

It rains fishmeal - Jailed for ecology in Chimbote, on Peru's stark desert coastline

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There's little celestial about the city Chimbote - except that it stinks to high heaven. But its determined citizens will risk jail to 'green' it. Stephanie Boyd went there to find out more.

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Today, like every other day, six-year-old Jorge is up to his knees in a rushing muddy-red stream of industrial wastewater. With bare hands he feels for fish remains in a stream of oil, blood, innards and various undefined chemicals spewed from a nearby fishmeal fertilizer plant.

The factory's smokestacks, emitting coils of dense, black smoke into an already gray sky, are visible above a high white wall. But Jorge keeps his eyes glued to the steady stream of poisons, pausing briefly to pry open a carcass or toss a fish head on to the bank. His cousin Katerina arranges their 'catch' to dry on the sand. Later Jorge's father will sell the sandy mixture as low-grade fishmeal in town. Sullen and timid, Jorge avoids my questions, but Katerina chats away like any inquisitive seven-year-old.

Nearby, a group of unemployed men eye me suspiciously as they direct waste water into large, muddy holes dug in the sand in which they will skim off the oil. If it were then used as machine oil this could be applauded as 'recycling' - but unfortunately many will sell it for cooking.

The city of Chimbote, some 400 kilometres north of Lima on Peru's stark desert coastline, was once a thriving fishing port. Today it is one of Peru's three most contaminated cities, with 40 fishmeal plants pumping toxins into the air, soil and water 24 hours a day. The pervasive odor of rotting fish is so pungent, thick and acrid, you not only smell Chimbote, but taste it as well. And there's no getting away from it: each breath is ripe with this foul stench as it invades every corner of the city

Chimbote's residents - nearly half of whom live in extreme poverty - complain of increased respiratory illnesses, especially amongst children. Life expectancy in the city is ten years lower than the national average. Nonetheless, Chimbote's story is one of hope, courage and resistance.

Jailed for ecology

It all started with a battle over a local 'tree nursery' - in fact a 40-hectare forested park, created in the 1950s on the outskirts of the city by Peru's Iron and Steel Company. As part of Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori's drive to privatize state-owned industry, the Nursery was placed on the

public auction block in 1993. But local people protested. They fought to preserve the nursery and won – thus inspiring subsequent environmental crusades. Today the nursery is controlled by local citizens.

Luis del Aguila, a 17-year-old university student, takes me there. Surrounded by full-grown pine trees, it's easy to forget we are in Chimbote as we explore tiny, wooded paths and throw bread to the ducks on a cool, transparent pond. Families picnic, children frolic and swim in the creek and for the first time in more than 24 hours I am not overwhelmed by the smell of rotting fish.

Soft-spoken and mature for his age, Luis explains how the group of students he leads hopes to turn the local Villa Maria wetlands – contaminated by untreated domestic and industrial waste – into a nature reserve like the Tree Nursery. Luis is currently organizing the wetland's third clean-up campaign. Over 1,000 students joined forces last time with rakes and shovels. This time Luis is hoping for 2,000.

'Isn't it beautiful – peaceful and calm?' he says as we wander through the Tree Nursery grounds. My lungs agree. Although the forest is much like any other, for Chimbote it represents half the city's 80 hectares of green space – a deficit of 420 hectares according to international guidelines. The rest of the city, even sections furthest from industry, has no trees and therefore gives no protection against the harmful effects of air pollution, let alone visual relief from the city centre's stark concrete streets lined with cheap billboards, gaudy shops and fast-food stands.

'We have no sense of culture,' complains Luis, discussing the psychological effects of industrial pollution. 'That's why it's so important to get young people involved, to make them proud of their city.'

Instilling pride and galvanizing activism is happening in Chimbote. With the aim of 're-greening' their city, a determined coalition of citizens banded together in 1996 to form the Association for the Defense and Conservation of the Environment of the Province of La Santa. Known by the more manageable acronym ADECOMAPS this broad alliance of 42 different groups – part of Peru's Local Agenda 21 initiative (see box below) – is slowly breathing new life into the ailing and unappealing city.

But ranged against Chimbote's eco-campaigners are some powerful forces – as Maria Elena Foronda found out. A fearless and vocal defender of environmental and citizens' rights, she and her husband spent 13 months in prison after launching a public-awareness campaign against pollution from the fishmeal factories.

