

WIXARIKA

RESEARCH CENTER

First Hand Update on Activities in the Huichol Mountains – February 2008

Shortly after arriving in Guadalajara, I was able to see the two students from the Huichol community of Santa Catarina Cuexcomatitlán who we are helping with expenses to finish university studies in that city at two different institutions. Agustín Carrillo, who is studying business administration at the Universidad Tecnológica de Guadalajara, received his semester's backing, after we met on January 22. Next I saw Atilano Carrillo, who was able to reenter the Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO), to finish one and half more years of accounting studies. Agustín Carrillo, and Claudio de la Rosa a graduate student at ITESO who is writing a thesis on bilingual education, were particularly aware of the upcoming general assembly in their community.

On February 2, I reached the high Sierra of Santa Catarina Cuexcomatitlán, or *Tuapurie*, in search of several co-parents. I was invited to stay at the ranch of the Grandmother, Who is like an Apricot, near the encampment where community members were preparing to hold the general assembly a week later, by Nueva Colonia. News was rampant that a young man had died after his fore-arm was fractured; he was taken for an operation to a relatively close town with the proper facilities, but in the state of Zacatecas, and thus had to be driven to a poor, distant clinical facility in the corresponding state of Jalisco, where he died of anabolic shock during the surgery to repair his fore-arm. The vigil for his death nearby brought together the most prestigious shamans, Vieruku, the 102 year old elder of the community who chanted the first night, and my co-father, Uxayucauye, who chanted on a second night.

People were busy repairing the road by Nueva Colonia, where all authorities would meet with the majority of the active community members of voting status. Some temporary structures were erected for the comfort of the guests and branches assembled to afford some shade, while wood was gathered for several nights and days of heating and cooking needs. Conversations went on with members of the Huichol community of Santa Catarina for a week before the general assembly, in which they asked me to participate. Representatives came from every different ceremonial center and clan of *Tuapurie*, and they amounted to over 900 people of voting status.

Witnessing the Santa Catarina Community General Assembly of February 8 to 10 that led to blocking the advancement of road construction along the high ridges of their forestland was a surreal experience. The local mestizo authorities had initially been presented correctly, according to the cargos they held and some were assigned seats in the assembly, near the Santa Catarina leaders or teachers, near the shade. However, they arrived a day late to the meeting in new S.U.V. vehicles, escorted by a couple of policemen, and they were told to wait for their turn to address the assembly and were denounced for not holding their promises after they became impatient to speak up.

The mestizo authorities were told by the assembly that they were the very ones who had betrayed them, in their positions as mayors, or as state representatives of

federal institutions that were supposed to consider the will of the local people, who see the major paved road damaging their cultural heritage in major ways, since it cuts through sacred spots along a path to the East. The Huicholes from *Tuapurie*, or *Tuapuritari*, would thus appeal to the federal ministries in charge of ecological protection, now that hundreds of trees had already been felled to widen the road and expose them to tourism, mining and water extraction, in which they were not interested. The municipal authorities packed up their portfolios and left with a final show of impotent force, having their two policemen change their uniforms into military outfits, with automatic weapons instead of the blue uniforms announcing police, wearing discrete guns.

Many local matters were approached on the first day of the meeting, and it was the first time all the new traditional authorities were invested with their power in a community assembly after receiving it for a year this past January. The communal representatives were also new authorities on a three year mandate, who had to show the direction they were taking for the community as a whole, among themselves about internal matters and with others concerning the outside world. They sat in front of the permanent elder authorities, near the outgoing leaders and by the gaze of involved teachers, like the community school supervisor and some principals, close to the women of note, elders, shamans and the common people.

Matters began heating up as the subject of the road construction without the community's permission was brought up. The community actively solicited the opinion of individuals representing the points of view of Mexican non-governmental organizations about the problem with the road and accepted the useful advice offered to them by Carlos Chávez, as the main representative of a Mexican association called AJAGI (Asociación Jaliscience para el Apoyo a Grupos Indígenas), and by Humberto Fernández, as the representative of another Mexican association called CHAC (Conservación Humana Asociación Civil). These organizations were aware of the general assembly taking place on this date and place, and were seeking to assure the Huichol of this community that they stood within their legal rights, if they were opposed to the road's incursion. They assured them that their legal complaints would reach the Mexican Ministries of the Environment. I was also asked to give my opinion about the road projects and the effects they were having in the land due to accompanying mining and damming projects, besides the cultural damage the road construction was likely to cause their patrimonial sites, which would be scarred or pillaged. They asked me to make their position known to the international organizations that have been set up to guarantee their rights as a communal ethnic group keeping this part of their territory since before the time of the Spanish conquest, recognized by vice-regal titles and confirmed as communal land titles.

