

Conference Report

by Mark J. Spalding

“Annual Meeting on the Border Environment/Encuentro Anual Sobre El Ambiente Fronterizo” March 5-7, 1998 Ciudad Juárez.

The US-Mexico border region constitutes the most populous and rapidly growing region of North America. The population in 1960 was 1 million, today it is over 11.5 million. As a result of significant in-migration to the border from both countries, we can expect this number to double by the year 2005. It is thus impossible to keep up with growth and provide adequate infrastructure. To make matters worse, in the border region there is an almost complete lack of long range planning, certainly a complete lack of ecosystem planning, and very little watershed analysis and management. New economic development is constantly added without regard to the future, its impact on natural resources, or its cumulative impact on human health. As a result, we are seeing natural resources scarcity, overuse and contamination; rising issues related to water contamination, conservation, reclamation, and prioritization of use; conflicts related to air quality; and serious concerns related to the viability of the region's many endangered species and habitats in need of preservation.

The “Annual Meeting on the Border Environment/Encuentro Anual Sobre El Ambiente Fronterizo” was the first in a series of annual meetings to bring together and begin to meet the needs of border region non-governmental and community-based organizations (NGOs and CBOs). The organizers hoped for a turnout of about 150, and instead were overwhelmed by a landmark attendance of over 400. Never before have so many organizations doing environmental work in the U.S. - Mexico border region been in the same place at the same time. The total also included some representatives from academia and from government.

The conference included panels on major environmental issues, skills-training sessions, roundtables to exchange information and experiences, and plenty of time for informal discussions. It was clear that the conference provided new information to many, and networking opportunities to all. It highlighted the similarities and differences along the border. The San Diego - Tijuana region was heavily represented not only in numbers, but also by more specialized groups than were found elsewhere along the border. In addition, the sharp differences between the resources of NGOs and CBOs in a developed nation were shown in clear contrast to those of Mexico's organizations. In other words, the border area suffers from the impact of patterns that reflect the gaps throughout the developed and the developing world.

Despite these differences, the fact that the meeting had never before been attempted, and that expected attendance was so much smaller than actual, the meeting went very

well. The panels and roundtables included topics in a number of categories. A panel on the role of universities was very interesting because it became a debate on whether universities should be competing with NGOs and CBOs for limited border funding. Another category related to advocacy tools that could be used by NGOs and CBOs such as right-to-know legislation (which is still brand new in Mexico), and other legal tools including various methodologies for conflict resolution. The NGOs and CBOs could also participate in learning how to access information and make use of binational institutions. The participants could choose from seminars on fundraising, press and publicity, and environmental education. Perhaps most important, however, was the category related to environmental topics which highlighted sharing of experiences related to dealing with indoor air pollution, micro-enterprise projects, pesticide risks, marine and coastal issues, conservation, traditional knowledge, hazardous wastes, land use, air quality, water use, and women's environmental health. The only complaint heard was that there were too many concurrent panels which prevented participants from hearing about everything they wanted to learn.

The conference was sponsored by the Ford Foundation and by C.S. Mott. These funders not only underwrote the conference, but the travel expenses of many of the NGO and CBO representatives. This was crucial for the participation of many of the representatives who barely survive on the few resources directed to dealing with the border environment condition. The sponsors have vowed to hold the meeting again next year, and discussions have focused on Tijuana or Ensenada as the host city.

The importance of this meeting should not be underestimated. For over twenty years, the debate between the developed and developing nations and their NGOs has slowed or prevented real advancement toward implementation of sustainable development. The US-Mexico border is a microcosm of this gap between the north and the south. Thus, if the differences can be overcome here, a meeting like this may become a model for the rest of the world in this context.

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