

Homero Aridjis

ECOLOGICAL DESOLATION

Author of 20 books of poetry, Homero Aridjis founded the “Group of 100” artists and intellectuals in 1985, in an effort to wage battle against Mexico City’s worsening pollution problems. Two years later, he accepted the United Nations Environmental Global 500 award on behalf of the Group. He is also the editor, with Fernando Césarmen, of an upcoming anthology of poetry, essays and artwork by the Group of 100 entitled, *Urban Ecocide: A Chronicle of Mexico City*.

I grew up in a village where there were no elephants, tigers, lions or dolphins but the knowledge of their existence nourished my childhood imagination. When a traveling circus came to town, I was fascinated by the elephants, so much so that I suffered when I learned that they were being killed in Africa and India. How strange it is; we respect the masterpieces in the Louvre or the Metropolitan Museum of Art but we don’t respect the masterpieces of nature.

The herds of mammoths and mastodons that once roamed Mesoamerica surely grazed near my village. More recently, however, it has been the seasonal home for millions of monarch butterflies. During the winters of my childhood, the sky would be aflame with red, orange, yellow and black as the butterflies swarmed through the village in search of water. The monarchs would light in the fir trees on a hill near my home and completely transform the landscape. I waited for the butterflies as if their arrival marked the beginning of a prolonged fiesta; as I might look forward to the visit of a favorite relative.

During the fourteen years I lived abroad, working in the diplomatic service and teaching, I made a point of returning every winter to my village, and each year I was able to observe the thinning of the woods as the trees were cut down for firewood. As their resting place was increasingly threatened, the butterflies became fewer and fewer. The images that had fed my childhood were being destroyed and I felt that it was my own childhood that was being killed, that my memory of a natural beauty that had once overwhelmed me was being ravaged.

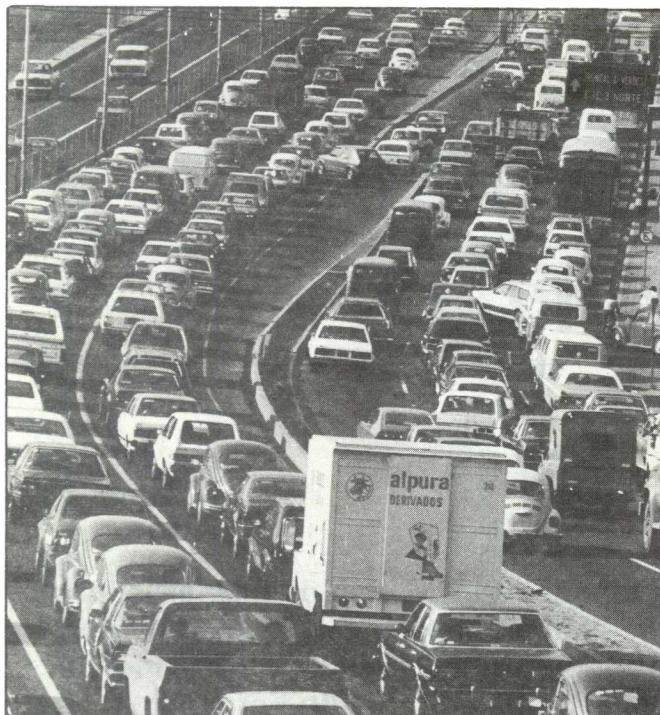
The possibility of my village becoming a wasteland, a silent country without wind in the trees or animal sounds or bird songs, makes me feel desperate. Such disrespect for nature humiliates me as a human being; it makes me feel like a stranger in the place of my birth.

If a woman who inspires great poetry dies, something of our own humanity dies with her. It is the same with the environment; inspiration for poets, painters and composers has always come from nature. Humans don’t seem to grasp a quintessential concept: What is destructive to the environment is ultimately destructive to ourselves.

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I realize that if people are hungry, it’s hard for them to worry about the preservation of natural resources. The problem is that the abuses of natural resources and the abuses of people are intertwined: Those who abuse nature also abuse people. Ecological destruction is a social crime and it is almost always a lie that the leveling of a forest or the building of a dam will bring economic benefit to the local people. What good is economic well-being when the ecosystem has been undone, the land has become uninhabitable and the people living on it have become pariahs?

Poet, President of the Group of 100.



Automobiles are responsible for 80 percent of pollution in Mexico City. Photo by Herón Alemán/Imagenlatina

Our planet is finite, our resources limited. Perhaps it is because I am a poet and have a mystic side that I feel the Earth is a living organism and that we —humans, plants, animals— are its creations. When the Earth moves, as it did in the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, we understand that it is alive and we are forced to acknowledge our dependence upon it.

The clichéd notion of Mother Earth is true; it is millenarian wisdom. We must admit this and live within the boundaries of the relationship because there is no life separate from it. The task of poets, and of holy men, is to tell this planet's stories and to articulate an ecological cosmology that does not separate nature from humanity. One of the most important stories to tell is that of Mexico City.

