

A Tale of Four Ejidos

How Mexico replaced one form of political patronage with another and how Pronatura, an environmental organization with ties to The Nature Conservancy, is gaming the system. Words by Mike Cade. Photos by Sergio Siller.

High on a hill above his hometown of Cuatrociénegas, Coahuila, stands the bronze likeness on horseback of Venustiano Carranza, cattleman and governor of Coahuila who became a leader in the Mexican Revolution and president of Mexico.

Although Carranza was honest and principled, his army and administration were known to take advantage of the people. This gave rise to a common expression, “*Fui* (I was) *carranceado*,” whereby the president’s name was changed to a verb. Like so many idiomatic expressions, it doesn’t translate into English. But to those Mexicans who were robbed, raped or even murdered by their government, the meaning was clear.

From Carranza’s mountainside vantage point, one looks south across the Cuatrociénegas Valley to where the mountain ranges that bound the valley on the east and west seem to merge.

The harsh, unforgiving landscape is softened in places by the unexpected spring that bursts forth from the base of a rocky



ABOVE: Cuatrociénegas favorite son, Venustiano Carranza, sits horseback high on a hill overlooking the valley, now turned into a Natural Protected Area by the federal government. BELOW: Ejido leader Ramiro Flores Navarro applied last year for permission to establish an educational tourist center along the highway that passes by Poza Churince.



precipice or the *ciénega*, a bluish, crystalline lagoon, the product not of rainfall, but of an underground aquifer that chooses this spot to gurgle forth, creating an oasis in the desert. To the subsistence farmers and ranchers who live here, this land is their patrimony. It gives them sustenance. To the environmentalists, it’s a national treasure that must be protected.

As a signatory to the 1992 United Nations’ Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Mexico is obligated to put as much of every major ecosystem as possible into “protected areas,” complete with buffer zones. The Cuatrociénegas Natural Protected Area, established in 1994, encompasses one of the first major ecosystems to be protected under the convention—207,480 acres. Environmental groups are pressuring the government to expand the area to about two million acres.

The idea, according to the National Commission for Natural and Protected Areas (CONANP), is to improve the lives of the people by protecting biological diversity and promoting sustainable development. But what does this really mean for the local economy and for those who live here? These were the questions asked by friends from northern Coahuila who ranch in yet another proposed protected area. They’d been hearing rumblings of discontent from their neighbors to the south.

Could the stated goals of the CBD be so benevolent? Or will Carranza, in his eternal vigil over Cuatrociénegas, become a metaphor for what happens when U.N.-trained bureaucrats try to “save” the environment in the name of the people?

□ □ □

Ejido Estanque de Norias (Wells Pond) lies at the southern end of the valley, 83,980 acres of rangeland with scattered fields of crops, a village by the same name and 370 people. Established in 1931, this ejido is part of a national system that resulted from reforms following the Revolution, when the government expropriated land from large ranches and gave the use of it to peasants.

Never successful, it was a system of political patronage. The ejidos weren’t given enough land to support the families that lived there and were forced to rely on government largesse. The political party in power would subsidize the ejidos in return for their votes. But the handouts were never sufficient and the ejidos slowly lost population.

What’s more, it became apparent that the ejidatarios weren’t necessarily voting the party line. In 1986 the government gave the ejidos title to the land, the idea being that at least



ABOVE: "We're not allowed to sell firewood anymore, because we have no permit," says Victor Manuel Escobedo. "If we do sell, it has to be clandestine." LEFT: Driving into the ejido, all one sees anywhere is the invasive and ubiquitous mesquite. Several decades of selling firewood don't appear to have made a dent.

some ejidos would choose to sell, putting the land back on the tax rolls. Most of the land in Cuatrociénegas Valley is owned by ejidos.

One dirt road connects Estanque de Norias to the rest of the world. With its unpaved streets, free-ranging chickens and a social life that revolves around the village chapel, the town, with few modifications, could serve as a movie set for a Clint Eastwood western. Of the original 97 families, 68 remain. Among them one senses a strong work ethic and desire to succeed. Also evident is an air of insecurity. Although Estanque de Norias lies just outside the currently protected area, it falls squarely inside the proposed one.

