

WHY SOME PEOPLE CHOOSE & STRUGGLE NOT TO BE "DEVELOPED"

[By Walt Sherwood, a retired California community college teacher and administrator, sherwow@sbcglobal.net]

A lot of people in the more developed countries of North America sometimes wonder why those other people, our neighbors to the south, just don't go ahead and develop themselves. It sounds like a solution, doesn't it? If they were only developed, then they wouldn't need to come here any more, they could stay home where they really want to be anyway, where they "belong," and the immigration problem would be solved.

So it might just come as a shock to learn that some of those people down there don't actually want to be developed – at least not the way "development" is usually thrust upon them.

I came to this realization on a Rights Action-led trip I took this summer to two communities in Honduras, both of which are suffering the effects of so-called development, and both fighting it with all they have.

THE GARIFUNA PEOPLE & THE PLAGUE OF TOURISM "DEVELOPMENT"

The first community is the Garifuna, descendants of escaped African slaves and native peoples from the Caribbean, who have lived on the northeastern coast of Honduras, on the shores of beautiful Tela Bay, for over two hundred years. They have their own culture, language, customs, music, and dance, and have been largely ignored by the mainstream, Spanish-speaking Honduran society until fairly recently, 20 or 30 years ago, when people from the capital, Tegucigalpa, and other large cities woke up to the fact that the Garifuna were living on some of the most spectacular real estate on the face of the planet – miles and miles of unspoiled beaches, pristine waters, waving palm trees – an ideal spot for vacation homes and condos and tourist hotels complete with tennis courts, swimming pools, and, naturally, golf courses.

The only problem was that the land was already occupied by these pesky people who seemed to think that, just because they had lived there for generations, it was actually theirs. The problem also was that the land belonged to the community – or communities, since there were many of them – and the communities didn't want to give it up.

But there was an easy answer for that, privatization, dividing the land up into individual parcels which could be bought and sold on the open market, then making enticing offers to the individual owners to induce them to sell. Of course national law had to be changed in order to make this happen – no problem! Some individuals began to sell out. If people didn't want to sell, well, the state or wealthy individuals had ways of "persuading" them. In any case, the control of the Garifuna over their coastal land had begun to erode.

Some communities have already begun to disappear. A place called Miami still appears on the map but is no longer an intact Garifuna community, its parcels sold off for hotel and condo development. But the nearby communities of El Triunfo de la Cruz, San Juan, and Barra Vieja, just down the coast from Miami, have decided to make a stand. They are part of an organization called OFRANEH, or Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras.

We were shown around El Triunfo by OFRANEH leader Alfredo Lopez, a wiry man with a friendly manner and easy smile in spite of the six and a half years he had served in Honduran jails on trumped-up drug charges (finally dismissed for lack of evidence – the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ordered the Honduran State to pay Alfredo monetary compensation for the abuse of justice and his suffering and loss) as a way to discourage his opposition to the tourism development projects.

Attacks and intimidation were commonplace, we were told. Another leader, Gregoria, had been shot outside her church and was now living in exile in the Bronx, New York, fearing for her life. Wilfredo Guerrero, an anti-development organizer, was living under a protective order from the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights, after having been jailed, attacked, almost killed, and his house burnt to the ground.

A not uncommon tactic for development interests and their friends in government is to try to pin the label of common criminals on those who oppose them, and so de-legitimize their protest. Thus it has been said of Alfredo, Wilfredo, and other leaders of OFRANEH that they are members of maras, or gangs, which is patently untrue, but hard to disprove.

For people with few financial resources, it is difficult to go head to head with the legal apparatus of the state. Lawyers cost money. Bail costs money. Court procedures can be made to drag on and on until witnesses grow weary or are bought off or disappear. The communities have to be creative in their resistance, launching protests and demonstrations complete with music, drumming, and dance, in front of the government buildings in the capital. Sometimes these tactics work, and gain sympathy from some lawmakers. But often they have to look outside the country to international bodies, like the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights, for protection.