All the traditional and agrarian leaders of the community addressed officially sealed letters to the minister in charge of "Secretaría de Medio Ambiente Recursos Naturales y Pesca" (SEMARNAT), the Ministry of the Environment, Natural Resources and Fishing, as well as to the Federal Attorney of "Procuraduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente" (PROFEPA), the Federal Department of Environmental Care. They asked these authorities to deny or revoke the approval of the Manifestations of Environmental Impact (MIA) that had been conceded by the state government in agreement with several building enterprises to build the paved road. Among their main complaints, the communal authorities stated that:

1. These works were done without consulting the community, already damaging beyond repair several of our sacred spots, as well as our forests and our water

springs, violating the national norm extant within the country, particularly the Covenant 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO).

2. Numerous detailed ecological reasons are cited to explain why the road from Huejuquilla to Bolaños, and in particular Tenzompa to Bolaños should not be disturbed.
3. This forested area should not be turned into a paved road without considering the environmental impact.

The Road Blockade in Context:

To protest the road construction on 19 kilometers of their territory, the *Wixaritari* or Huichol of this community, called *Tuapurie* or Santa Catarina Cuexcomatitlán, agreed to move their point of assembly to a vantage spot by the road, called *Awatsaitüa*, where they blocked the road building equipment and stopped the illegal work from proceeding without some agreement at the highest levels of the Mexican government. By the evening of the 10th, members of the assembled community began to move by foot and in vehicles belonging to community members to this strategic spot on the road. To the north, this road extends in the direction of Huejuquilla el Alto, via the neighboring Mexican town of Tenzompa, and to the south, it reaches the crossroad toward the Mexican town of Bolaños, which is far below in the western valley. Also to the south is the crossroads with the Huichol school of Pueblo Nuevo and a very poor dirt road that was started around 2005 to the headquarters of Santa Catarina, in the west, above the canyon of the Chapalagana River.

Further west are the cliffs of the community of San Andrés Cohamiata, where the government and the Franciscan Church, before it, fomented strong links with its headquarters above the hillside, in *Tatéi Kié*, Our Mother's House, with its *calihuey*, or government headquarters, its *teyupani*, or 'church', and its ceremonial center, or *tukipa*, with its temple and god-houses. Catholic priests and nuns were able to set up a school near the headquarters of Tatéi Kié and Huaixtita, at two ends of that community, where the government placed its main schools, by 1970. The first major road was built by the Plan Lerma, Proyecto Huicot, in 1975 to connect San Andrés to the village of Huejuquilla el Alto, Jalisco, to its east. To the west this dirt road connects to the main settlements in the Cora native territory and reaches Ruiz, a Mexican village north of Tepic, Nayarit, near the Pacific coast. This created the first road infrastructure to cross the rugged northern Western Sierra Madre, from the state of Nayarit in the west, through some of Durango, to Jalisco and the state of Zacatecas, east of Huejuquilla.

South of Huejuquilla el Alto, on the eastern valley flanks of the Huichol Sierra, are the municipal seat of Mezquitic, overseeing the Huichol communities of San Andrés, Santa Catarina and San Sebastián, and the municipal seat of Bolaños, overseeing the Huichol community of Tuxpan. They became fairly well connected among themselves and to the east by paved roads. By 1975, parallel dirt roads were being built in the high ridges of the Huichol mountains to the west of Mezquitic and Bolaños, by extending the road from Huejuquilla to Tenzompa and the northern Santa Catarina Highlands, while a road from Bolaños in the southwest valley was built up to Tuxpan in the South Huichol Highlands and extended northward to the Mexican community of Los Amoles (recently expropriated from the natives), through the Huichol community of San Sebastián, next to Santa Catarina.