The cowboy crew is several miles north. They have just finished cleaning out a dipping vat and are eating lunch. Tomorrow they will begin the *corrida*, or roundup, and dip cattle for ticks.

The cowboys all nod in agreement as Luis Rico, leader for all ejidos in the valley, speaks: "We are against the proposed protected area because of what we've seen happen to the other ejidos."

□ □ □

A long, bumpy ride north and one enters land belonging to Ejido El Venado (The Deer), where a swift-flowing stream crosses the road. A short distance uphill is the source of the water. Several children are splashing and playing where a spring makes a large pool inside the mouth of a cave. The town lies across the stream, around a bend and behind the hill. It's easy to identify the ejido's major cash crop—stacks of mesquite fire-

wood and small horse-drawn wagons used to haul it into town.

Ermilo Hernandez is horseback on his way home from checking range cattle. The next day he and some fellow ejidatarios meet to talk about their new benefactors at CONANP. "We're not allowed to sell firewood anymore, because we have no permit," says Victor Manuel Escobedo. "If we do sell, it has to be clandestine."

Hernandez points down the street to a large stack of firewood that was seized by Pro-



"No one is more interested in conserving this land than we are," says Manuel Hernandez. "But what do we get out of it?"

fepa, the agency that enforces environmental laws. One of the ejidatarios had been caught selling firewood. Before this became a protected area, permits were easy to obtain, says Escobedo. "Now we need an environmental study to determine the sustainability of cutting mesquites."

Driving into the ejido, all that can be seen is the invasive and ubiquitous mesquite. Several decades of selling firewood don't appear to have made a dent.

"CONANP and Profepa work together to deny us permits," says Escobedo's brother, Jesus Carlos. "We apply at Profepa. They send the application back to CONANP and the application is denied."

The men at El Venado are especially peeved with Pronatura, an environmental organization that receives funding from the World Wildlife Fund, CEMEX (a large cement company), GM, Ford, British Petroleum, Toyota and other corporations trying to cultivate a green image.

Pronatura came to the ejido with a "divide and conquer" strategy, offering every member of the ejido \$1,200 for a 20-year conservation easement on 11,115 acres. Although many ejidatarios live elsewhere, they still have a vote in everything that happens.

To Juan in Monclova, \$1,200 might have meant new tile for the roof; for Esteban in Sabinas, a rip-roaring drunk in Monterrey; for Eloisa in Piedras Negras, new furniture and clothes for the kids. But for most of those still living on the land, it was like selling their birthright for a bowl of chili. Those in favor of the contract with Pronatura won by two



To the subsistence farmers and ranchers who live here, this land is their patrimony. It gives them sustenance. To the environmentalists, it's a national treasure that must be protected.

votes, the nonresident voters deciding the outcome.

The funds used to purchase the conservation easement came from The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, says Magdalena Rovalo, director of Pronatura Noreste. According to the contract, the ejido cannot graze livestock or cut firewood on the reserved land. The livestock are still there, but word was recently received that they're going to be fenced out. The loss of one-third of its land will leave the ejido without enough range for its livestock.

As an incentive for signing the contract, Pronatura gave verbal promises that it would clean irrigation ditches and furnish tractors and alfalfa seed.

"Nobody from Pronatura has set foot here since the contract was signed a year ago," says Escobedo. The reason, according to Rovalo, is that Pronatura ran out of funds: "But we'll show up next year."

Says Escobedo, "It's a good thing we didn't sell our mules."

□ □ □

Several miles to the east lies Ejido La Vega (Fertile Plain). With 29,640 acres, a few range cattle, and 370 acres of alfalfa, corn and other

crops, the ejido has always supported itself from the sale of mesquite charcoal and wax made from the candelilla plant. Eighty percent of the candelilla wax in Mexico comes from the area around Cuatrociénegas and Ocampo, a small town to the north.

