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**EXPOSURE TOUR WITH INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL
ORGANIZATIONS COSTA RICA REPORT
December 6-13 2009**

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**EXPOSURE TOUR WITH INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS
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**I. EXPANSION OF PINNEAPPLE MONOCULTURES IN THE ATLANTIC ZONE
II. EXPANSION OF REAL ESTATE AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE NORTH
PACIFIC**

The tour was carried out with funds from Friends of the Earth International (FoEI) with the goal to create links among communities in the Atlantic impacted by the expansion of pineapple plantations as well as communities affected by tourism development in the North Pacific, with organizations working on similar topics from Honduras, Guatemala, USA and the UK.

The exposure tour was attended by Darcey O'Callaghan, from Food and Water Watch in the United States; José Mauro Cosojol from the community of San Juan Sacatepéquez in Guatemala, Teresa Reyes from Honduras and Matt Cape from Bananalink in England. Mauricio Álvarez from the Association of Social Ecology (AESO) with Mariana Porras and Javier Baltodano from COECOceiba (FoE Costa Rica) accompanied the tour in the Atlantic region and Grace García and Isaac Rojas (COECOceiba) were present on the North Pacific tour.

The attendees came to Costa Rica on December 6th and on the 7th they had an introductory speech given by COECOceiba on Costa Rican reality. We shared our views on the state of things in the country as well as on the work that each of the organizations do in the different countries and the expectations about the exposure tour ahead. There was an obvious contradiction, especially for people who do not live in Costa Rica, between the international discourse employed by the government and the reality of the country: while it claims to protect the environment, every day it is further destroyed. The tour helped to get acquainted with this deep contradiction and to find out that this discourse is used as propaganda that seeks to attract foreign investors to the country.

Additionally on this day, December 7th, they accompanied the act of recognition that several environmental organizations (FECON, COECOceiba and CEDARENA) gave to colleagues that have been victims of criminalization, because of their activism in the environmental movement. Similarly, we celebrated the life of Oscar Fallas, Maria del Mar Cordero, Jaime Bustamante and David Maradiaga who were killed fifteen years ago.

Exposure tour in the Atlantic

Tuesday December 8

Carlos Arguedas, secretary of Occupational and Environmental Health of the Workers Union of Agricultural Plantations (SITRAP) welcomes the group and provides a briefing on the situation in the region and the work of the union. Next, Mauricio Alvarez (who also works for

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the Environmental Kiosks at the University of Costa Rica) talked about the situation of pineapple in the region.

SITRAP is a union representing the workers of plantations, which began as a movement for the banana trade workers. It has several working areas among which the struggle for freedom of association and collective bargaining, better conditions for workers in agriculture, environment, rights of migrants, legal work, national and international relations, fair trade with freedom of association, women's rights to fair wages and decent conditions, among others. The union works in the province of Limon.

In addition, SITRAP fights to curb the pollution of pineapple plantations, mainly in water sources that supply several communities of Limon. Two years ago the communities of Luisiana, El Cairo, La Francia and Milano in the canton of Siquirres, witnessed the pollution of their potable waters with several chemicals that have been used by the pineapple company of Hacienda Ojo de Agua (which owns 1500 hectares). Another of the affected communities is La Perla, whose water supply has been poisoned by pesticides from the company Tico Verde.



Photo 1. Agrochemical Storage facility. Babilonia Farm. Siquirres, Limon.

Currently, the Secretary of Occupational and Environmental Health of SITRAP, Carlos Arguedas Mora, faces a lawsuit by the company Hacienda Ojo de Agua for about US\$20,000.00. The lawsuit is based on alleged defamation to the company since he requested before the authorities of Siquirres -on February 16th, 2009 - a moratorium on the expansion of pineapple plantations while denouncing the pollution done to the water sources that feed about six thousand people.

