

Paradise To Be Regained

Pollution in Acapulco is threatening the country's best-known tourist resort.

Still considered to be one of the country's three most attractive tourist centers for national and international visitors, the Port of Acapulco is also a city with all of the common problems related to industrial and demographic growth.

Acapulco is one of the major marine fishing centers in the state of Guerrero. As a deep-sea port for coastal traffic, it also has a large concentration of port-related services, including 5 shipping agencies and 9 customs houses.

Eleven foreign and one national sea cargo lines use the port, providing regular service to the United States, Central America, South America, the Caribbean and the Far East, 46 countries in all.

Without a doubt, Acapulco is tremendously important for the country because of its natural potential and as a source of foreign exchange income. Nonetheless, it is beset by problems that transcend those normally associated with tourism. It suffers from the effects of anarchic

growth produced by the unrestrained, entrepreneurial drive in the tourist industry and the politics of planning for the port.

Acapulco produces close to a thousand tons of garbage a day, about 1 kilo per inhabitant (in Mexico City, the daily production per person is 722 grams). Yet the city has only 40 garbage trucks and 4 open-air dumps, without sanitary filling. In addition, according to data from the Planning Office of the Ministry of Agriculture and Hydraulic Resources, the rivers that empty into the bay dump some 44,000 metric tons of total solids into it, of which 560 are oils and fats.

Last September 8, the Minister of Urban Development and Ecology, Manuel Camacho Solís, announced a series of measures to clean up the Bay and the Black Lake of Puerto Marquez. Administered through the Ministry's Acapulco Bay Program, close to \$9 million (U.S.) will be invested in the clean-up project. Included are the construction and rehabilita-

tion of the 120 kilometer-long drainage system. At the same time, he announced the closing of the Pacific Cellulose Plant, the major polluter of the Papagayo River, principal source of potable water for the Acapulco area.

Despite these official measures to bring the bay's pollution problem under control, the difficulties related to the unprogrammed growth of a vacation-center city continue to multiply. For example, some 40% of the population doesn't have access to the sewage system. According to Alfonso Ciprés Villarreal, architect, President of the Mexican Ecological Movement and coordinator of a multi-disciplinary study on pollution in the Bay, the problem is very serious. He explains, "Acapulco is a closed and shallow bay, where the natural exchange of waters takes some 5 to 15 years. Thus, it is urgent to treat the sewage waters before they enter the Bay. And artificial means are needed to speed its water exchange process, using mechanical systems with injectors or water jets to



Uncontrolled urban development is leading to the ruin of a tourists' paradise

Photo by Sergio Dorantes

ecology

move the water out into the open sea."

There are 273 hotels with a total of 17,000 rooms in Acapulco. The hotels, together with the restaurants, pour some 5 tons of concentrated detergents into the Bay each year, the by-product of their efforts to keep their installations clean and their services hygienic. According to the above mentioned study, in just 13 years, these residues could totally destroy the marine flora and fauna in the area.

The fact that Acapulco is so close to Mexico City (just 418 kms.) is an important factor in the rapid increase of national tourism to the bay area. Most of the people from the capital who go there on vacation have never read the official material on the ecological situation, and therefore are not yet conscious of the importance of preserving our non-renewable resources. Just between 1970 and 1980, the total number of tourists, national and international, increased by more than 50%.

By 1975, some 45% of Acapulco's economically active population, was employed in the service sector, in large part because of the tourist industry's capacity to generate

jobs. This situation has attracted large numbers of job-seekers to the area. Yet the industry has not been able to absorb all of the influx, and slowly but surely Acapulco is becoming a city of tremendous contrasts, between those who use or benefit from the great concentration of services and those who are seriously marginalized.

The result is the anarchic use of soil resources, the oversaturation of existing transportation systems and constant displacements of the population. The *Renacimiento* neighborhood project reflects many of these problems. Plagued by irregularities since it was established on nationally expropriated lands in 1978, this urban housing project, according to Cipres Villarreal, "is less functional than any other one like it, anywhere in the world, both in relation to the deceptive way in which people were pushed out of their human communities and to their relocation into a swamp. Now *Renacimiento* is just one more ecological problem and one more urban development problem for Acapulco. They will have to totally reurbanize and relocate service areas such as markets, schools and administrative offices."

In fact, the Acapulco Trusteeship, a body made up of federal, state and local authorities to promote the city's economic and social development, issued a study which acknowledges that since 1983 "the attraction of significant migration to the area has produced chaotic urban growth and meant that equipment and infrastructure are inadequate to satisfy residents' needs. Urban under-

range from water pollution to irrational industrial and agricultural development to overpopulation and unsatisfied housing needs. Once again, Ciprés Villarreal's comments are to the point, "The poisoning of a bay is irreversible when it happens in an integral fashion...thus, we are interested in specific solutions for social and ecological problems. Above all else, we need environmental education



Photo by Sergio Dorantes

Overpopulated beaches call for visionary sanitary policies

development is serious, the differences between residents and visitors, extreme. Social injustice is a daily fact of life."

The current state government is hoping to promote more rapid industrial growth, with the idea that local industries could meet some of the demand for industrial products (beds, mattresses, milk products, etc.) generated by tourism. Government feasibility studies show that Acapulco has a large enough industrial base to warrant the construction of an "industrial park." Nonetheless, within the existing development framework, such a measure will probably exacerbate the area's pollution problems.

There are many problems to be faced in the Acapulco bay and port area. They

for officials and hotelkeepers, and we must integrate the interests of all those involved in the problem. More than an ecological matter, it is a problem of social organization."

Perhaps we need to turn back the clock to the moment when this quiet fishing village began its dizzying transformation into the country's most important tourist center. Perhaps, that way, by learning from past mistakes, tourism, the so-called "non-polluting industry," could continue to be the base for this invaluable economic enclave and to support integrated development for a population that lives along one of the world's most beautiful beaches. ★

Ernesto Rojas



Photo by Sergio Dorantes

The bay still beautiful from afar, but closer up