

OUTSIDE THE WALL...

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Many thanks* to Secretary Juan Elvira, to the Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT), to El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF) and to the National Institute of Ecology (INE-SEMARNAT) for inviting me to take part in this meeting. Many of us here, dear friends for many years, have been in this fight for decades. We have seen the highs and lows of environmental problems along the border, we have forged our character and we have hardened ourselves in these battles; we have been tempered by these conflicts. I came to northern Mexico for the first time in 1979 with a project to establish protected areas at the border. In those days, protecting the border region was practically taboo in Mexico; for years, there was a directive followed to the letter at the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, not to create any protected areas along the border line; and back then, there were none. It was in that context that, together with several colleagues, we generated the project for the Pinacate Reserve, which of course failed tremendously. We also created, many years ago, a project to protect the Maderas del Carmen Mountain Range, which borders Big Bend National Park in Texas, and that initiative became stranded as well within the federal government. It was only until Luis Donaldo Colosio arrived at the Secretariat of Social Development (SEDESOL) that we were able to unearth the project and seriously work on the

1 Transcript of the lecture delivered during the conference, reviewed by the author.

idea of creating protected areas along the border joined through biological corridors with natural reserves in the United States. Thanks to the enthusiastic and generous support of Luis Donaldo, in 1993, the El Pinacate Sierra and Altar Grand Desert Biosphere Reserve was decreed; and two years later, the Santa Elena Canyon and Maderas del Carmen. The taboo had been broken and protected areas on the border were a reality.

There is an important lesson in this story: a project to create a reserve envisioned in 1979 saw the light in 1993. We had to wait 15 years before things actually came to fruition, for the initial efforts to finally yield results. The environment at the border is, in my experience, a topic that requires a lot of patience and demands of those of us who work on these issues that over decades we do not falter or desist, so that eventually some of our ideas will reach the Federal Government offices in Mexico City or Washington, D.C. and then, eventually, some things start to happen.

I come from the San Diego Natural History Museum, an institution that is proud to be binational and which has been promoting cross-border scientific cooperation for 135 years. It is truly an honor for me to be part of this museum which has historically maintained, for many decades, a productive relationship between colleagues on both sides of the international boundary. For example, during the first half of the 20th century when there were talks in the U.S. Senate of invading Baja California and appropriating it for the United States, the San Diego Museum was always very clear in its position to respect Mexico's authority and work scientifically in the region with respect and consideration for the country's sovereignty and for the Mexican researchers and naturalists. In our institution's archives we have lengthy correspondences, for example, with Miguel Ángel de Quevedo over a number of scientific projects that were carried out in regional collaboration and which yielded results that were extremely important for conservation.

I mention these experiences because I truly believe that this type of efforts is what is needed at the border. Gatherings such as this one, in which we can see each other face to face, talk and think about how we can achieve regional objectives together, independently of the efforts that take place in Washington, D.C. or Mexico City, in the places where the great national decisions are made. And I mention the Mexican capital because over many decades, the reluctance toward environmental border cooperation came from Mexico City and not from Washington. Today, the situation has changed and that is unfortunate; but basically, what you need in this is a long term perspective.

I also want to mention, briefly, a political process that could be called “the perfect storm”. The first element originated in the year 1992, when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) negotiations began, which were already mentioned by Mary Kelly and Paul Ganster – two people who have also spent years working on environmental border issues and whose work has been transcendental in the region—. Back then, I was working with Luis Donaldo Colosio and there were some voices —among which I must include myself— that expressed strong concerns about what would happen when subsidized agriculture started coming in from the U.S. and what impact U.S. farm belt subsidies would have on the economically-depressed regions in Mexico. Unfortunately, there was so much optimism and so much pressure over the ratification of NAFTA, that the topic was never seriously discussed and what many of us feared, regrettably came to pass: greatly subsidized biotechnological agriculture from the United States came into Mexico. A Corn Belt farmer in the U.S. receives much more money per hectare in subsidies than a corn farmer in Oaxaca can obtain legitimately by selling his product. With NAFTA, we too joined the ranks of the truly absurd in modern food production, much in the same way that a cow in the European Union receives two euros of subsidy per day, which is significantly more than the average income for most of the inhabitants in many African regions. This clearly explains why so many people want to migrate; NAFTA actually left a large sector of Mexican society completely unprotected; and immense areas of Oaxaca, Guerrero, Michoacán and Chiapas, particularly those regions of traditional agriculture that Guillermo Bonfil defined as “Deep Mexico”, were left defenseless in a flood of agricultural products with which they could not compete.