The Huichol were not asked then if they felt the road was good for them or not. This was simply assumed to be the case, and in the case of the headquarters of the community of San Sebastián Teponohuastlán, it managed to acquire its road in return for relatively good deals to a timber exploiter who reaped plenty of mature pines and oaks in the process of opening the doors of Tuxpan, Barranca del Tule, Los Amoles and San Sebastián. On the other hand, when they told the community members of Santa Catarina Cuexcomatitlán they had to sign a deal with the timber company or expose themselves to losing 12,500 hectares of their land, the *Tuapuritari* openly defied the government of the state of Jalisco, stating they would not sign a deal, but fight for their land rights.

At that point, in 1979, the community appointed me officially as its assessor to help with the government by appealing to federal government instances, which eventually backed the community's land titles. The basic road structure was traced through the upper community's forest ridge, without entailing a timber contract for pines and oaks on the sides of the road. A similar lack of timber contract was pursued in the community of San Andrés, where I also acted as an assessor in 1980.

Since the 1970's, when roads were used primarily to extract large amounts of timber from the Western Sierra Madre, another corridor was constructed from Bolaños to Tuxpan, in the southern direction to Puente de Camotlán and west to Tepic, crossing the southern range of the Sierra Madre. It is promising to become a major corridor of traffic, as the dams of "La Yesca" and "El Cajón" are fully constructed and producing electricity in the state of Nayarit, where the first major dam was built on the Santiago River, at Aguamilpa, flooding a number of Huichol ranches and settlements, beginning in 1992.

The major community that has not been penetrated is *Tuapurie* because it has consistently refused to have a road properly built into its community headquarters in Santa Catarina from Pueblo Nuevo, in the high plateau which is reached by the road from Huejuquilla el Alto in the north, Mezquitic in the east and Bolaños in the south. The road which the government would now like to have widened and paved, with fraudulent *Tuapurie* permission, is the axis from Huejuquilla to Bolaños, which is connected to the eastern Mezquitic road at the *Tuapurie* latitude. The previous president, Vicente Fox, had assured he would bridge the road gap between the canyons of Santa Catarina and up to San Andrés Cohamiata, but Santa Catarina refused to build to the canyon, improve the road to their headquarters or use the electricity provided to them. Thus the road through the main heart of the Huichol Mountains, near the canyons of *Tuapurie*, has so far been prevented from finally destroying a living native culture in Mexico today.

Immediate Consequences of the Road Blockade:

Major state and national newspapers, like *El Público*, *El Mural*, *La Jornada* and its weekly opinion section *Ojarasca*, fully supported the cause of the Santa Catarina Huichol, and quoted their denunciations, after their show of mass resistance to this road construction. They sent the statements of their communal representatives to the government and public media, who became aware of their plight.

The worst fabrication of the government was that the members of the community of Santa Catarina had expressed their approval for the construction of the road through a general assembly held on September 9 of 2007. Whereas the community held no assembly on that date, some community leaders were hustled away by influential

leaders of the mestizo municipalities, state indigenous and urban development functionaries, who pushed them to sign a document, far from the sight of their members on September 14, with a number of police agents. The document does not reflect one of an assembly meeting and is obviously fraudulent. In a general assembly carried out between November 8 and 12 of 2007, the community recognized again its disapproval for improvements to the road, among other themes. However, this document was published as proof of the Huichol's agreement to the construction of the road by the secretary of Urban Development for the state of Jalisco, a few days after the Huichol started their boycott. Santa Catarina's main authorities gave a press conference in Guadalajara on February 26 to clarify how they had been misrepresented in the regional newspaper *La Voz del Norte*, which had reproduced the false documents.