The couple were sentenced to 20 years on 'terrorism' charges. Only persistent local and international pressure led to their release. They certainly did not have the support of Chimbote's mayor, however, who has close ties with the fishing industry and opposes the environmentalists.

Since the persecution, the city's green movement has shifted towards pressing for solutions rather than highlighting injustices. 'Now we are working not just in protests but also proposals,' says Maria Elena, who heads the environmental group Natura.

Agenda 21 in Peru

Agenda 21 was the document signed at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, outlining a 'Global Plan of Action' for sustainable development. The initiative supports the creation of local committees bringing grassroots community groups together with business and political interests to devise plans

for sustainable environmental development.

In February of 1996 ADECOMAPS, with the Cities for Living Forum, came together with the Peruvian Government's National Environment Council (CONAM) to work out Peru's Agenda 21 framework. CONAM has brought together 13 Peruvian cities with critical environmental problems to make plans at a national level.

As the process is still in its infancy, environmentalists can only hope it will lead to concrete actions and not become merely a political tool to improve the tarnished image of industry in Peru.

This is my home

Natura's technology expert, Guillermo Sanchez, is trying to get the fishmeal industry to change its ways. With 15 years' experience working in the Fisheries Ministry, he knows that a cleaner industry is possible. Currently, he is working with the few companies interested in updating their equipment. 'In two or three years the costs are usually recuperated,' he argues. Cleaner technology produces better-quality fishmeal that can command a higher price. Recycling the oil as 'crude' is another way of both increasing revenue and reducing pollution.

'Ten years ago it was impossible to talk about the environment with the fishing industry,' according to Guillermo. Today, industry representatives sit on an environment commission formed late last year by the Peruvian Government. However, most industrialists have made it clear they do not have any problem with upgrading their machinery - as long as the Government foots the bill.

Such abdication of responsibility does not wash with Maria Elena, who points to the income gap between 'millionaire owners' of the profitable industry and workers who do not earn enough to cover their family's basic needs. 'Most of the owners do not even live in Chimbote,' she complains. Industry executives have long seen Chimbote more as a convenient garbage dump than a home. Of the 278,000 people who do live in Chimbote, three-quarters reside in shanty towns near the city's factories.

Clara Temoche heads a group of health promoters in a community called April 15, created by a people's 'land invasion' on that date 15 years ago. Clara helped form their first committee to demand water, sewers and green areas. After getting nowhere with municipal authorities, she made contact with Natura which funded water and sewerage systems while the population contributed their labor.

But Clara's community has made no headway with the fishing industry. Residents planted trees in front of the Spanish-owned plant just 50 meters from Clara's house, but she says this has not brought them any favors from officials who refuse to meet with community representatives.

An outspoken defender of children's rights, her anger at the industry's lack of concern is apparent. A neighbour's child comes to play and she explains that the white rashes on the boy's face will require numerous scrubblings with lemon juice to remove the fungus. Children in her community also suffer considerably from bronchial infections and other respiratory problems.

'When it rains, it rains fishmeal,' says Clara, adding that the substance accumulates on roofs and the black soot from the factory turns white clothing black as it dries outside. But Clara is not one to give up. Instead she proudly details her community's latest plan to construct a children's center with a health post and recreational and educational facilities.

The dedication of such a diverse and talented group in Chimbote struck me repeatedly throughout my visit. 'Why do you stay?' I kept blurting out and always received the same look of genuine surprise: 'Why would we leave when there's so much to do?' My mind goes back to Clara's fellow activist Maria Elena Foronda, whose imprisonment is now emblematic of Chimbote's green movement. Even in jail she organized training sessions on subjects ranging from the environment and family planning to traditional dance. 'When my release came through and it was time to leave, it took me two hours to say goodbye to all the new friends I'd made.'

Now that she has her own family, Maria Elena's drive has grown even stronger, despite living in one of Chimbote's most polluted neighborhoods. When I ask her the familiar question - why not move to a cleaner city? - she coddles her baby girl lovingly, replying simply: 'This is my home. I'm not leaving.'

Stephanie Boyd

P.S.

* "It rains fishmeal". New Internationalist. Issue 313:

<http://newint.org/features/1999/06/05/fishmeal/>

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