Ejidatario Manuel Hernandez is irrigating newly planted oats. The simple but attractive buildings and well-laid-out fields reflect pride of ownership. "No one is more interested in conserving this land than we are," says Hernandez. "But what do we get out of it? Only the people who work for the protected area are benefiting from it: new pickups, the best wages...they are benefiting from this jewel, this land, which belongs to us."

Recently, personnel from CONANP threatened to turn Hernandez in to Profepa for possible fines and/or jail time when they caught him burning dried weeds along his irrigation ditch. "All we hear from them is don't touch, don't take, don't do," says Hernandez. "They don't want us to cut mesquites to make charcoal. They don't allow us to fish the pozas [ciénegas]. They don't let us cut candelilla to make wax. We have supported ourselves for many years on what the land gives us. How are we to survive?"

Hernandez suggests what's heard repeatedly—the ejidos are being squeezed so that they will become "willing sellers" of their land and water rights. "The only real interest that CONANP and Pronatura have is to take our land away from us," says Hernandez. "I believe they want us to leave."

Ivo Garcia, director of Cuatrociénegas NPA, disagrees, saying it's actually an advantage to live in a protected area because the government is teaching the locals how to harvest mesquite and candelilla in an orderly and sustainable manner. As for the charges of harassment and intimidation, says Garcia, it's simply not true. "I can only comment the same as I did for mesquite: there is currently no person in jail or who has a judicial process against him for cutting candelilla."

Garcia's response is of little assurance to ejidatarios, who seem fully convinced that their livelihoods have become criminal activities. They tell of several city employees of Cuatrociénegas who recently were arrested and put in jail when caught fishing for perch in one of the pozas. Fines were paid and the men were released. Cash-poor ejidatarios, accustomed to supplementing their diets with fish, fear they wouldn't be so fortunate.

In an artisan's shop in La Vega, crafts made from mesquite don't begin to replace what was earned from the sale of wax and charcoal, especially since the flow of tourism to the area has been cut off.

"We haven't sold any items for eight months," says Ilda Cortina. "We even consigned some artifacts to a lady who came with Pronatura; she promised to help by selling them in Monterrey, but we haven't heard back from her either."

□ □ □

Cuatrociénegas (Four Marshes) became a popular tourist destination after a 1995 photographic essay depicting "Mexico's Desert Aquarium." It also became the focus of intense environmental activism.

Poza de la Becerra (Heifer Calf)—the area's largest and most popular swimming hole—was closed last June by Profepa for violating conditions of its operating permit. Supposedly, with the payment of a fine, the business that owns the concession to operate the poza could reopen. It remains closed, as do several other pozas.

CONANP is lobbying Profepa for permanent closure of Poza de la Becerra, pointing to the presence of trash and oil in the water and arguing that the pozas are too fragile to support such heavy tourist traffic. For years, environmentalists have been arguing for a form of tourism that leaves a lighter footprint, exactly the kind of tourist attraction that Ejido Seis de Enero (Sixth of January) wants to establish on its own land.

Ejido leader Ramiro Flores Navarro



The cowboys all nod in agreement as Luis Rico, leader for all ejidos in the valley, speaks, "We're against the proposed protected area because of what we've seen happen to the other ejidos."

applied last year for permission to establish an educational tourist center along the highway that passes by Poza Churince. The center would contain a research lab, a coffee shop and a conference room for presentations of the flora, fauna, culture and history of the area. Visitors would also be able to take a guided walk on a nature trail with stops at points of interest.

"The director of the NPA says he's waiting for a specialist from Mexico City to come study the proposal," says Navarro, "but we feel

we're being stonewalled."

Like Ejido El Venado, Navarro was forced to accept a contract with Pronatura. "The agreement allows us to run cattle and farm as long as the use is reasonable and sustainable," he says. "But who will define what is reasonable and sustainable?"

At Poza Churince, Navarro watches as several young ejidatarios check traps in the water for an exotic species of fish, an example of the kind of project that Garcia says communities request. Says Navarro: "We had asked for something different. We wanted to clear some of the reeds from the canal that carries water from the poza to the lagoon and to our livestock, because it had gone dry."