The next response of local municipal government forces was evident in that newspaper, which accused the Huichol authorities of *Tuapurie*, or Santa Catarina, of representing a minority of the people who actually wanted the road construction to be carried out, including a majority of the other Huichol communities, like San Andrés Cohamiata (which is not affected by this road construction), San Sebastián Teponohuastlán and its annex community of Tuxpan de Bolaños (which was later unmasked to have been represented by a biased president of communal goods) and others, which are non-indigenous, like Los Amoles (taken over by the Mexicans in the 1950's) and Tenzompa (taken over in the 1850's), that are not interested in the survival of Huichol culture. The major conflict of interest uncovered was that San Sebastián's native president of communal goods had been acting on behalf of mestizo interests and rewarded by receiving the position of secretary of the mestizo municipality of Mezquitic. Spokesmen from the Municipal Government of Mezquitic added that a vehicle traveling in that direction with marihuana had probably been used by natives from *Tuapurie*, when a check on the name of its owner identified him as a member of a Mexican family. One thing the traditional Huichol want to avoid is having roads in their areas used to transport opium and marihuana that they do not grow and cannot yet be delivered through their road-less territory, but the drug runners would love to peddle them through an ever expanding native territory, and blame it on the Indians, if ever caught using their roads.

What is especially frightening to the Huichol of *Tuapurie* is how so-called progress is supposedly helping their siblings in neighboring communities. In San Andrés Cohamiata, there has been a lot of talk about taking advantage of the government's inclination to open an eco-touristic window of opportunity. People from the beach resorts of Puerto Vallarta, to the city of Tepic, begin to hear about the possibility of making quick trips into their native lands, with cottages for rent and directly available crafts, plus possible enactments of rituals *in vivo*, and maybe a peyote journey in a lucky trip to Don Weird Land, sponsored by the government's tourist bureau. Next San Andrés, like Tuxpan, have plenty of electricity but no more water because of population density and timber felling, but large fiestas bring in surpluses of beer and coca-colas, or other imported sodas and alcoholic drinks. That is the beginning of the end of native culture and health in these tribal areas, which becomes totally dependant on their image to the tourist, the anthropologist and the archaeologist, who can safely classify them as dead Mexican remnants of old cultures from the past. At that same time, these natives would rather not become attractions for outsiders, with another reason to visit the country's ecological spots. Most of them would rather not share anything with everybody for the sake of the Ministry of Tourism. Up to now the *Tuapuritari* have refused to accept eco-tourism projects offered by the government's National Commission for the Development of Indigenous People (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas).

Today a major question rising from the flanks of the community of San Andrés is whether they are going to open up two mines to extraction over a 99 year contract period, which could soil the waters of the central Chapalagana River that divides much of the community of San Andrés from that of Santa Catarina in the east. This is a vital concern today, since mineral extraction from the high Sierra of southern San Andrés would contaminate the basin in the Chapalagana River between Santa Catarina and San Andrés, where there are currently quite a few fish and shrimp. Some authorities have told me the mining extraction permission in San Andrés has been revoked, which would be good news, but we are still not sure.

Some anthropologists may suggest that the National Institute of History and Anthropology (INAH) can replace a sacred monument if road-workers damage the spot in question, or they can have the road-builders move the road away from its original trace to prevent the spot from being altered, if the natives tell them in advance where such spots may be encountered. Since these anthropologists have never made a long foot pilgrimage to the holy land in the east and back, it would be difficult for them to understand how the large road parallel to the sacred spots might affect the insight of the pilgrims.

On February 26, 16 days after the road blockade was started, the main authorities of the Wixárika community of Santa Catarina gave a press conference in Guadalajara, Jalisco, to air their points of view. They said that the blockade to stop the machines working on their section of the road had grown from 745 to 846 communal members in a few days. They discussed the matter of the road, about which they were hoping to get information from the agents of the Ministry of Urban Development (SEDEUR), the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous People (CDI), the Office of Management for Environmental Care (PROFEPA) and the municipalities of the region. The negotiations were slow, and although these agencies were asked to present themselves, the high level agents did not show up, and instead they sent representatives unable to take decisions. A few days later, other members of *Tuapurie* traveled to Mexico City to hold a second press conference. They had been harassed on a couple of occasions by military helicopters flying over their encampment and two deployments of state police in SUV's, but unmoved. While waiting to negotiate, they decided to denounce the false agreement publicly, to seek backing from the National Indigenous Congress (Congreso Nacional Indígena) that emerged from the Zapatista Rebellion and also fights for autonomous causes in other parts of Mexico, and which agreed to visit their area on March 8 to 9.

