

Acción Ambiental in Peru

Background - Beginnings in Portugal

Acção Ambiental [Environmental Action] para o Barlavento, [for the western section of Portugal's Algarve], was established in 1997 when a group of neighbours became concerned about plans to build a landfill in their area. We believed that a coordinated campaign was needed and that letters to the responsible authorities from a duly constituted NGO would have more effect than those from individuals.

The landfill campaign backed by several demonstrations and a 3,000-name petition had some initial success and the Silves Mayor in whose district the project was to be built refused to authorise it. Within days, however, Lisbon dispatched Under Secretary for the Environment (and later Prime Minister) José Sócrates to the province and he soon persuaded the Mayor of the adjoining Portimão district to authorise the construction on land only a few hundred metres from the site originally proposed but within his jurisdiction.

The campaign continued and alternate sites were proposed. But the Portimão Mayor proved far more tenacious than Silves', dismissing every concern and objection raised and even producing an extraordinarily spurious 'sociological study' justifying the landfill's location. Perhaps more significant, almost everyone, whose objections were classic NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) cases, lost interest or became resigned that nothing could be done.

And they may have been right. AA took the case to the European Ombudsman pointing out that the construction contract was officially put out to bid before the technical documents had even been received from Portugal by Brussels' Environment Directorate, that the proposed landfill specifications fell far short of standard US EPA codes, that not a single request for landfill documents had been honoured in spite of Community Directives specifically entitling citizens access to such material, that alternative sites were not seriously considered and that landfill promoters ignored the on-site presence of nesting threatened raptors.

These issues were raised during the discredited Santer Commission and, perhaps for this reason, almost every point in the case was lost. Nevertheless, a geocomposite waterproofing layer was added to the single protective HDPE membrane originally specified as we had called for. But AA cannot (yet) confidently claim that this significant improvement was in any way a result of our lobbying.

With this possible exception, the three-year landfill effort was a major disappointment. Existing European legislation was consistently flouted - apart from the lack of documents, public hearings were held to satisfy Brussels (whose Cohesion Fund financed 85% of the landfill cost) but not to register, still less respond to, public concerns.

Just as disillusioning, support from almost every Portuguese NGO was minimal or non-existent. We must note, though, that the Liga pela Protecção da Natureza

{link?}, the organisation which has done most to protect the country's wildlife, was invaluable in helping AA to be formed.

During those years, we learnt much about landfills. This led us to the conclusion that after effective implementation of the three Rs, (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle), well-constructed and professionally and transparently-monitored landfills in tandem with composting of organic waste constitute the most acceptable, or least unacceptable, measure to deal with society's burgeoning waste problem.

We wanted to share our knowledge with the close-to-forty other communities in Portugal targeted to receive similar facilities following the European Commission's (absolutely correct) decision to replace the thousands of uncontrolled rubbish dumps in member states. Repeated requests for the names of communities being considered for future landfills to Quercus {link?}, Portugal's largest environmental NGO and the only one that has done extensive research on solid waste, were in vain.

AA also fought another major project during those years, the 85M Odelouca dam which proposed capturing water from the Odelouca and Monchique rivers and flooding an area of important habitat for the European Lynx, the world's most threatened feline. The dam's environmental impact study, prepared in a clear case of conflict of interest by the same consortium that would build it, minimised this threat and justified the construction on two premises - that regional water consumption was growing fast - there are over 30 separate golf courses in the province with many new ones are planned - and that traditional sources of water were polluted.

But at no point in the document was there any account of steps taken to reduce water demand or to minimise recognised leaks and waste before opting for a multimillion Euro project. Similarly, no measures to mitigate, let alone eliminate, pollution, mainly from pig farms, were contemplated. As with so many government proposals, the symptoms of a problem are tackled rather than its causes and officials opted for a far more costly response. It was disconcerting that large, veteran NGOs should not have recognised this in their own, equally critical, comments.

Change of focus

This was one of several factors which persuaded Antonio and Adriano Lambe, two of AA's officers with links to Latin America, to undertake and ultimately concentrate on new conservation efforts where needs were greater, more wildlife remained and limited resources would have a greater beneficial impact.

Exploratory trips were made to Central America with the intention of selecting and buying land for reforestation and biodiversity restoration. The need is desperate. The region is generally densely populated, very poor and desperate to extract short-term benefit from the land whatever the long-term cost. Much of what little forest remains is burnt annually - on our last road trip the shroud of smoke accompanied us every day from southern Texas to the Costa Rica - Panama border. Honduras, which has lost more than a third of its forest cover since only 1990, has suffered the greatest percentage of forest destruction of any country in Latin America. Moreover, apart from a concrete land purchase proposal from the Nature Conservancy {link?}, there

was minimal interest in our proposals from other NGOs and almost none from governments.

At a conference in Costa Rica, the director of ProNaturaleza, the largest conservation organisation in Peru, invited us to consider his country. On our first visit, it quickly became clear that in terms of geography and biodiversity Peru is extraordinarily rich. Although it faces severe problems, much of its natural resources are intact and the situation is not as seemingly hopeless as Central America's.

Since 2001, AA has worked on or supported a range of projects, mainly in Peru's Cuzco region, and recommended many more. These are described separately in *{Projects and Proposals}*.