The project was denied, as was a request to put a fence between the poza and the highway to prevent passersby from tossing trash in the water. "They tell us that with this program we are going to eliminate this exotic species of fish," says Navarro. "But it doesn't give us any benefit other than a few temporary jobs. Frankly, we're too worried about our own survival to be worried about saving other species."

□ □ □

Many in Cuatrociénegas express dismay at the way the protected area is being managed.



The harsh, unforgiving landscape is softened in places by an unexpected spring, or the cienega, a crystalline lagoon, the product not of rainfall, but of an underground aquifer that chooses this spot to gurgle forth, creating an oasis in the desert.



Gustavo de la Garza has been told by officials that extracting gypsum might harm an endemic microorganism. De la Garza's father mined it for many years, with great benefits to the community.

"We have lost at least 40 percent of our business since the closing of Poza de la Becerra," says Hotel Plaza manager Elvira Borrego. "We are being hit very hard by this NPA. All we see are restrictions on all economic activities."

One of Borrego's regular customers is a biologist from TNC. "You are pressing us very hard to take care of the area," she tells him, "and we agree, but what about the people? Where are you going to put us?"

Jose Luis Hernandez says he soon will be forced to close his restaurant, El Doc. "When this NPA was established five years ago, the government told us we were going to have sustainable development. What we are seeing is the exact opposite of that—no development. We are going backwards."

Hernandez approached the NPA director about the damage being done to the local economy. "He said it's our problem and suggests that we migrate. He said the pozas, the fish and the plants cannot migrate. People can."

Luis Alberto Gonzalez, who ranches north of Cuatrociénegas, heads a local citizen's group that is asking for a balance between conservation and development. Since 1996 the town's population has declined

from 13,500 to 12,000 and counting, says Gonzalez.

"We're unable to attract new jobs or industry. As soon as they learn that we're in a protected area, they lose interest."

Gustavo de la Garza's experience illustrates the point. Two years before the NPA was established, de la Garza obtained a permit to reopen his father's gypsum mine, the Alma Rosa. He planned to sell the gypsum, which has 33 known agricultural benefits, to fertilizer companies and he also invested heavily in a plant to make plaster of paris.

Before opening the mine, de la Garza signed off on the original NPA management plan that would allow his mining operation to continue. But when actually published, the plan changed the land's zoning from mining to forestry. Supposedly, with the proper paperwork and a stiff fee, the original zoning

could be restored. But these efforts were unsuccessful.

De la Garza shows a letter written by Pronatura to all appropriate agencies asking that his application be denied. The mine's presence would be an ugly mark in a beautiful setting, the letter argues, and would harm the valley's tourism-based economy. Furthermore, extracting gypsum would harm endemic species and cause more environmental destruction.

De la Garza stoops in the middle of his 494-acre mining concession, several miles off the highway and 24 miles from the nearest poza, picks up a handful of gypsum from the barren surface that extends for miles in every direction and lets it sift through his fingers.

"Supposedly," he says, "an endemic microorganism holds this gypsum together and prevents erosion. But this is a natural resource that, if used, has benefits for myself, my family and my community?"

□ □ □

Carranza wasn't a fan of land reform. For him, the Revolution was about adherence to the constitution and liberty, especially of the municipality. Local governments, he argued, should be free to determine their destinies and manage their own affairs without federal intervention.

Most of the ejidatarios of Cuatrociénegas Valley, although beneficiaries of the land reforms that followed the Revolution, share Carranza's ideals. Toughened by adversity, seasoned by drought, they survived for decades under the political patronage of a party that perpetuated itself in power while boasting it had saved Mexico for the people.

The question now is can they survive the political patronage of yet another federal entity that perpetuates itself in power while boasting to a largely naïve and urban public that it's saving biological diversity for the people? ■



Luis Alberto Gonzalez ranches north of Cuatrociénegas and heads a local citizens' group that is asking for a balance between conservation and development.

Mike Cade and wife Jacqui farm with mules, ranch, and raise horses in southwest Texas. "In Old Mexico or New Mexico, writing about people in rural communities is bitter-sweet. It hurts to watch them struggle against increasingly hostile bureaucracies to stay on the land they love. But it's a privilege to know them. They're the salt of the earth."