Below is my translation of the final statements made by the spokesmen of *Tuapurie*'s communal government at the press conference in Guadalajara:

"We manifest that the government of the state of Jalisco, instead of going to consult us and investigate, has spent its time justifying the actions in complicity and threatening that the project will continue even against our will.

"Thereby the treaties and international agreements extant in Mexico are being violated, like covenant 169 of the International Organization of Work, the Declaration of Indigenous Rights emitted by the United Nations in 2007, the Inter-American Democratic Letter of the OAS, and a violation of our supreme law based on the agreements of San Andrés, exercised in our autonomy and free determination.

We make the following statements as the official position of our community:

1. We the Wixaritari do not want that which they call "progress" that they want to impose on us, we want to maintain a respectful attitude with the mother earth, who is alive and which the enterprises and bad governments do not understand, nor respect.
2. It is a deliberate fraud imposed from the part of the Mexican State that seeks to turn over the natural resources of the people to the large enterprises, which are destroying the world and are today pretending to make the public media think we are the liars.
3. It is a lie that we are told the road is for our benefit, since we know the real foundation are the ambitions of the mega-projects of the government allied with transnational capital for the creation of eco-touristic corridors that pretend to commercialize our culture, our fauna, our minerals, our water, our woods and rob the soil that our ancestors have cared for us.
4. We accuse the government of being responsible for the falsification of the act, by pressuring, intimidating and even forcing some of our authorities with police agents, to force them to sign without consultation or knowledge of an assembly. That seems to be the way federal, state and municipal governments work to impose their mega-projects on the indigenous communities.
5. For these reasons, the community requests that the responsible individuals be investigated and removed from their positions, namely, the secretary of Urban Development, José Sergio Carmona, the state delegate of the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous People, Guadalupe Flores, and the director of the State's Indigenous Commission, Francisco López, besides suits against the municipal presidents of Huejuquilla el Alto, Bolaños and Mezquitic.
6. Given the climate of intimidation against us, we consider the governor of the state, Emilio González, as well as the municipal presidents, mentioned above, responsible for anything that might happen to our spokesmen, as well as to our agrarian and traditional authorities.
7. Since we recognize that bad governments do not offer guarantees of justice to original people and given that we find our strength in other people who fight and resist in order to continue existing on the basis of autonomy, we convoke the members of the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) to meet in Awatsait+a on March 8 and 9 of 2008."

The Office of Management for Environmental Care (Procuraduría de Protección del Medio Ambiente, or PROFEPA) did take the community's appeal into consideration, found some environmental damage had been caused and thus, ordered the shut down of the construction works on March 11, 2008, a month after the Huichol started blocking the road by placing from 800 to 1000 people a day around the area called Awatsaitüa, or el Reventón and preventing the machines from working. Another suspension to the road was declared due to a local district attorney's response to a suit by the Santa Catarina community founded on illegal occupation of its land. These last pieces of information were sent to us by Carlos Chávez, who has been working closely with the Huichol of Santa Catarina, as an ally on this issue through his office at AJAGI, in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. He has been vilified by *La Voz del Norte* as an outsider, when he has spent many years dedicated to overseeing land being returned to the Huichol of the areas in the four Huichol Jalisco communities, to the detriment of mestizo interests only.

Most recently, on hearing that a Huichol sacred spot might have been damaged by the new road, the governor of Jalisco, answered the reporter (*La Jornada Jalisco*, Juan Carlos Partida, 2008/03/20) that he was only aware they had one sacred spot in that state, which was the Lake of Chapala. This goes to show how far these people move from their native land that is full of sanctuaries, in order to reach outlying ones like Chapala, in the south. Of course, they did not reach the lake out of thin air, but following a pilgrimage trail that is full of sacred halts that are eradicated by modernization. It is in the Huichol Sierra that their trails still persist, but the damage to Lake Chapala is fatal, since its fish have been extinct for years and the Huichol have no particular grounds for their tribe on its shores. The state governor was pragmatic about the paved road in the 19 km. stretch of the *Tuapurie* community. He said it would remain a dirt road since the funds were not sufficient to finish the work this year anyway and the only losers would be the Wixaritari, losing out on the fact they are not in contact. We hope the government will respect the Huichol in their native land, even if it is not aware of its traditions or its sacred spots out there.

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