

The Catholic Bishops of Northern Mexico A Pastoral Letter on the Forests of the Sierra Tarahumara

Summary:

The Catholic Bishops of Northern Mexico declare that forest conservation has become a life and death issue for the Tarahumara Native people. They emphasize the need to rethink our basic attitudes toward the forests if we are to save not only the forests from commercial exploitation, but also the villages which depend upon the forests for livelihood. The text of their pastoral letter to the people of Mexico follows.

Declaration of the Dioceses of the Sierra Tarahumara on the Exploitation of Forests

Mexico City, DF

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As servants of the Church of the Tarahumara, we are deeply concerned and angered at the way the forests of the Sierra Madre in the State of Chihuahua have been destroyed throughout the twentieth century, and especially following the ratification of NAFTA. This exploitation has brought virtually no benefits for the majority of *mestizo* and indigenous inhabitants.

This has happened because it occurs in a framework of cultural clash in which the members of the dominant culture take advantage of the indigenous people and believe that they have fooled them. At the same time, the wretchedness of the invaders affirms the identity of the indigenous people.

The lack of local employment is a serious problem. Because it is one of the main sources of jobs in the Sierra, the forest must be treated and worked in a sensible manner in order to preserve it for future generations.

We are obliged to express our reflections publicly because the avarice and racism that have been part of forest exploitation are destroying God's creation and undermining its fraternal destiny."

The Social Costs of Desertification

1. Desertification is moving rapidly forward in the Sierra. The once abundant forests are becoming a rocky desert. The situation is coming to a breaking point. Moisture loss has undermined the survival of the region's people. Without ignoring the planet's warming, which is often used to explain our regional problem, it is plain to see that the forests of Chihuahua form a fragile ecosystem in the desert belt of the world. The difference between what they are today and what they once were is huge. Undeniably, today's desertification is the result of irresponsible forest mismanagement.

2. We have come to an important crossroad: If we take one more step in the direction of ecological destruction, desertification may never be halted.

3. We are witnessing the unjust sentencing to death of an entire ethnic group. The forest is being devastated in the name of a development that has proven itself to be both racist and disenfranchising.

4. An uncontrolled economic system is being imposed on the region. Its effects are damaging all of the Sierras inhabitants as well as those of regions neighboring Chihuahua: Sonora, Sinaloa, Durango, Coahuila, and the southwestern states of the United States.

5. The proponents both governmental and private of this economic system have allowed the pillage of these forests because they are beholden to external interests and care little for the people who live here.

6. The social impact is disastrous. Springs are going dry; there are few livestock left; planting crops is extremely difficult; and the harvests are meager. This is the primary cause of emigration to the cities.

7. Traditional ethnic groups are witnessing the death of the environment that is vital for the continuation of their culture. The natural processes that once permitted hunting, gathering and the regeneration of agricultural lands have been shattered. The life that the forest once nourished is virtually destroyed.

The Cycle of Corruption

8. With few exceptions, lumber companies, including fly-by-night sawmills, have been the cause of this devastation. They have no vision of the future and have placed us on the brink of disaster. Now we must take emergency measures or go headlong into the abyss.

9. Those who work for this system of plunder see it as something natural. The slightest objection makes them feel attacked. Because they must work every day just to survive, it is hard for them to have a vision of the future.

10. With all its implications, the drug trade which has taken root in the Sierra, is both a reflection of the lack of opportunities and a chance to survive in such a deteriorated land.

11. The indigenous communities continuously complain about violation of their basic rights. In their own way, they have repeatedly said that they do not want the forest plundered.

12. Pressured by lumber companies, the "*ejidos*" [local rural cooperatives] sign ambiguous contracts that call for standing pines, which must then be transported. This has a negative impact on local jobs and ejido dividends.

13. A circle of corruption, comprised of bosses within the *ejido* and lumber companies, allied with forestry engineers, and public officials makes this possible. The result thwarts all legal efforts to stop the destruction. Proof of this is the accumulation of more than 400 unresolved complaints over the past four years.

14. Such corruption filters into administration of the *ejido*, which is often controlled by the lumber companies. In this way internal divisions and cultural differences are fostered to benefit a few. This works to the detriment of the already deteriorated family economy.

15. It is commonly claimed that rural people are not capable of managing their forest resources for their own gain and that outside intervention is beneficial. We do not agree. Corruption is what has kept the people of the Sierra from taking control of their own forest resources and learning how to manage them.

The Inevitable Ecological Consciousness

16. The ecological deterioration to which this oasis between deserts has been subjected affects the inhabitants of an enormous hydrological basin that extends over a large part of the Rio Conchos (Rio Grande) River Basin. This has caused reduced the oxygenation process, causing increased summer temperatures, water rationing in the cities, and other consequences mentioned by experts in the field.