Are the Garifuna really against all "development"? Up until about fifteen years ago, they pretty much were. They were opposed to mega-tourism because they feared it would ruin their beaches, siphon water from nearby

rivers to keep golf courses green, and force poor people off land that had belonged to them for centuries. But then they began to reflect. They were living in a zone that was attractive to tourists, after all. Why not try to meet these new challenges in a way that would not destroy the very things that were bringing the tourists there in the first place? Why not share the beauty with others, but on their own terms?

The answer the Garifuna came up with is community-controlled development – development on a much smaller scale than that proposed by the tourist industry that would have a minimal impact on the environment and on their traditional way of life. They envision small clusters of cabanas instead of multi-storey hotels. They see cultural exchanges between people, mutual exchanges, instead of the separation and isolation that currently exist in large-scale enclave tourism. Typically, tourists are whisked from the airport straight to a gated, fenced condo or hotel compound with no chance or attempt to interact with the local populace.

The Garifuna see tourism as a way for different peoples to learn about, and from, each other. They see it as a mutually beneficial learning experience, controlled and administered by the local communities in such a way that the communities would remain intact and the tourists would still have a satisfying, relaxing and enriching vacation.

THE CAMEPSINOS OF THE SIRIA VALLEY & THE PLAGUE OF MINING “DEVELOPMENT”

The second "development" site we visited, in the center of the country not too far from the capital, in the department of Francisco Morazan, was the lovely Siria Valley – lovely, that is, except for the huge raw scar on the mountainside, carved out over the past eight years, to form the open-pit mine called San Martin, owned by the Canadian/US mining company, Goldcorp, Inc. The Siria Valley is some 36 square kilometers of agricultural land fed by numerous streams and a river, the Rio Playa, where people have been growing corn and beans and raising cattle for over 150 years, typically producing more than enough to feed themselves, with a bit left over to sell in the market.

Then, about eight years ago, the mine came. People were moved from their homes "voluntarily" – a whole community, Palo Ralo, was relocated from the spot where they had lived for more than a century, and new, "better" homes were constructed. Some people – not many, a few hundred in a population of 40,000 – were given jobs in the mine. The side of the mountain was scooped away, thousands of tons of soil and rock washed with water and treated with cyanide to recover the gold.

It took a while for the effects to begin to show up. First, the streams which fed the Rio Playa began to go dry. Coincidentally, there was a drought, and the mining company wasn't responsible for that, of course, but at the same time the mine was pumping out thousands of gallons of water and the streams that had nourished the farming communities for over a century were drying up, so people concluded that the mine had something to do with it.

More serious, though, and equally hard to prove, were the negative health effects resulting from the mining operations. People began to develop skin problems – funguses, rashes, itching, and dry, scaly skin. Some had their hair fall out. There was an increase in miscarriages and stillbirths and in the number of infants who died in the first months of life, attested to by a health-care worker, a nurse, who had worked in the community for 27 years. An increase in urinary tract infections and kidney stones, accompanied by a decrease in intestinal parasites, signaled the presence in the body of heavy metals – mercury, arsenic, lead. Community leaders believe that the mining process has released the heavy metals into the water.

Our delegation saw a three-year-old girl, Leslie, who looked normal and was of normal intelligence, according to her mother, but who had no strength in her arms and legs, was not able to stand up, walk, or grasp things with her hands. Her father, who had sired other, normal children before her, with another woman, had been working in the mine for several years before she was born.

It's admittedly hard to prove a direct result between the mine and the health effects we heard about and observed. The mining company claims that the heavy metals were always present in the soil, the water never safe to drink and wash with. Studies have been made – the most recent over a year ago, but the results are in the hands of the government in Tegucigalpa and have yet to be released.

Still, people were using the water for over a hundred years before the mine with few or none of these problems, and suddenly, with the advent of the mine, over the past few years, the problems have begun to show up or increase. Moreover, they particularly affect people who have the most contact with water in their daily routines – women. Men, even those who work in or around water, typically wear rubber boots. Women plunge their arms in the water up to their elbows to do the wash, or splash water on their hands and arms in drawing water from a well.