The Compromised Land

Before the arrival of the Europeans, Mexico was home to many advanced civilizations. Twenty-three thousand years ago, nomadic tribes hunted in the valley that now supports Mexico City. Today, it is among the first places on the planet to face imminent ecological collapse.

Here, the natural seasons have lost their names.

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We no longer speak of "winter, spring, summer, fall". It is now "thermal inversion season", "dust storm season", the "season of acid rain", and the "ozone season". We are even beginning to name illnesses after our pollution problems. I was recently in a government office and a clerk, who sounded like he had a very bad cold, told me he was suffering from "inversión térmica" —thermal inversion sick-

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ness. Complicated scientific terms have now become common currency.

Life itself —animal, plant and human— is in grave danger. Our city is a modern-day laboratory and we are guinea pigs who are helping the world discover that lead and other components in gasoline provoke cerebral lesions when absorbed into the blood stream; that atmospheric poisoning causes birds to fall out of the sky; that the contaminated air breathed by pregnant women sends toxic levels of lead into the forming brains of the unborn.

Mexico City began on a few islands in the middle of Lake Texcoco. The Aztecs, who were looking for the Promised Land, arrived there and saw a predestined sign —an eagle perched on a cactus with a writhing snake in its beak. Now, that sign is immortalized on our national flag but we live in the ruins, in an arid city, and the golden eagle is in danger of extinction. The lakes have been sucked dry, the rivers turned into underground sewers, and we have to pump water, 40 cubic meters per second, from farther and farther away. Ironically, the city whose economy and transportation systems depended on water is now going to die for the lack of it.

Ecological deterioration not only affects air and water, it also leads to aesthetic degradation. When the Spanish conquistadors arrived in the 16th century they were fascinated by the beauty of the valley, the volcanos, the lakes, and the clarity of the air and the light.

The Aztecs whom the Spanish encountered were called Children of the Sun. Today, we can't even see the sun, and the children that are being born, brain damaged in the womb by lead poisoning, are now being called the Generation of Idiots. In their drawings, kindergarten pupils color the sky gray.

We know the volcanos are out there but we see them only rarely, and if we do see them, we have to worry because it's a sign of severe thermal inversion. When the pollution sinks low one has a sharply etched view of the volcanos but breathing, particularly for the elderly and the young, can be deadly.

THE LOST FOREST

With the destruction of 130,000 hectares of jungle in the state of Quintana Roo due to the recent forest fire (the worst in the history of the country), the ecological balance of jungle areas is close to being destroyed. According to a letter sent to the President of the Republic by the Group of 100 (composed of Mexican intellectuals, artists and writers), 100,000 acres of jungle in Chiapas and 250,000 acres of jungle in Guerrero, Michoacán, Colima and Jalisco are lost each year.

In the report "The State of Nature", the Group of 100 said that "the principal factors in the devastation of the country's ecosystems are the uncontrolled logging of forests and jungles, the extensive conversion of more than 220 million acres to pastureland (at least 37 million acres were tropical jungle, temperate forests or natural deserts 20 years ago), and the practice of slash-and-burn (which turns deforested land into pastureland, completing the circle of ecological imbalance). To the previous plagues, one must add the clear-cutting carried out constantly by official development and colonization projects. We must also mention the criminal forest fires that sweep through Mexico's forests each year just before the rainy season begins — fires that quickly reach epidemic proportions (last year alone, more than 320,000 acres of forests were burned and there were days on which some part of almost every woodland in Mexico was in flames). These fires happen without any public official being able to prevent them, put them out or punish the arsonists."

Mexican jungles are disappearing more rapidly all the time. Now it takes one year to destroy an area which previously was destroyed in 50 years. At this rate, for example, the Lacandon Jungle in the state of Chiapas on the border with Guatemala is in danger of disap-

pearing in the next five or ten years. Even though there are government decrees to protect this jungle and mark the areas of ecological reserves, the area has been affected by oil well drilling, the construction of hydro-electric dams, logging companies, the use of single-crop agriculture, extensive cattle grazing and overpopulation.

Wildlife is also being exterminated. The natural habitats of such species as the jaguar, ocelot, margay cat, puma, tapir, otter, and the spider monkey are progressively disappearing. The absence of the natural habitat makes the survival of fauna impossible. The golden eagle —the national symbol— is virtually extinct in Mexico. The Group of 100 considers that the affected species are victims of uncontrolled hunting, destruction of habitat, pollution and illegal trafficking. Other species are close to disappearing: the harpy eagle (the largest bird of prey in the world) and the imperial woodpecker of the north (the world's largest woodpecker) as well as the quetzal, the horned guan and the great curasow. The plight of Mexico's parrots, macaws and toucans is also critical.

The biological diversity of Mexico, considered to be among the five richest in the world, is at stake. The group of 100 proposes the creation of a government entity which would be responsible for the protection of strategic environmental areas, the prohibition of illegal human settlements in forest and tropical jungles, and the modification of the Agrarian Reform Law to establish correct use of land.

