
Madre Vieja: The River that Reached the Sea

Over 30 years ago, African palm came to the coastal municipalities of Tiquisate and Nueva Concepción. Both share a boundary with the Madre Vieja River, which originates high in the Quiche and Chimaltenango mountains. According to local testimonies, when oil palm arrived in the region, so did other problems. "African palm began to divert the river toward the plantations," tells Don Juan, one of the older leaders of the community movement for the liberation of the River. It is common to hear people say that for over 15 years, the river hasn't reached the sea during the dry season. "It has become a river of sand, we could walk from one side to the other. We didn't have fish and the river didn't reach the mangroves," says local peasant, Fredy A...

On February 7, 2016, banana agribusiness representatives, sugar and African palm engineers, community representatives, the Catholic Church, municipal authorities—the mayor and council members—and environmental and human rights organizations, gather at the Municipal Hall of Nueva Concepción. The communities denounce the agribusinesses' theft of water, demanding that they open the river and remove its diversions so that the river can reach its mouth and the mangroves. Their discontent is focused on the Hame Group, producer of African palm.

Months ago, one of their companies—REPSA—was accused of the worst ecocide in recent history in Guatemala: the contamination of the La Pasión River. (1) Community discontent is huge, they want water, and they want their river back. The meeting closes with an agreement, and two days later the communities will verify compliance with the agreement: that the river reach the sea and that the diversions be removed.

Two days later, a long line of people heads toward the Pinar del Río plantations—where the Hame Group has placed one of its largest diversions—to verify compliance with the agreements. Many people are in doubt, because the river has not yet reached the sea. Guatemala is the only country in Central America that does not have a water law, and Hame Group has taken advantage of this, arguing that they have a usufruct inherited from the previous company operating on the land, United Fruit Company, to use a water canal.

Upon reaching the river bank, they observe a machine supposedly meant to lower the embankment, a 200-meter border of sand that diverts the water toward the Pinar del Río canal. At this moment, Hame Group representatives explain the work, but the leaders do not believe them. The companies have promised many times before to remove the diversions from the river, and this seems like a strategy to entertain the communities and authorities. The mayor decides to cross the waters of the Madre Vieja, heading toward the machinery with dozens of community members. He demands the operator remove the embankment, while the others watch from the other side of the river. Suddenly the machine reverses, digs, and raises its metal arm full of sand, beginning to remove part of the diversion. People can see that Pinar del Río is closing, and the waters of the Madre Vieja river are clearing rising. Many applaud with joy, because the river will finally reach the sea. (2) With great euphoria they ask to verify another diversion at the La Sierra farm.

The La Sierra diversion pushes water from the river toward sugarcane and banana plantations. Here, there is no machinery, or tools like shovels or pickaxes to remove the diversion, only hands. While the sugar cane plantation company representatives explain the history of the diversion and why it was built, a sound is heard—a woman throws a stone at the mouth of the diversion, where the waters enter toward the plantations. More people join her; they throw one, two, three, hundreds of stones into the river. What they are trying to do—to block the diversion into the canal leading to the plantations with stones—seems almost impossible. After 40 minutes they achieve what seemed impossible. The waters of the Madre Vieja are once again redirected, another success. The sugarcane representatives' discomfort is evident, and they go away.

That day the communities achieve three liberations. The media, along with members of environmental organizations like Redmanglar, Cogmanglar and Utzche, release the news on social networks. In the following days, various media headlines and news report on the people's achievement: the Madre Vieja river has been freed from a long kidnapping.

The river advances slowly, but it advances, its water levels rising. On February 14th, Alfredo A. from Isla Chicales, a community located near the mangroves at the mouth of the Madre Vieja river, cannot contain his joy as he announces that the river has reached the sea, the river has reached the mangrove.

Between February and March, the community movement carries out 18 more liberations of the Madre Vieja river. In February, a Technical Committee is convened to ensure compliance with the agreements. Several meetings and visits to monitor the situation in the field take place, in which specialists from government institutions, members of the municipality, communities, and members of environmental organizations are present. The inalienable point for communities is that as long as the river reaches the sea, there can be negotiations and dialogue. After several weeks, communities decide to stop participating in the meetings, expressing that the agreements have not been fulfilled, and that the agribusiness companies do not have a clear proposal or plan.

In April, the Social and Popular Assembly organizes the great March for Water, a movement that reclaims the human right to water for communities and nature. They come from La Meilla, from Tecún Umán, from Purulhá. They call themselves "the watersheds," like the three main watersheds of our country. (3) The people of Madre Vieja join them, and later the southern watershed, made up of women from the Cajolá community, the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC, by its Spanish acronym), the Food Sovereignty Network and many other organizations and communities, joins. They form a fence with flags and sheets, displaying their slogan "rivers to the sea, rivers to the mangrove." In May, the rainy season will begin. The communities know that the river will carry water to its mouth, but for the leaders of Madre Vieja the fight is not over. Their concern now is what will happen next year.

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(1) Video by Friends of the Earth US, about contamination of the La Pasión river, based on a presentation by Saul Paau of the "Commission for the Defense of the Life and Nature of Sayaxté":

(2) View the photo report

<http://wrm.org.uy/es/otra-informacion-relevante/galeria-fotografica-madre-vieja/>

(3) "La marcha por el agua fue tremenda" by Magalí Rey

Sosa <https://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/la-marcha-por-el-agua-fue-tremenda-y-70-diputados-que-votaron-favor-del-desvio-de-rios>

