images presented began with a view of the city's main architectural structure, also the symbol for the city which was built by a native stone mason 200 years ago, as were the many other towers and beautifully carved buildings. Images of markets filled with colourful fruits and flowers followed, with pictures of ancient fountains splashing cooling waters within the arched courtyards of the city's original dwellings and inns, many now in use as banks, offices, museums, homes, and city administration centres as well as shops. Just outside the city are ongoing archaeological excavations unearthing pyramids alongside pottery shards more than 1,500 years old.

The city has a rich tradition in supporting the work of artisans and exports of the excellent crafts and artworks flow from San Miguel to the entire world. Artisans receive apprentices and continue traditions sometimes thousands of years old as is the tradition of ceramics and metalwork in Mexico. Music played by live musicians ensembles in ornate performance dress is part of everyday life on a stroll to the city's lively and beautiful main square. The spectacular feathered headdresses and glistening native costumes are a breathtaking and awe-inspiring sight during the frequent days of celebration when processions and parades of traditional dancers take to the city's streets.

The harsh contrast to the city's beauty and cultural richness is the degraded condition of the soils and lands surrounding the entire area, in fact throughout the

state of Guanajuato and to the northern states at the USA border. Several images showing eroded areas around San Miguel showed obvious lack of organic matter in the soil, lack of vegetation, and rampant deforestation that occurred since the last 500 years.

Deforestation in Mexico was spurred by the discovery of one of the most important silver mines in the world, just an hour's drive from San Miguel de Allende. To smelt the enormous quantities of silver (one mine supplied more than a third of the world's silver years ago), much coal was needed, and with the processing of lime for many construction projects undertaken by the Spanish colonists, the forest was decimated over several states in the central part of Mexico.

Yet the Mexican people have a spirit filled with strength, celebration, loyalty and friendship. The quality of life one enjoys is extremely satisfying, as a rich and nurturing human culture envelops one in this particular area of Mexico, all accompanied by very delicious foods. San Miguel draws many talented and interesting people, many from various parts of the world, and the lower cost of living allows people the free time to use their talents in creative or charitable pursuits. Many non-profit educational, service, medical, ecological, and historical foundations are based in San Miguel de Allende and offer many very satisfying outlets for one's talents, interests and energy.

Permaculture has found a welcome home in San Miguel de Allende, as the need for productive lands has never been greater in Mexico. The population growth has exploded, and the land productivity has plummeted simultaneously. The weather patterns have become disrupted, and the seasonal rains have not occurred on the regular and satisfactory basis of some years ago. Mexico just passed through the worst drought in the nation's history during 1995-1996, which seems to have ended with a few and very late torrential rains with hail which in turn caused more environmental problems.

Up to the recent past there was no need to store water as the groundwater and rain was always available for all the people's needs. Therefore, there is no standing tradition at this time for catching rainwater from the house roofs, and there are usually no ready containers in which to store harvested water. In the ancient culture there was a tradition of underground cisterns which stored water runoff from the many stone terraces and structures, and there once was a tradition which maintained water catchments throughout the landscape. That water-harvesting culture was lost to the Spanish colonizers who harnessed the population into a labouring workforce of servants, miners, and general labourers who by force served the Spanish to collect their booty of precious metals, cattle, wool, and timber and largely saw all Aztec gold sail away to float the European markets, saving their collapse, while Mexico lost its forest and its ancient self-sustaining cultures under foreign domination through the sword, disease, muskets, alcohol and horses with the hoofed and grazing cattle of the Spanish conquistador.

Mexico is a vibrant and exciting land, and a full-length documentary video would still need more details and images to portray the many facets of this rich part of human heritage. Mexico is the land that gave many important foods to the world: corn, tomato, beans, chillies, chocolate, vanilla, pecans, avocados, marigolds and

more. There are so many nations whose economies rely on the commercialisation of these biomasses, and Mexico nurtured them for thousands of years before they were taken out as part of the loot and booty of Europeans who would later dominate the economics surrounding these foods. (See book: *Seeds Of Change*, Smithsonian Institution).

Permaculture comes as a way for this land to return to what was fine, what was a sustainable culture, what was a self-sufficient society for thousands of years. Water harvesting, food crops abounding, forested and fertile landscapes, balanced patterns of water movement in the landscape and a self-employed society independent from imports and costly manufactured agricultural equipment and chemicals.

In collaboration with the permaculture work ongoing now in San Miguel through Marcela Andre Lopez and Skye, there is an outstanding corn scientist, Ing. Ramon Aguilar in a nearby research station who is demonstrating soil recovery techniques using corn and is able to demonstrate soil productivity 14 times higher than the standard yield in corn, even while relying on seasonal rains. The soil is recovered by returning the corn stalks to the soil for five years, and the process is meticulously documented for the use of both industry and “campesino” (country people) farmers. The recovery and productivity results are even more spectacular with the help of irrigation water, increasing the production of corn within five years to 28 tonnes per hectare.

There are other outstanding permaculturists in Mexico who don't call their work “permaculture”. The important project now that permaculture is so needed in Mexico is to put all the people achieving results in contact with each other in this nation. There is a shortage of journalists and communication media, even paper, throughout the nation. Therefore information is not easily available, especially if one is busy doing one's own work. Notable in this area are Alejandra Caballero and her veteran prize-winning conservationist father, Juan Carlos Caballero.

The Caballeros have demonstrated by action large-scale forestation of entire mountains, and are actively training people who would otherwise be involved in unsustainable and destructive activities within their environment. Ten years ago USA permaculturist Ianto Evans trained Alejandra in permaculture, and a dynamic, fruitful teaching practice incorporating permaculture has evolved at their family ranch/school.

Mexico is poised to apply all that permaculture has to offer and welcomes permaculture with open arms. Government agencies are receptive and requesting courses to train their management and field staff. Permaculture is a beautiful export for which Australia must be congratulated as a nation. In a time when nations export weapons and garbage, this is a life-giving and life-sustaining “product” that is a true token of peace to share among the nations of the Earth.

The slide show ended and all danced in a circle to the festive and joyous music of “mariachis” – the incomparable traditional brass and strings party music of Mexico.

It is Mexico now who welcomes the 7th International Permaculture Conference and Convergence to be held in 1999 in Guanajuato and San Miguel de Allende, state of Guanajuato, Mexico. The invitation is given by the State Water Commission and city

and state government and private organizations and private individuals working to bring solutions to the drylands of the world, and many who have now been trained in permaculture are keen to share with many of their countrymen, the traditional warm hospitality, and Marcela and friends look forward to sharing knowledge and then much music that we all may dance joyously as life goes on.