



Interlude 2

Letter to a friend

Dear Juan

Thank for your message and sorry for the delay in answering. Life has become hectic in San Miguel!

I am pleased that you now have a Ph.D. in Development Studies and are coming back to contribute to our country's future. I share your enthusiasm for sustainable development, but after ten years in San Miguel I have seen that things are terribly complex in real life and change comes very slowly.

Three years ago, the government approved and financed the San Miguel Watershed Management Programme. Work to drain the valley and build a hydropower dam on the White Canyon progressed smoothly, creating temporary jobs and business opportunities for our citizens and contributing to my re-election as mayor of San Miguel.

Unfortunately, we had a lot trouble with Prof. Eleuterio, the Scientific Director of the orchid forest biotope. For more than a year, he used the press, social mobilization and the courts to resist the (partial) drainage of the piedmont swamp, insisting that it would affect the micro-climate and stop some rare orchid species from flowering. Finally, the scientists carrying out the environmental impact assessment found that his worries were exaggerated, and that the planned drainage of 30 percent of the swamp would not cause any significant change to the upland forest microclimate.

Following his defeat, Prof. Eleuterio retired. The new manager of the biotope believes that natural resources are primarily for the benefit of the people and has launched a biotope collaborative management process, which calls stakeholders to contribute to "embedding conservation in development". The biotope now has infrastructure for ecotourism: a canopy trail, log cabins, health food kiosks and a horseback tour centre, which are managed by members of the community. There is also a cooperative orchid nursery that supplies the international orchid market with plantlets of sought-after local varieties.

These initiatives and some good advertising have tripled the number of tourists visiting the orchid biotope over the last two years, and this has had an impact on businesses in town. More and more people are involved in tourism, providing bed and breakfast and other services. New restaurants and shops sell orchids, local handicrafts, local food, T-shirts and other gadgets. Tourism has become the main topic of conversation in Park Square, with people particularly anxious to know when construction of the Alameda White Canyon Inn resort is going to start. They expect this to make up for the unemployment that we are expecting in a few months, when the channel and dam yards close. Some dream that a tourist boom will make San Miguel rich.

Unfortunately, the Alameda Inn's lawyers are delaying signature of the final agreement with the municipality, which owns the land where the resort will be built. They say that their clients want to see the finished White Canyon lake before they sign, but I think that this is just an excuse. The real problem is that investors are waiting for the courts to clarify the legal status of the reclaimed land.

This is the crux of the problem. You may remember how the River Shore Protection Act transferred the alluvial, flood-prone area at the bottom of the valley to the municipality about 20 years ago. As the land had been swamp for 150 years, nobody objected to the decision at the time, but now the hydraulic works have turned it into the most productive land in the valley, Don Victor, Don Arturo and other local landowners are insisting that the area is no longer under the River Shore Protection

Act's jurisdiction and should be returned to its legitimate owners. Their lawyers have found an old title certifying that the land has been owned by their families since 1856. The district court has rejected this claim, but the landowners have appealed to the Supreme Court and our lawyer says that top-level jurists tend to pay more attention to the legal form of a claim than its substance. If this happens, we have little chance of winning the case.

This is a critical issue for me. As the town mayor, I promised that the reclaimed land would be distributed equitably among the hundreds of small farmers who are struggling to survive on their unproductive and erosion-prone hillside parcels. My political future depends on fulfilling that commitment. My constituency does not like the permanent picket that the Small Farmers' Union has set outside the town hall to put pressure on council members, or the graffiti calling me "liar" and "swindler".

As a watershed management professional, I know that unless tree crops replace maize and bean farming on the valley's steep slopes, the channels and lake will soon be filled with runoff debris. In addition, the contract with Water and Electricity Ltd for using the dam and reservoir sets very high penalties if the water's sediment levels increase beyond the threshold that their machinery can tolerate. This whole endeavour will become financially unsustainable if the municipality has to pay those penalties. That is why I planned to lease the reclaimed land to hillside farmers on condition that they move their annual crop plots downstream and convert their hillside land to agroforestry and conservation farming. If the landlords win their case, all this work will be lost.

I do not want to discourage you from returning home, but I thought you ought to see how top-level politicians and donors can pay lip service to "sustainable development" and "enabling environment", while a bunch of privileged landowners use the law to prevent change from taking place.

Best regards

Francisco