



The SHARE Foundation: Building a New El Salvador Today *El Salvador Today: Advocacy Issues Series*

River Pollution Threatens the Health of Communities

"El Río Sucio", a tributary of the Lempa River, runs through the Valley of San Andres, a valley in El Salvador that was once fertile and productive. The ironically named *Río Sucio*, which means "dirty river", has been coined as such since the middle of the twentieth century, because its water appears muddy after passing through the irrigation district of Zapotitán, due to the sediment that rises to the surface. Unfortunately, today, due to the refusal of many national and multinational corporations to comply with environmental law, the Río Sucio is not just muddy, but dangerously polluted.

The pollution of the river began in the 1970's as a result of both industrial and agricultural practices. After the earthquake of 1986 that rendered serious damages to the metropolitan area of San Salvador, many of the businesses relocated in the Valley of San Andres. Companies such as Record, which manufactures car batteries, and Hilasal, a textile company, secured land for their factories through deceit of the local population. Kimberly Clark, a well known North American company that makes such popular products as Kleenex, arrived on the scene in the 1990s. Today there are 128 companies in the Valley of San Andres. Many of these companies dump chemical waste into the river without regard for the repercussions.

Today the river, once full of fish used to irrigate crops, is unable to sustain life. The pollution of the river is affecting the health of the members of nearby communities, 76% of whom rely on the river as their source of water, according to a study published by a group of chemistry students and faculty at the University of Central America. Many of these people are forced to drink this water, which is not treated or purified, because they cannot afford bottled water, or the water that is partially purified by ANDA, the national water provider. As a result of drinking the polluted water of the Río Sucio, many of these individuals are now suffering from diarrhea, rashes, and boils on the skin. In fact, 35% of these individuals suffer from respiratory problems, 26% from skin infections, and 39% from stomach diseases, all of which are likely caused by contact with and / or consumption of the polluted water (source).

The risks of pollution are not just limited to those living in close proximity to the river, or relying on it for drinking water. If water and soil are polluted, then agricultural and horticultural products will become polluted as well. In the San Andres Valley, much of which is irrigated with the polluted Río Sucio water, tilapia, milk and vegetables, among other foods, are produced and subsequently sold throughout the country. Because El Salvador has no institution responsible for food quality control, these polluted products are being consumed all over El Salvador, putting even more Salvadorans at risk from this pollution.

One individual who visited the river on a delegation with SHARE had this to say of the condition of the river: "Inappropriately my mind leapt to thoughts of Willy Wonka as the color of the water was startlingly silver-blue, the color of my DVD player but with perhaps more periwinkle thrown in." Just what exactly is in this river, turning it silver-blue, killing the fish and making those who drink it sick? A study performed in October of 2002, by SNET, the branch of the Salvadoran Ministry of the Environment that deals with water issues, examined both the subterranean and surface levels of the Río Sucio. The analysis of specimen from eighteen different wells around the basin of the Río Sucio confirmed that not one of these samples was safe to drink or use for irrigation. In addition to a high concentration of unsafe microorganisms, 100% of the samples exceeded the acceptable limit for iron and cadmium, 55% exceeded the limit for magnesium, 33% for aluminum and 88% for lead. An analysis of twenty-two

different samples from random locations on the river's path confirmed that the river was highly polluted with domestic waste material. The two main indicators of this were a high nitrogen concentration and a lack of oxygen (almost 50% less oxygen than should be present), which destroys the river's ability to biologically purify itself. Another analysis performed in 2002 by the Holland Institute of Agriculture found threatening levels of arsenic and mercury in the water

To confirm that the factories in the area were, in fact, a major source of the pollution, a study was performed by ECO Engineers of thirty-one of the factories in the Río Sucio area. It was discovered that most of these factories are dumping their unfiltered, untreated waste water directly or indirectly into the Río Sucio through small sedimentation lakes. Although the factories are not entirely to blame for the pollution (some can be attributed to the chemicals and fertilizers used in the agro-industry) the study concluded that these factories are without question responsible for the exceedingly dangerous existence of heavy metals in the river. Also, according to the study, because the installation of a water filtration system demands high investments and technical knowledge, not all factories are willing to pay for it.

The members of the communities surrounding the Río Sucio, who have been concerned about the river's pollution since the 1990s, have been trying to organize themselves and fight to protect their health and environment since 2000. With the help of the Union of Rural Communities of Northern San Salvador and La Libertad (UCRES) they joined forces with health clinics, municipal representatives and others in efforts to draw media attention to the issue. The investigations conducted by these community groups uncovered that the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources (MARN), was alerting the companies before they were to be checked for compliance with environmental standards, allowing them time to put in place a treatment plan before the inspection. By 2007 the "Movimiento Sin Plomo" (The Lead Free Movement) surfaced and, working with several other organizations, was successful in pressuring the Ministry of Health to close down the Record battery factory. The success of this movement is a tribute to the bravery and tenacity of the community groups involved.

As North Americans, it is important that we are aware of the practices of the companies that produce the things we use in our daily lives. Although local managers at the Kimberly Clark plant maintain that the operation on the banks of the Río Sucio does not endanger the environment, another SHARE delegate from Wisconsin would beg to differ. She told of watching the company discharge their waste, or in her words, a "bubbly, translucent, sickly concoction" directly into the water. After seeing this, the delegates asked to speak to representatives from Kimberly Clark, but after a half an hour of waiting and even explaining that they were constituents of one of the company's owners, they were denied access into the plant. According to Roberto Ramírez, the president of UCRES, all Salvadorans ask of Kimberly Clark is that they actively maintain the water treatment and not discharge their raw waste into the river. Sadly, according to the beneficiaries of the Agrarian Reform that live alongside the plant, Kimberly Clark has threatened not to give them drinking water if they complain about the pollution of the Río Sucio.

Please join SHARE in listening to the voices of those whose health and wellbeing are threatened by the pollution of the Río Sucio, and in holding the companies and governmental agencies involved in or complicit with its pollution responsible for their actions.

The following sources were used in this article:

1. Provily, Matthe. Results of Impartial Assesment by Dutch Development Team, San Pablo Tacachico. Nov. 2002
2. Study conducted by Julio Herrera, Engineer, Director of Chemical Agriculture lab. Nov. 11, 2002
3. Union of Rural Communities of Northern San Salvador and La Libertad. Assesment of the Pollution of the Rio Sucio. February 2007