"Mexico," says the letter, "is on the brink of ecological disaster. Mr. President, do not let this happen. The government as well as citizens must participate in the conservation and defense of our natural resources, because of our love for Mexico."

Our city has become an amoeba that has run amok and is undermining its own sustenance. It is eating its host and destroying everything within reach.

In the psychological stages of cancer the first is denial, the second is a kind of vague awareness, and the third is an acute awareness that calls for radical treatment. We need emergency treatment, but no one moves. The government tries to cure the cancer with aspirins and cosmetic surgery. The officials, with their grandiose propositions and promises, often have neither the moral, technical, or economic capacity to deal with the problem.

My play, *Spectacle of the Year 2000*, dramatizes the overwhelming population burden and the incredible strain on city resources at the end of the millennium. In many ways, however, the future has arrived. Already the largest urban area in the world, the city's growth shows no signs of abating. One thousand people a day pour into the valley looking for work because the rural economy has been sacrificed in favor of urban industrial development. People must move in human packages, creating human traffic jams. If one rides the metro during rush hour, in a city that is trying to move 20 million people from point A to point B every day, one can appreciate what it is like to be part of a human package; one will feel the future.

There is a lot of rhetoric that the economic crisis,

the foreign debt and unemployment are the principle obstacles to an effective struggle against environmental damage. But there is always money for widening or narrowing sidewalks, for painting dividing lines on the streets, for congressional campaigns, and for endless forums and repetitive speeches on pollution.

The environmental pollution problem reflects the pollution of the political system and it will not be solved unless we effect political changes. There must be more democracy, more plurality of political parties and respect for the citizen. The government is not accustomed to listening to the people. Since officials' careers are not affected by elections and their positions do not depend on electoral deci-

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sions, they have no need to respond to the people. Once a politician enters the system, he is virtually guaranteed lifetime employment, unless he somehow violates the internal code of the system itself. The government has the authority to control ecological deterioration through laws, regulations and strict enforcement, but it has done relatively little thus far.

In fact, the worst polluter is the government because many of the major offenders — the refineries, thermo-electric facilities and fertilizer plants, for example— are state-owned. The public buses are another glaring source of pollution and the fact that nothing has been done to maintain them is an insult to the population. How long will we be able to survive our daily ration of carbon dioxide, sulfur, fecal dust, ozone, noise, gastro-intestinal illnesses, eye ailments, respiratory problems and skin infections?

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Perhaps the greatest problem, however, is that we still have our daily lives, even under the deadly weight of pollution. Children still attend school, through they come home with headaches and nausea. We still go to work, though the transportation system can't possibly keep up with population growth. Our sense of time, of the seasons and of the future has been completely warped by pollution, but the vast majority of people carry on as if nothing had changed.

Certainly, the government has a responsibility to preserve the environment but so do the citizens. Yet, our people have been both passive and apathetic. In many ways, the citizens are to blame for the political, economic and environmental crisis because, until recently, they did not question the actions of the politicians. Pollution is the great equalizer. We all breathe the same air, there are equal amounts of contaminants for all of us.

Custodians of Future Generations

In a country where politicians often lack credibility, it is up to the artists and intellectuals to take an ethical stance on important issues. Since their constituency is transcendent, they are frequently at odds with immediate interests and can act as custodians for future generations.

In March 1985, I formed a group of artists and intellectuals, which came to be known as the Group of 100, and worked to get the lead content in gasoline reduced. One year later, the new, reduced-lead gasolines were introduced with great fan-fare. But



Industries such as these still function in Mexico City. Photo by Herón Alemán/Imagenlatina

the day after the new gas went on the market we had a severe ozone problem in the valley. Pemex, the national oil and gas company, had merely substituted the lead components with other toxins. So, we won but we lost.

The strategy of the Group of 100 is to stop the immediate destruction of the environment. For example, we stopped the construction of four electric dams on the Usumacinta River between Guatemala and Mexico. The proposed project would have flooded 500 square miles of jungle, including the largest remaining tropical rain forest in North America, destroyed two of the most historically important archaeological sites of the Mayan civilization, and delivered the coup de grace to the remnants of the Lacandon Indian culture. We also forced the government to halt distribution in Mexico of 7,000 tons of powdered milk that had been contaminated by nuclear radiation at Chernobyl. We discovered the government's purchase and denounced it publicly so that the officials were forced to send the milk back.

As in times of war, each day we hear of new casualties. We are losing the jaguar, the ocelot, the puma, the tapir, the spider monkey, the black bear, the pronghorn antelope, the bighorn sheep, the marlin, parrots, macaws, and toucans. In fact, it is difficult to name a species whose survival is not threatened. Not even rattlesnakes, tarantulas and scorpions escape human plunder. Anything that moves and brings a buck is exported from Mexico to willing buyers in the United States.

So, we have losses and we also have small victories. Sometimes it's not what one can do but what one can stop that matters the most. The struggle is so important. It is the struggle for life itself. □

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