Several studies show how the pineapple companies in the area have not respected the restrictions where there are water springs, in addition to the fact that the areas planted to pineapple in the Siquirres region have more capacity for aquifer recharge but also the soil conditions that facilitate drainage. These areas are part of the basin of the Peje and Destierro rivers. Water springs of Milan and El Cairo in Siquirres suffer the pollution since 1995, despite warnings that the Costa Rican Institute of Aqueducts and Sewers (AyA), the institution responsible for water management, made on the possible pollution of water sources to these communities. Pineapple crops in the country employ various chemicals and among the most used is bromacil, which is a herbicide used to control perennial weeds and classified as relatively persistent in soil. Its half-life is more than one hundred days and in some cases can be higher. It also has a high tendency to leach and contaminate groundwater. It is classified as possibly carcinogenic by the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency of the United States) and has been banned in several countries such as Germany, Belize, Slovenia and Sweden due to the impact on health and the environment. In 2007 the Institute for Studies on Toxic Substances (IRET), at the National University (UNA), confirmed the presence of bromacil, in addition to other two agrochemicals: diuron and tradimefon. It is for this reason that the AyA

suspended water supply for the people from the springs and instead sends tankers to supply water. The locations affected are in Cairo, La Francia, Milano and Luisiana. This situation exists even today: the problem has not been resolved after two years and eight months. It is estimated that the total cost of this operation over all this time is about US\$800,000.00. Other communities not connected to the grid use wells that are also contaminated, such as Calle, La Paz and Trinidad.

Another problem experienced by the inhabitants of this region is the pest of pineapple fly (*Stomoxys calcitrans*) that feeds by sucking the blood of animals like cattle and humans. The fly has deteriorated the health of livestock by evident weight loss and reduced breastfeeding. According to different studies, the cause of this plague is the mismanagement of waste straw from the pineapple because it produces hundreds of tons per hectare in each crop.

It was also important to learn that the pineapple plantations that cause the most damage are certified by international certification organizations, which make consumers in the U.S. and Europe believe that all is well.

Visit to the community of El Cairo in Siquirres and meeting with the Association of Women and the Environmental Committee

What can you tell a person who eats pineapple in Europe? A female participant in the hearing said: "Every time you eat a piece of sweet pineapple remember that it is nothing, compared with the bitter pain we suffer."

The community of El Cairo is one of those affected by water pollution with bromacil. In May of this year, the Environmental Tribunal reported on the results of an analysis conducted in the waters of the area by the IRET, where bromacil was detected at 8.4 micro-grams per liter of water. This is eight times the level of 0.6 micro-grams per liter allowed in the USA and also much higher than the 0.8 micro-grams per liter by the AyA found in the same waters two years ago. However, the current Health Minister Maria Luisa Avila visited the community and said that the water is not contaminated and urges people to take it, notwithstanding the results obtained by the IRET. There seems to be a difference between physicians working in the community and those who do it for the pineapple companies. The latter simply provide some medication to relieve pain and never attack the causes, so the ills continue and deepen.



This community has witnessed other problems: sixteen years ago the first pineapple plantation was established and from there on there has been an increase in cases of cancer (in colon, stomach, skin), asthma and vision problems as well as numerous cases of rashes that primarily affect boys and girls. In this situation, the Association for the Management of Aqueducts and Sewer Systems (ASADA) has filed lawsuits to AyA, the National Environmental Technical Secretariat (SETENA) and the Ministry of Environment,

Photo 2. Caution sign warning about the use of agrochemicals presence. Hacienda Ojo de Agua, Siquirres

Energy and Telecommunications (MINAET) without any response yet. Similarly, there is much concern about health: the community is tired of taking water from the tanks and besides this does not ensure no-contact with contaminated water, since people bathe with water from the grid. Moreover, in schools they no longer collect water from the tankers so the children consume contaminated water. There is therefore profound indignation as companies continue to violate environmental measures provided for in national legislation, such as the respect for the springs and the government does nothing for the people and the communities.

This visit showed us the typical neoliberal model: rural lands are being taken by transnational capital, which offer employment, social improvement ... but the offers never materialize.