17. Tourism projects do not provide benefits to the people of the Sierra. They are a threat. One example is the demand for drinking water and the generation of sewage. These projects are backed by interests external to the region and only benefit the executives of tourist services. They ignore the needs of the local population, and do not favor the creation of dignified living conditions for the indigenous people.

18. Reforestation has been ineffective at preserving and restoring the ecological balance. There have only been public declarations and good wishes, all of which amount to nothing before the millions of trees that are cut each year. This reality is plain for anyone to see.

19. Recent proposals by state authorities to get to address this problem cannot be limited to bandaid approaches when the situation is so serious. Their proposals do not address the root causes which threaten ecosystem sustainability.

20. The market orientation has created a devastating logic. If we do not stop it, it will drag us all to our deaths. For this reason, it is vital to achieve a new ecological consciousness that defends life for everybody instead of material benefits for a few.

21. Multinational market pressures have made the legal framework increasingly flexible. Both forestry police and silvicultural practices are at the service of industry, mainly for production of cellulose, paper, and plywood. Legal reforms have facilitated the flight of unimaginable wealth from our forests, in contrast to the extreme poverty in which our people live.

22. The society affected by this deterioration does not react to the magnitude of the disaster. It is everyone's duty to demand responsible action from governmental authorities. It might even be appropriate for forestry to come under state instead of federal jurisdiction.

23. Education must become a priority. A new consciousness about forests and the natural environment must be created. We must realize that the world is a living being that deserves our respect, care and attention.

24. The ancient traditions of the Indigenous Peoples offer great ecological wisdom. Despite the historical changes they have been subjected to, they still possess a worldview that stresses communion with nature. As governmental authorities, industrialists, and citizens at large, we must change our conception of nature and see it, not as a resource to be exploited, but as a world with which to live in harmony. We need to adopt a more integral vision of life, like the one that the Indigenous People offer us.

Urgent Action Needed

25. The protection of forest resources requires urgent measures. It is vital to reconsider and revise forestry management plans, restore the areas of forest that have been lost, and seek out advice in an ethical way. In this fragile land, we must understand the value of the forest. It is not mere food for industry that chops it down and gobbles it up; it is the giver of life for its legitimate owners and inhabitants of the State of Chihuahua and neighboring territories.

26. Culturally sensitive training programs that will not alienate the inhabitants are desperately needed so that a rational forest policy can become a reality, and so that people can become self-sufficient. Until today this has systematically been blocked.

27. Training in sustainable forestry could open many doors. In Mexico there are experiences of self-sustaining forestry management by Indigenous people that can be shared with the inhabitants of the Sierra of Chihuahua.

28. The commercial forestry production chain should be implemented in the Sierra so that waste of raw materials can be minimized. This would create more jobs, reduce emigration and the tendency to participate in the drug trade.

29. The studies and information at the government's disposal must become public. NGOs which do not profit from the forest should collaborate in forest management programs.

30. All governmental and industrial initiatives must guarantee long-term actions to promote the sustainability of the Sierras ecosystem. Without this orientation, aid programs become handouts to support political parties.

The Demands of Christian Faith

31. By formulating our concerns and displeasure in this way, we are well aware that we are not the voice of all the people of the Sierra. However, we do listen to and gather their thoughts and feelings. We use them together with the demands of our faith to denounce and criticize these social injustices, these crimes against creation, which should be for the fraternity of all people. For this reason we appeal to the conscience of everybody and urge all Christians to take responsibility for preserving life on this planet that God entrusted to our care.

32. We believe that the God of life has given us this world to be shared by all peoples, all world-views, and all cultures. Nobody owns nature, and nobody has more rights than anybody else to her fruits. We believe that God acknowledges all the efforts a person makes to preserve the life of our Mother Earth. We believe that we will come to understand everything we have done or have failed to do to care for this world of his.

33. All of this makes it our obligation to express these reflections publicly, to denounce the genocide and ecological devastation we are witnessing, and to demand honesty, justice and the life we all deserve, from the word of God, and from the people of God.

Tarahumara

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Signatories:

Jose Luis Dibildox Martinez

Bishop of the Tarahumara

Celestino Villa Ayala, Pbro. Gabriel Parga Terrazas, Pbro.

Vicar General Episcopal Vicar for Indigenous People

P. Javier Avila Aguirre, SJ. Francisco Chavez Acosta, Pbro.

Vicar of the Northern Territory Vicar of the Central Territory

P. Javier Campos Morales, SJ. P. Rosendo Martinez Flores, CM.

Vicar of the Western Territory Vicar of the Southern Territory

Translated from the Spanish by Sr. Carlos Agnesi, RCFC field representative for the State of Jalisco

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