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In Ecuador, a fight for safe, affordable water

Posted by Kenneth Kaplan June 5, 2009 11:15 AM

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Vast Guayas River estuary is under assault from sewage and industrial pollution



(Claire Barker photo)

Many Guayaquilans receive their water supply for drinking, washing, and cooking from delivery trucks.

Claire Barker, a resident of Jamaica Plain who is retired from a career with the MWRA and Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, traveled to Guayaquil,

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Ecuador, as a volunteer with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. She is helping local grassroots organizations that promote the right to water and sanitation to investigate the impact on the Guayas River estuary from the operations of InterAgua, the city's private water and sanitation business.

By Claire Barker

June 3, 2009

GUAYAQUIL, Ecuador -- In May, I went to Guayaquil, with sewage as my calling card!

Guayaquil is Ecuador's largest city and center of commerce and shipping, located at the mouth of the Guayas River and alongside a vast estuary. This city of 2,500,000 lies just below the equator and is hot and steamy year round. My guidebook says that the pace here is much more of a bustle than in the high-altitude capital of Quito, but you don't move very fast here during the heat of the day.

The Guayas River is the largest on the Pacific coast of South America, and the mangroves that historically lined its estuaries have been important to the fishing and shellfishing industries, as well as buffers against salt water and erosion.

In the past decade, Guayaquil has renovated its riverside Malecón (pier and walkway) and the old neighborhood that winds up Santa Anna hill to its historic lighthouse. Ecuadoran families and tourists alike enjoy the riverside museums, cafes, playgrounds, and shops. But if you spend enough time on the Malecón, you'll smell the seamy side of Guayaquil: only half of the city's household wastewater receives the most basic treatment, and all of it discharges directly into the Guayas River, along with the entire watershed's untreated domestic and industrial wastewater, petroleum-laden discharges from shipping, and pesticides and fertilizers from industrial farming.

The Guayas River estuary empties into the Pacific Ocean, near the Galapagos Islands and is an important ecological resource with species of mangroves that purify the water. Over time, the mangroves have been cleared for housing and shrimp farming or damaged from excessive waterborne pollution. And particularly in poorer neighborhoods, inadequate trash collection compounded by a lack of environmental awareness means that a lot of trash is thrown into the estuaries. The results are unpleasant to smell and see and do great damage to public health and the environment.

For two weeks I worked on water quality issues with the Citizens' Observatory for Public Services, a local activist group affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. The Observatory and UUSC have partnered to fight for citizens' rights to drinking water at affordable prices, and their work in Guayaquil has been significant in empowering citizens in poorer neighborhoods for whom drinking water service is typically nonexistent or intermittent, and almost always far below the quality standards for human consumption.

An outsider can often open official doors normally closed to citizen groups. Our meetings enabled the Observatory to introduce itself to government ministries, public interest groups, individuals, and university researchers with interest in this issue. We learned about how water quality testing is done or not, depending on available resources and other priorities, and that government agencies here, just as in the United States, have trouble sharing information and working together.

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(Claire Barker photo)

A poultry slaughterhouse in Guayaquil.

We also toured parts of the upstream watershed and also talked with local residents about how the lack of public services affects them:

- One woman living close to the river upstream in a house without water, sewer, or electricity, told us about the difficulty of getting help from her local government.
- Another resident showed us the town's slaughterhouse, where water and every other residue from the slaughtering process flow directly to the river.
- In Flor Bastion, a neighborhood in Guayaquil of almost 500,000 people without city water, sewers, or drainage, a man showed us his few vegetable plants and described how hard it is to get around during the four-month-long rainy season, when rainwater and sewage flood the gulleys between houses.
- Maria, like most other Flor de Bastion residents, pays a water tank driver to fill the 55 gallon tank on her porch so she can cook, clean, and wash. She pays much more per gallon of water than someone with a tap in their house.
- Yet another long-time Guayaquileno who raised a large family here, said "yes, of course the trash was very bad for my children, especially when the hot sun began to decompose the trash piles."

There are hopeful signs as well: the young man who collects plastic bottles from the estuary and sells them for 12 cents a kilo, and the fishermen on Santay Island, just across from the city, who are building a community fish pond to replace the fishing areas in the river lost to pollution.

During my visit here, I was able to talk about the great success of the Boston Harbor cleanup, and for Guayaquilenos this was often an "aha" moment -- if a country as rich as the United States once had as big a problem as Boston Harbor's and was able to turn it around, perhaps they can do the same in Guayaquil. The Citizens' Observatory hopes to learn from

Boston's success in citizen advocacy and action to continue its fight for clean water and a clean environment.

For more information about UUSC's Environmental Justice Program, please visit www.uusc.org/content/environmental_justice. To learn how you can contribute to the Passport blog, contact the Globe's assistant foreign editor, Kenneth Kaplan, at k_kaplan@globe.com.

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