In Mexico, one of the repercussions of the free trade of subsidized agricultural products was a deterioration in the terms of exchange for rural Mexico, and that not only generated an increased migration into the United States, but also underscored the contradictions between the two Mexicos: the one in the North, which is relatively rich in economic resources, and another Mexico in the South that is increasingly more desperate and more economically-depressed. Since the beginning of time, human beings have migrated in search of better opportunities for personal development and better resources. That is why the arrival of subsidized agricultural products necessarily generated an accelerated and unexpected migratory movement, with great repercussions on the migratory pressures faced by our cities in Mexico and on the United States as well. The advancement of social injustice and inequity and the increased ejection of farmers from the countryside in the most impoverished states in

Mexico were definitely NAFTA's harshest social consequences. They were feared by some, they were predicted by others, the majority of our leaders could not foresee them in time, but this is the painful reality with which we must live and that, sooner or later, we must face as a society.

The second element of the perfect storm was the tragedy on September 11, 2001 that literally unleashed an involutory cultural process in the United States: the fear of others, the dread of what Ortega y Gasset called "otherness", the fear of other cultures, of anything foreign, alien, and the terror, in many cases irrational, of what some perceive as the Hispanic invasion, the invasion of people who come from the south.

I believe it is in this context —of an impoverished Mexico and a U.S. society increasingly paranoid and fearful of other cultures and other nations— in which we must try to understand the border fence.

Throughout this meeting we have talked about the border fence, but as Paul Ganster and Mary Kelly explained so well, we are not dealing with a single fence but a series of efforts, that are in some cases merely sensationalist, while in others they carry an electoral purpose, and still in others, are frankly hysterical attempts to ward off what is perceived to be a threatening mass of potential migrants from the south.

Perhaps the most important victim of all of this over the last five years has been the fall of environmental cooperation ideals in this part of the land, which has seriously affected the work of those of us who have been active in this region for decades.

The dreams we have nourished for years, the collaborative effort on binational protected areas and biological corridors, the students who went from Mexican universities to universities in the United States and vice versa, the young American researchers with Fulbright scholarships that would come to work on conservation in Mexico, the shared fieldwork, all this spirit of visions of cooperation, are at this time profoundly depressed, at least at the level of government circles, of federal government decision-making on both sides of the dividing line. And that affects us all, because we live in this region and, whether we like it or not, we have to live together and we have to collaborate and work together if we want to move forward as a region.

I would like now to briefly analyze some of the environmental aspects of the fence, as a preface to the presentations of several colleagues and excellent specialists that will be discussing the subject in much more detail and with knowledge greater than my own. As a starting point, it is surprising to me that from a scientific standpoint we know very little about the work on the fence.

As environmental scientists, we have been, with some exceptions, notably outside of the debate. Unfortunately, ignoring the border region is not new for environmental scientists. If we review the biological collections, such as the herbariums at UNAM, the Museum of San Diego, Berkeley or Arizona, or the collections of birds or mammals at the same institutions, we will find many more specimens, for example, from La Giganta Sierra in Baja California Sur than from Tecate Point in the border region. For decades at least, if not for a century, we scientists have had somewhat of a “border shame”. Research projects rest mainly in areas away from the border and there are few projects which have generated consistent information on the border region itself. There are, fortunately, a few exceptions worth mentioning, especially on the part of COLEF researchers such as Lina Ojeda and Carlos de la Parra, who have worked in the border region for years and who have blazed a trail in regional environmental research; but even so, they are very few for a border that is almost three thousand kilometers long and which unites and separates both countries.

Of course we can already make some inferences regarding the tragedy of some species whose biological distributions run across the border; they have already been mentioned by other lecturers and I will not insist upon this because I am sure we will continue talking about them throughout this meeting: the pronghorn antelope, the black bear, the bighorn sheep, the Mexican gray wolf, the jaguar, the ocelot and many smaller animal species which are probably less charismatic but of great ecological importance, such as many small rodents that have populations which communicate across the border, or Gambel’s quail, to cite just a few. And we will also discuss strong impacts at the subspecies level, of which we know little but which carry great scientific importance. There are, for example, some melanic populations of insects as well as rodents in the black basalts of the El Pinacate Sierra, which present a clear color in the granite substrates of the United States, and there is a certain genetic flow that is maintained between the two disjointed populations. That important reproductive circulation, which is necessary to maintain genetic diversity of species that are distributed across the border, will disappear or be seriously affected by the impact already being generated by enforcement and construction activities along the border.