Wednesday December 9: Pineapple plantation visit

We visited two plantations, one located to the south of Route 32 and the community of El Cairo. The other one, which belongs to Dole, also located south of Route 32 at the height of the community of Milano. In both we observed several situations:

- both plantations add up to several thousand hectares and are located upstream of the inlets of the rural aqueduct of the communities of El Cairo and Milan. The plantation area corresponds to the aquifer recharge area of these springs and the area is unprotected and crisscrossed by drainage channels that facilitate rapid transit of polluted runoff to the site of the headwaters;



Photo 3. Pineapple expansion into the Highlands.

- there is regular application of toxics, as the companies themselves specify through road signs;
- there are large stocks of pesticides a few hundred meters away from rural water facilities;



- the working conditions are very harsh to the employee according to interviews we had with some of them: they are forced to work shifts of more than eight hours a day within just sprayed plantations. Often the shifts take place during extremely high temperatures in the pineapple fields;

Photo 4. Pineapple workers protect themselves from the sun and agrochemicals.

- there is a southward expansion of pineapple plantations on hillsides at the foot of the Talamanca mountain range. We saw machinery tilling large areas of land on steep slopes.

Visit to the community of Milano and meeting at the ASADA facilities with community leaders, including representatives from the Development Association, Association for the Management of Rural Water Supply and environmental organizations.

The area planted to pineapple is the one with more recharging capacity in the aquifer zone of Guacimo and Milano, which implies the water sources that supply the community have been contaminated with bromacil and seventeen other types of chemicals. A resolution of May 19th, 2009, of the Environmental Administrative Tribunal (EAT) proves it, and the same document orders the immediate suspension and closure of activities of the pineapple packing plant of the Agricultural Development Corporation Del Monte SA; based on tests conducted by the Environmental Analysis Laboratory of the National University (UNA), which confirmed a high incidence of bromacil and other agrochemicals in the wastewater discharged into the Destierro river and towards the springs used by the populations of Milano, El Cairo and La Francia. In the tests, there were 4.8 micro-grams per liter of bromacil in the headwaters of Milano. The maximum allowed in the United States, according to the EAT, is 0.6 micro-grams per liter.

Because of the high level of bromacil in the water, the community of Milano took to the streets and blocked Route 32 that leads from San Jose to Limon to protest the abuse of their rights. Despite the results of a study by the IRET, the requests of the community for the right to consume safe drinking water and the various protests, the Ministry of Health has not acted. Despite all, in June the EAT authorized the reopening of the plant's operations from Del Monte, under the condition that no wastewater will be discharged into the river or into the headwaters of Milan, however the damage is already there, and besides there has been an increased expansion of pineapple plantations and therefore a great damage to water bodies, springs, wetlands, rivers and streams, in full view of the authorities, are polluted day by day, and forest cover is removed.

The community is strongly requesting a halt to the expansion of pineapple plantations and that the companies stop using chemicals such as bromacil, diuron and tradimefon, among others. The community is tired of not being able to have water in their homes and of suffering from skin diseases, asthma and other ailments. Health problems are constant, many people are not receiving appropriate treatment from health authorities and they have had to resort to private medicine, which is very expensive.

Currently, the planting of pineapple in this area is done in a very aggressive manner: pineapple plants naturally provide one harvest a year. However, companies in the area harvest up to thrice in one year with the help of heavy doses of agrochemicals.

One concern of the people who live in this community is that this cash crop is currently the main source of employment. However, during the visit, people reflected whether this was rather fictitious because it is not so in the long term. Pineapple is a crop that remains in a field for about thirty or forty years, because of the type of intensive soil management it receives, leaving only barren places to grow. The community recognizes the urgency of reviving farming based on the cultivation of all types of products in organic plots, ensuring environmental

protection and food sovereignty. It is recognized that pineapple monocultures cannot operate without these levels of pesticide application, and so the communities are demanding that the pineapple plantations recede and that the land is distributed through the Agrarian Development Institute (IDA) in rural settlements that can generate a local and sustainable economy.



