

Third Mexican Activist Wins Award for Environmental Defense

By Talli Nauman, The Herald Mexico-El Universal | April 26, 2005

Another Mexican has won the international Goldman Environmental Prize, which is called the “Nobel” for grassroots environmentalists. Isidro Baldenegro López is the third Mexican to claim the coveted award. Not only that but he and both the others earned that distinction for the same kind of activism: defending the forest.

That says something about the importance of halting deforestation in Mexico. It also says something about the grave danger of trying to protect the woods.

As Goldman Environmental Foundation President Richard N. Goldman noted at the awards ceremony in San Francisco on April 18, the recipients are selected on the basis of the need for their countries to act on the prizewinners’ initiatives and on the candidates’ courage.

Mexico’s rate of deforestation is second only to that of Indonesia. From 1993 to 2000, forest coverage in Mexico declined almost 3 million acres each year. Misguided enterprises have cut or burned more than half of the country’s woodlands—and not for any significant contribution to the formal economy. Meanwhile, threats and rights abuses are the steady fare for community activists who try to reverse the trend.

Baldenegro, 38, was jailed on trumped-up weapons charges for his successful role in mobilizing indigenous and other community members of the Western Sierra Madre against the mounting destruction of old-growth forests. The illegal logging there in Chihuahua state is undertaken for the purpose of narcotics plantations and drug money laundering.

The violence engendered by this longstanding plight is eroding Tarahumara and other indigenous, land-based cultures. Ingrained corruption fosters it. And Baldenegro learned about its devastating results at a young age, when his father was murdered in 1986 in the decades-old conflict with local crime bosses known as the Fontes Cartel.

Beginning in March 2003, he led a peaceful civil disobedience and court case joined by other family members of victims of the Fontes Cartel, which is sacrificing lives and the biodiversity of the Copper Canyon area in northern Mexico to the cause of crime.

Thanks to the help of domestic and international advocates for the environment and human rights, Baldenegro established his innocence and secured his freedom in June 2004. Now he is carrying on the conservation effort, and the Goldman award helps keep public attention focused to prevent further injustice.

A precursor to Baldenegro’s effort is that of Edwin Bustillos, who garnered the Goldman in 1996. Bustillos stopped some illegal logging operations with the creation of a human rights and environmental organization called CASMAC (Advisory Council of the Sierra Madre) in 1992.

Suffering atrocious attacks and death threats attributed to the Fontes Cartel, Bustillos nonetheless persevered to achieve local community declarations of two old-growth forest reserves. His organization set a precedent in developing proposals from 10 other communities for biosphere reserve integration.

CASMAL has been promoting appropriate economic alternatives to illegal drug production and logging. These include permaculture methods, a native craft program, organic paper production, and conservation of medicinal plants. Were it not for the solidarity of the Goldman foundation and other groups, Bustillos might not have lived to see these projects unfold.

Meanwhile, further to the south, in the Pacific Coast state of Guerrero, Rodolfo Montiel Flores helped form the Peasant Environmentalist Organization of Petatlán and Coyuca de Catalán (OCEP). He received a Goldman prize that helped draw attention worldwide for the struggle against uncontrolled logging by Boise Cascade Corp. and local bosses in the 1990s, too.

It was only after Montiel received the award in 2000 that Mexican President Vicente Fox ordered his release in 2001 from the Guerrero jail where he was detained, tortured, and obligated to confess to fabricated charges. But



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even since then, OCEP's members remain in danger, as do Sierra Madre defenders.

Felipe Arreaga Sánchez, another well-known OCEP participant, has been jailed since Nov. 3 on charges of murder and criminal association, while a veritable witch-hunt proceeds for others of his organization. Amnesty International is monitoring that situation. It says the process has clear indications of political motivation.

As the Goldman foundation describes its prizewinners, they are "literal and figurative voices in the wilderness, men and women from isolated villages and inner cities who are willing to take great personal risks to safeguard the environment."

Since 1990, 107 Goldman winners selected from 65 countries have benefited an estimated 102 million people worldwide, the foundation says.

Like the foundation, each and every one else has a role to play to bring the winners' voices out of the wilderness, protect them, echo them, and see that their messages stick.

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