On the other hand, there is already a significant and very important deterioration, mentioned by Mary Kelly, which is generated by the roads and trails of the migrant smugglers. This is a problem that we as Mexicans must assume critically: the trails which are created by the migrant smugglers all along the

border and the environmental impact that this infamous human trafficking has, which severely affects the border environment with its after-effects of trash, clearings and destruction of natural vegetation. Unfortunately, and due to the Border Patrol's response, these actions immediately generate further clearings and increased destruction, in a spiraling of actions and consequences which is truly disastrous for the environment.

Even though it is not the main purpose of this meeting, the social aspect of the border fence project is also extremely important and cannot be eluded, because in many ways it is also related to the environmental aspect. Many ethnic groups, such as the Cocopah, the Kumiai and the Tohono O'odham, have their populations spread across the border line and many of them have crossed it freely for centuries and they consider themselves both Mexican and American. The social impact of the new border traffic restrictions on these indigenous populations and on their tribal and family interactions is very severe.

One of my favorite musicians and poets is Roger Waters, who recently played a concert in Mexico City. In his album *The Wall*, which was recorded when he was part of the rock group Pink Floyd, he wrote a poem, "Outside the Wall", which reads:

"All alone, or in twos, / the ones who really love you / walk up and down outside the wall. / Some hand in hand / and some gathered together in bands. / The bleeding hearts and artists / make their stand. / And when they've given you their all / some stagger and fall, after all it's not easy / banging your heart against some mad bugger's wall."

In a peculiar way, Waters' lyrics symbolize what could be an easy conclusion to this meeting and all that we have been discussing: to blame the border fence problem on what many perceive as the actions of a "mad bugger," an unfortunate but transitory policy that will be in effect for two more years and after that, will go away. From a self-complacent position, we may think we have little to do with all the decision-making regarding the fence, that historical justice is on our side and that things will change on their own.

But the problem is much more complex, unfortunately, than a mere political juncture in the United States. The tragedy of the wall is not only a product of a unilateral decision in Washington—which does exist and is a problem—, it is not only the result of chauvinism and the fear of foreigners in the U.S.—which do exist and are also a big problem—. In my opinion, the situation is much more complex: as long as there is so much poverty in Mexico's Deep South, the dream of cultural integration in North America will continue to

be crushed by the reality of misery and inequity; as long as the American farmers continue to receive the subsidies they are currently getting and at the same time, the life expectancy of a farmer born in Mexico's Mixteca region is under 40 years; as long as in Mexico misery continues to coexist in certain states along with some of the world's greatest fortunes, the border problem will continue to grow.

It is both countries' problem; it is not, in my opinion, only a problem of the United States. Walls, unfortunately, were not invented by some mad bugger six years ago; the idea of using walls to separate contrasting societies is as old as human civilizations, an anti-utopia that has appeared, unfortunately, in many cultures throughout history. The shame of walls is not exclusive to the border line. I have seen walls that are just as high, just as unbreachable in Santa Fe, in Lomas de Chapultepec neighborhoods, and in many other places in Mexico; and it is important to say it, and say it bravely. We must understand this painful reality, because if we do not, we will not solve this problem. This is everyone's problem, it is not just a problem of conflict between nations; it is a problem derived from a new international economy that leaves no room for the most marginalized groups, for those that Franz Fannon called the "the wretched of the Earth".

The final question that I would like to address is, if we accept that in fact extreme poverty and inequity in the context of a global economy are at the root of the border problem: what do we do with this? What can we do to mitigate the environmental impact on the border region? In my opinion, Mexico must promote dialogue to advance toward the resolution of border environmental problems; and if we cannot move forward along this line, we must promote dialogue again and again. That is how we managed to have the El Pinacate Reserve decreed, that is how we achieved the Maderas del Carmen Reserve, that is how we made it possible for the California Condor to fly over Baja California again. Those were decades of work, of insisting and fighting central bureaucracies that often times do not understand or are deaf to local demands. That is the most vital experience that we as conservationists have, that of patience and of continuous and dedicated work. We are now fighting this battle in the field of the border environment and also in the field of global climate change, two issues on which the Mexican government, very justifiably, wants to advance. But we have fought them in the past and, in many cases, successfully. And why not, we must fight these new battles, we must prepare ourselves to work on this for a long time and finally, I say it again, we must seek dialogue as we are doing today. And if we fail, then we have no other option

but to seek dialogue again, and if we fail again, we have to seek dialogue once more, and take that dialogue to the capitals of both countries.

Historical justice is built as a result of civil society's labor, and in this case, we have to build it. We must be patient and we can be, because history, I believe, in this matter, is on the conservationists' side, on the side of those of us who fight for the conservation of diversity in nature and in cultures, on our side.