Photo 5. Typical Siquirres landscape. Many of the remaining forests have been destroyed due to the pineapple activity.

Exposure tour of the Northern Pacific

This tour took place between the 10-12 of December and was coordinated with the Social Pastoral of the Diocese of Tilaran. Ronald Vargas and Juan Felix Castro were there for the entire tour and Elena Araya could also be on a visit to Ostional.



Photo 6. Northern Pacific Landscape, bordered by beautiful beaches. Today these places are being threatened by big hotels chains.

Guanacaste has been an experiment in Costa Rica on what to do with the tourism sector for the last thirty years. An open-hands policy has been enacted in the whole world and thus, policies to attract investment and provision of various benefits have been granted. Guanacaste has a huge presence of hotels and various tourist projects that have led to numerous social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts. In this way many natural resources have been lost throughout the province.

During the tour, we visited three experiences in three different regions of Guanacaste. The three show various stages of progress in each of the projects:

La Cruz

The community, bordering with Nicaragua, has beautiful beaches that are being claimed by investors of Nicaraguan and Costa Rican capital. This region has been characterized by struggles for land reclamation and against big landowners. Today, they still commemorate Gil Tablada, a peasant leader who was killed in the struggle for land.

María Auxiliadora, a community leader, explained that Puerto Soley, a coastal community near La Cruz, is being evicted to make way for a great investment that aims to build tourist accommodations. The investor group is from Nicaragua and Costa Rica and the project would include not only Puerto Soley but also a part of Nicaraguan territory. The community would be relocated to a site about two kilometers from its current site and away from the beach more than eight hundred meters, which would create an obstacle for a large majority of families engaged in artisanal fishery. There is a triple negative impact: the access to beaches for fishing will be lost, leading to higher unemployment -because those that are created are given to illegal immigrants who work for less money-, and water and land would be lost.



Photo 7. One of the main activities of the area is artisanal fishery, threatened by the construction of big hotels.

This conflict is at an intermediate stage: the community has been threatened indirectly to vacate their territory and land movements are being made on the site where they are intended to be relocated. The community works with the Social Pastoral to defend their rights and has established some control strategies. They know that the political power of government is not on their side.

Sardinal

Alberto, Ligia, Pilar and Yanory from the Sardinal Committee recalled how an investor group, in partnership with the local government, proposed a project to draw water from Sardinal towards touristic projects (condos, villages and hotels) which would cause negative impacts in terms of potable water supply to meet the basic needs of the population. This caused the community to organize and stop, through street actions, the looting of their water. The Committee remains on alert because they know that the interest to take over water is powerful and there will be new attempts in trying to achieve that goal.

During the conversation the invitees from the different countries shared similar experiences in their countries where communities have had to organize to defend their water, and other resources and how these strategies have worked. It is known that these powerful

interests, to which the government is an ally, do not rest and always seek to divide the community offering gifts, exerting pressure and using psychological violence. They also make use of a whole institutional framework that fails to defend national interests.

Later we visited, together with the Committee, a new hotel facility installed within walking distance of Sardinal. Hotel Riu, of Spanish capital, is a huge infrastructure that has caused enormous damage to the mangroves and coral reefs, the situation faces complaints before the national judicial authority.

Ostional

The Ostional community is under pressure from investors and the government to vacate the territory in which they have lived for many years.

Ostional is located in the Costa Rican Pacific. It is a small seaside community known worldwide for the large number of turtles that come to nest and for the conservation work that the community does. In 1966 the State granted various property titles to peasant families that, in some cases, had settled there since the beginning of the twentieth century. Each month, thousands of ridley turtles come to lay their eggs in Ostional, and the community has been organized since 1987 under the project "Rational utilization, conservation and management of the olive ridley sea turtle eggs" through the Association for Integral Development of Ostional with the support of the University of Costa Rica. In this way, the community fights against people who come to pouch turtle eggs, protect the species and take advantage of the eggs. This is the main economic activity on which much of the community depends. Ostional is also a wildlife refuge.