After eight years, all the gold has been removed and the mine is closing. So what's all the fuss about, you might say. Goodbye, good riddance. But the health effects remain, the water supply is still contaminated with heavy metals, and the company won't put the mountain back together again. Of course, it will plant some trees to try

to hide the ugly scar – eucalyptus trees, which are faster growing than the native pines that once covered the mountainside, and which suck water from the soil and are a fire hazard.

But the company won't compensate people for their medical problems or set aside a fund to treat them. Apparently that isn't part of the closure plan because the company believes that the mine is not the cause of the health problems that people are experiencing.

So who has benefitted from this "development"? There is a big sign outside the chain-link fence that marks the entrance to the mining company property that proclaims proudly all the financial benefits that the mine has brought over the past eight years to Honduras, the department of Francisco Morazan, and the municipality.

But even if the figures are true – and like everything else, they are disputed – where has all the money gone? Certainly not to the local community, or at least not much of it. Yes, there were some new municipal buildings erected, a school or two, new houses for the village that got removed, and jobs for a few hundred people. Goldcorp got to keep 99 % of the profits, while the Honduran State got 1% back in what is called a regalia, a kind of gift.

The communities will be left with a badly healing scar, a depleted and contaminated water supply, and lingering health problems that will persist into the next generation. Who got the better deal

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Do these communities oppose development? It really depends on what is meant by "development" and how it is done. In the past, the model has typically been top-down: mining corporations, real estate developers, hotel chains – all too often linked to the very government agencies that are supposed to be regulating and guiding them – come into an area with a pre-determined plan, a fixed idea about what should be done, and usually with one main goal in mind – how much money can be made. If the community is consulted at all – and most often it isn't – it is as an afterthought, and usually much too late to have any but a marginal effect on the process.

A more just model would have the community consulted up front, as part of the planning process, with an honest appraisal of the pros and cons of development. If the community is persuaded to go ahead, then genuine negotiations should take place that will satisfy community needs for jobs in the short and long term, protections against damages to the environment, economic compensation for harms done, and an assured seat at the table as the project is implemented. Of course, all this would cut into the bottom line – there would be fewer profits under a model that strives to balance development with social justice.

But until that happens, the Garifuna communities of Tela Bay and the people of the Siria Valley will continue to resist "development."

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WHAT TO DO

TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS for Indigenous and community-based organizations that are implementing their own community development projects (schools and scholarships, health clinics, solidarity economy productive projects, etc), human rights and environment projects in Guatemala and Honduras (as well as El Salvador and Chiapas), and resisting the harms caused by large-scaled "development" projects (like mining, tourism, hydro-electric dams), make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

* UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887;

* CANADA: 552 - 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8.

CREDIT-CARD DONATIONS: http://www.rightsaction.org/Templates/donations_index.html

DONATIONS OF STOCK: info@rightsaction.org

EDUCATIONAL DELEGATION-SEMINARS: Consider forming your own group and coming on an educational seminar trip to learn more about community and Indigenous development, human rights and environmental issues in Guatemala and Honduras.

2nd HEMISPHERIC GATHERING AGAINST MILITARIZATION – HONDURAS, OCTOBER 3-5: !Para callar las armas, hablemos los pueblos! (To quiet weapons, the people must speak!) For more information or to attend this gathering in La Esperanza, Intibucá, Honduras: (504) 783-0817; copinhonduras@yahoo.es

; antimilitarizacion@gmail.com; www.antimilitarizacion.blogspot.com.

3rd SOCIAL FORUM OF THE AMERICAS – GUATEMALA, OCTOBER 7-12: Thousands of people from across the Americas are expected at this gathering to debate and discuss (and enjoy awesome music, art and theater)

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JOIN: Rights Action's listserv and newsletter lists (info@rightsaction.org).

CREATE YOUR OWN E-MAIL LIST: and re-distribute this and other information.

DAILY NEWS: listen to the www.democracynow.org news program and read www.dominionpaper.ca/.

READ: Eduardo Galeano's "Open Veins of Latin America"; Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States"; Naomi Klein's "The Shock Doctrine"; Paolo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed".

SMILE: And live to make another world is possible, everyday.

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