

# Environmental degradation in mexico and mexico city



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Most people who find themselves concerned with the history of Mexico relate to famous figures, monumental events, tide turning battles, or topics about a class and time period, but what concerns me is what Mexico City's future will be like due to the environmental degradation around the Basin of Mexico.

There is an important interrelationship between the city and its environment here. Environmental Degradation in post-conquest Mexico, around the Basin of Mexico, has been often ignored by scholars.

In this paper, I will try to show that Mexico's history concerning the nation's attitude and relationship with the environment shall continuously shape Mexico City. Mexico has been a land plentiful in resources, but with rapid economic eras such as in Diaz' presidency capitalizing with the exploitation of natural resources, permanent natural losses such as the complete depletion of Lake Texcoco, and other natural resources have taken place thus creating environmentally hazardous conditions that permeate until today in Mexico and especially in Mexico City.

Mexico five-hundred years ago was a scene that was recorded to be so remarkable and majestic with a sense of a pure and lush landscape however we must first consider if this Eurocentric myth of a "pristine landscape" was indeed the case for pre-Columbian Mexico. There is evidence suggesting the environment was already modified to a degree. Environmental effects from the neolithic age spanning across Central and South America included settled populations such as the Aztecs of Tenochtitlan.

Tenochtitlan had an estimated population of over 200, 000 inhabitants at its peak and the Basin of Mexico supported this city with natural resources

harvested from the lake and the forests around the mountain sides. After the arrival of the Old World epidemics and the decline in the population of indigenous people there was an era of environmental recovery up until 1750. This is when more Europeans were exposed to the Americas and the natural romantics began in works of arts and novels.

“ The pristine image of 1492 seems to be a myth, then, an image more applicable to 1750, following Indian decline, although recovery had only been partial by that date. There is some substance to this argument, and it should hold up under the scrutiny of further investigation of the considerable evidence available, both written and in the ground” (Denevan). It can be understood that with Denevan’s argument there has always been a degenerating environment since the arrival of man in Mexico and that the land portrayed in the natural romantics would find itself right for the pickings yet again.

The continued behavior of resource exploitation of the lands of Mexico carries heavily over into the Porfiriato with nearly ninety percent of the economy relying on exported precious minerals, ore, and raw materials. During the Porfiriato there was a series of foreign investment and capital exchanged with Mexico for these natural resources which allowed Mexico to have a rapid period of economic growth. This unearthing of non-renewable resources left environmental casualties across Mexico particularly with the forests.

The “... local fuel-wood demand must have been quite intense, leading to the repeated of cutting of oak for firewood and charcoal, especially near the

larger mines" (Mathews). In addition the mule and donkey trains during this time required pastured land to travel on and graze upon leading to further deforestation. Mexico never developed a second industrial revolution and lacked the technology to create capital goods which later deprived Mexico from domestic investments.

This inability to become a sustainable country is what ultimately devastated the environment and is a characteristic I believe you can see until this day especially in Mexico City. What I found so fascinating when I began storming up a topic for this paper was the clever system in which the Aztec People of Tenochtitlan thrived on. A sustainable system of agriculture with chinampas. Lake Texcoco served as a channel for waste, a mode for transportation, and a source of nutrients for crops.

The Aztecs adapted to Lake Texcoco and thrived off of it however the City that stands there today is unconditionally unyielding to the environment. With the disappearance of Lake Texcoco followed with the introduction of industry and the automobile there has been a large amount of emissions released and trapped in the atmosphere encompassing the Basin of Mexico further degrading the environment. There is only one region left that you can find the floating gardens and evidence of the chinampa system of old.

In Xochimilco, Southeast of Mexico City there are scenic boat rides for tourists along causeways lavished with vibrant flowers and plots of gardens. It had been rumored at the turn of the 19th century that Mexico City was to be the Venice of the West, but today there is only a fragment of that idea left after so much environmental degradation. Instead of abstaining to the

environment and sub-coming to it, Mexico City is still trying to progress like in the past during the Porfiriato.

The city is still trying to take practical measurements to solve complex issues like the fault and degeneration of the facilities supporting the city in the Canal from Hell. "The canal once flowed downhill, but as the city taps its aquifer for diminishing supplies of drinking water, the clay lakebed is collapsing. The downtown plaza has sunk 29 feet over the past 100 years, and the canal has sunk as well—forcing the city to pump sewage uphill through a series of locks to get it out of town" (Zarembo).

Modern Day Mexico City's sustainability relies on a heavy need for facilities and utilities, but it is constantly butting heads with the environment. A new canal or updated canal will not solve this dilemma because the city shall continue to sink, but if the city and its inhabitants can adapt to be more like the region of Xochimilco across the whole city after a long series of reclamation concerning the environment and embrace the environment then maybe progress can be made. The environment in Mexico has not been taken serious until the 1980s with growing awareness and eventually some legislation.

Mexico has been developing a comprehensive approach to environmental protection with such actions as the passing of the Law of Ecological Equilibrium and Environmental Protection which was enacted in 1988. The law outlines a general principle that "A new position of Federal Prosecutor for the Environment has been established that reflects the sense that the environment, itself, is entitled to representation in the government" (The JAC

on the MC Water Supply) and that there is an increased emphasis on various water conservation measures including water reclamation.

This has been a milestone and even a resolution over the whole “right to water” and “anti-privatization” campaigns. However with one step forward Mexico City continues to take two steps back. With the low cohesion of the Federal, Federal District, and the state of Mexico on certain metropolitan and environmental issues such as posing solutions for air pollution, there was a small environmental group that had an idea in 1987; Hoy no circula, or ‘don’t drive today’.

The idea was taken up by the government and it became mandatory for all registered vehicles in the metropolitan area not be able to be driven for one day out of the week. At first it was a success with the air quality in Mexico City becoming better. Unfortunately later, Hoy no circula was counterintuitive and led to the production and purchase of more automobiles so drivers can drive a vehicle on their “off day” which increased more emissions in the atmosphere.

Apart from solving air pollution there have been gains in other directions concerning growing cities and the environment. “The Secretary of Urban Development and Ecology (SEDUE) was initially responsible for environmental protection, but in 1992 the Mexican Congress dissolved SEDUE and created a new ministry, the Secretariat of Social Development (SEDESOL), which has a broader mandate than SEDUE. In addition to environmental protection and natural resource use, SEDESOL is charged with

overseeing: housing, urban development; and infrastructural development” (Diez).

Initially you might think that this was also a step away from environment conservation for Mexico because an entity that specialized in only environmental protection was also put in charge of mandates concerning urban development. However in fact this is positively great for the environment throughout Mexico because we can now have urban planners evaluate and consider the environment in which cities are expanding.

This will minimize the impact on the environment across Mexico and help lead to sustainable solutions which can precipitate to the Basin of Mexico. It is clear that the environmental situation in the basin remains critical. Presently the population continues to grow rapidly with its attendant environmental consequences created from the increase in motor vehicles, degenerative facilities and faulty utilities.

Of the many problems considered the best known is atmospheric pollution, and many measures are in place to address it. “ The most serious however from the perspective of sustainability and continued city growth, is water supply” (Buckingham and Turner). The Basin of Mexico and Mexico City have reached a tipping point. It now remains to be seen whether water supply, and all the environmental problems, can be overcome in time to prevent the city from going into ruin.