The exploitation of turtle eggs is an activity that has managed to preserve the ridley turtles: given the large number of turtles that arrive each month to lay their eggs, if the first eggs are not removed, the following turtles may destroy them and they will not lay theirs in the best possible way. In November 2001, a newspaper article said that one million two hundred and seventy thousand turtles arrived in Ostional during October. In 2005, the official newspaper La Gaceta published the regulations for public use and there are several technical documents stating that human activity has been important for turtle conservation. Ostional is one of the few places in the world where every year more turtles come, contrary to others where every year the number of turtles decreases. Among those who study the turtles, the Ostional project is exemplary and well known in the world.

Nonetheless, since a few years ago, officials from the Ministry of Environment, Energy and Telecommunications (MINAET) have waged a war against the community: overruling actions of the Association of Integral Development and its leaders; initiating legal actions against community works and, despite the will of the community, taking distance from any dialogue. The Ministry has submitted ideas for reforming Ostional that have been rejected by the community. However, due to a ruling by the Constitutional Court, the community will be expelled from Ostional starting January 2010.

This community is part of the *Coalition of Communities threatened by Policies and Politicians*, an organization that brings together diverse communities facing similar situations in the country and which has submitted a bill to secure their territories. On January 13th, 2010, these communities made a new march to demand the authorities the adoption of this bill.

In this context, an intentional fire in Gilberth Rojas' home takes place. He has been for many years president of the Association of Development and has raised his voice about the proximity of tourism investors before some local authorities of MINAET. This attempt occurred on the night of December 6th and left Gilberth and his family without a home, household goods and car. He suffered some minor burns and last December 12th he told us what happened because he could save himself, his wife and three German volunteers from the fire.



Photo 8. Don Gilberth Rojas' home, after the intentional fire just a few days before our visit.

The three cases from Guanacaste show the various stages in the struggle for the seizure of communal territories: an initial stage where the threats are strong and frequent (Ostional), an intermediate stage where the community is accompanied by the work of other communities and organizations and can resist (Puerto Soley) and a community that has succeeded in its resistance but know that the threat is not extinct and may return with new strength (Sardinal).

Conclusions from the exposure tour

The situations faced by the affected communities are not exclusive of Costa Rica: in Guatemala they have suffered repression and killings as well as in Honduras in similar conflicts. It is important therefore, to share experiences and strategies that have worked as the use of international instruments and forums to join the resistance exerted locally. In this sense, the tour as a whole was a useful exchange that helped view local struggles not as unique but rather see them in a larger context that allows the creation of stronger spaces of resistance. These areas of resistance need the accompaniment of many organizations that should not impose anything but rather build horizontally from the local level. This should occur at all levels: locally, nationally and internationally.

The tour showed the impacts of neoliberalism in practice: how it deepens the conflict over the use and ownership of lands traditionally occupied by fishing communities, rural or indigenous peoples who are first promised *heaven* in order to leave. When this first strategy fails, the threats begin even from the government who is allied with the investor who intends to develop his project. Then death can even come if it is a mean to achieve their goal. The conflicted areas visited during the tour also show how the approval of the Free Trade Agreement between the Central American governments, Dominican Republic and the United States (DR-CAFTA), has deepened the conflicts with a significant variant: that they provide tools to protect the capital.

It is not only about environmental or labor rights, but the defense of one is closely linked to the other, and therefore a holistic approach is needed to analyze any problems and provide strategies to struggle and the creation of community-based proposals that are effective and lasting.

During the visits to the communities it became evident that there was fear to oppose what the company does because they are economically dependent on it. That is, companies take advantage of the situation of impoverishment of communities, and that of migrants, and exploits and coerces them in various ways to carry out their activity. Finally, the visit also showed that certification does not work because the environmental problems and the violation of labor rights still occur every day.