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Mexico's Río Santiago: river from Hell or heavenly river?

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by John Pint



The Ahogado Creek, filled with industrial waste and raw sewage from toilets, flows out of the Ahogado Dam toward the Santiago River.

A new movement is afoot to clean up Jalisco's Rio Santiago, widely considered the most polluted river in Mexico. Salvador Peniche of CUCEA, the University of Guadalajara's Center for Economic Sciences (under the leadership of Gustavo Padilla and Margarita Hernández) has teamed up with his colleagues in the International Society of Ecological Economics to issue a clarion call to government, business and the public at large:

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Public outrage focused on the sad state of the Santiago River in 2008 when Miguel Ángel López, an eight-year-old boy, waded into the river to recuperate a soccer ball. He died eighteen days later, not from drowning but simply from having swallowed a mouthful of river water containing 400 times the amount of arsenic a human being can tolerate. The public outcry resulted in the construction of the Ahogado Sewage Treatment Plant in 2012, which reduced the amount of fecal matter in the river but did little about more than 1,000 contaminants such as chrome, cobalt, mercury, arsenic, benzene, toluene and chloroform, just to name a few. These heavy metals and synthetic compounds come from the second largest industrial zone in Mexico, conveniently located just above the river: 600 plants—many foreign-owned—producing everything from chemicals and steel to textiles and powdered milk.

Over the years there have been numerous campaigns to stop these companies from polluting the river, campaigns waged by a variety of groups, including Greenpeace, but in the end the river remains toxic and the people who live alongside it are paying the price. They breathe the aerosols generated by the moving water and they get sick. The incidence of cancer is several times higher in El Salto than elsewhere in Mexico.

“See that street?” asks local resident Enrique Enciso in the excellent documentary [Silent River](#). “There are eight houses on this block and in six of them somebody has cancer. ”

The dreadful state of the Santiago River and the harm it's doing to the people of El Salto have made headlines for years, but no one has succeeded in cleaning up the River from Hell. So how is it that economists have now taken on the task? I put the question to Salvador Peniche.

“We call this Shame Economics,” he says, “and basically we want to demonstrate with satellite maps and with local sensors the deplorable state of the river basin and how it's affecting people's health. Then we want to make

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services we are not getting; the cost of the harm that is being done to nature; the cost of so many people losing their kidneys; the cost of conjunctivitis; the cost of cancer.”

The concerned economists are interested in measuring all of these factors scientifically, says Peniche. “which is why we are working with satellite image experts, data managers, people who will help us get measurements: hard scientific data which we can present through the media. We want to give the public scientific evidence that will show the scale of this problem and the costs. All this is Shame Economics. What we are trying to do is to generate awareness here. As someone once wrote: ‘The silence we have kept greatly resembles stupidity!’”

Perhaps the best way to come to an awareness of this problem is to participate in what the people of El Salto call “El Tour de Terror.” This is a visit to the Ahogado Creek and Dam where raw sewage and industrial waste collect and work their way down to the river.

The tour is simply disgusting.

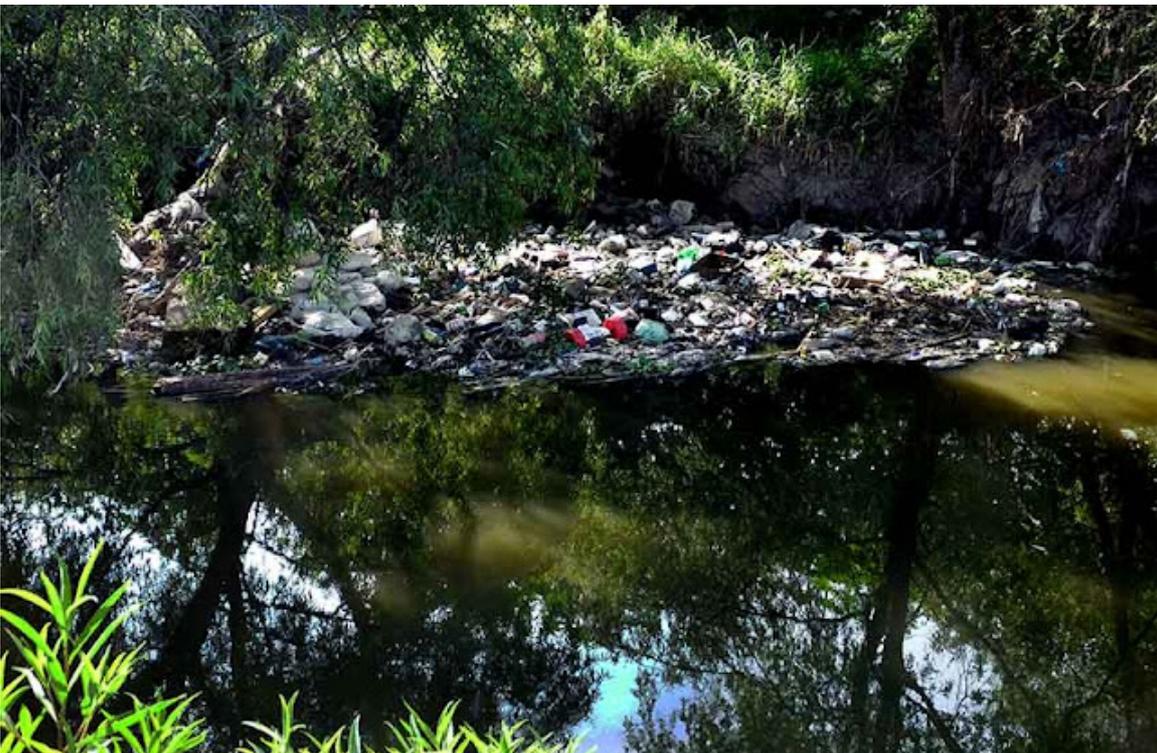
Stop number one was at a point where Guadalajara’s Periférico or Ring Road meets the main highway going to the city’s International Airport. At the corner of two streets quaintly named Biblia and Rosario, we pulled up next to what looked like a drainage ditch and stepped out of the car to be hit by a stench that nearly gagged us. This was the natural bed of the Ahogado Arroyo (creek). Ahogado, perhaps appropriately, means “drowned man.” Into this creek was flowing raw sewage from countless houses all around us.

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Raw sewage flowing through El Ahogado Creek in Tlaquepaque near Guadalajara's Periférico (Ring Road).

Our next stop was a spot only 100 meters north of the airport. Here we found great gobs of garbage floating on the creek's surface. Amongst the plastic bags, worn-out tires and "icebergs" of Styrofoam, we spotted the bloated corpse of a dead dog.



Garbage floats in El Ahogado Creek as it flows past Guadalajara's Miguel Hidalgo

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looking swamp called the Ahogado Dam, which stinks to the high heavens. All around it are located hundreds of factories and most of them seem to be spilling their residues into the smelly bog. Fat, filthy cows wander about the place, munching on the water hyacinths growing in the muck.



A cow munches on water hyacinths inside the swampy dam, within site of polluting factories.

Finally we went to the most infamous point on the Santiago River, El Salto de Juanacatlán Falls, once a huge tourist attraction nicknamed The Mexican Niagara.

Again the stench. In the corrosive spray of the falls, Dr. Peniche addressed our little group:

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Dr. Salvador Peniche hopes that Shame Economics will result in a clean-up of the Santiago River.

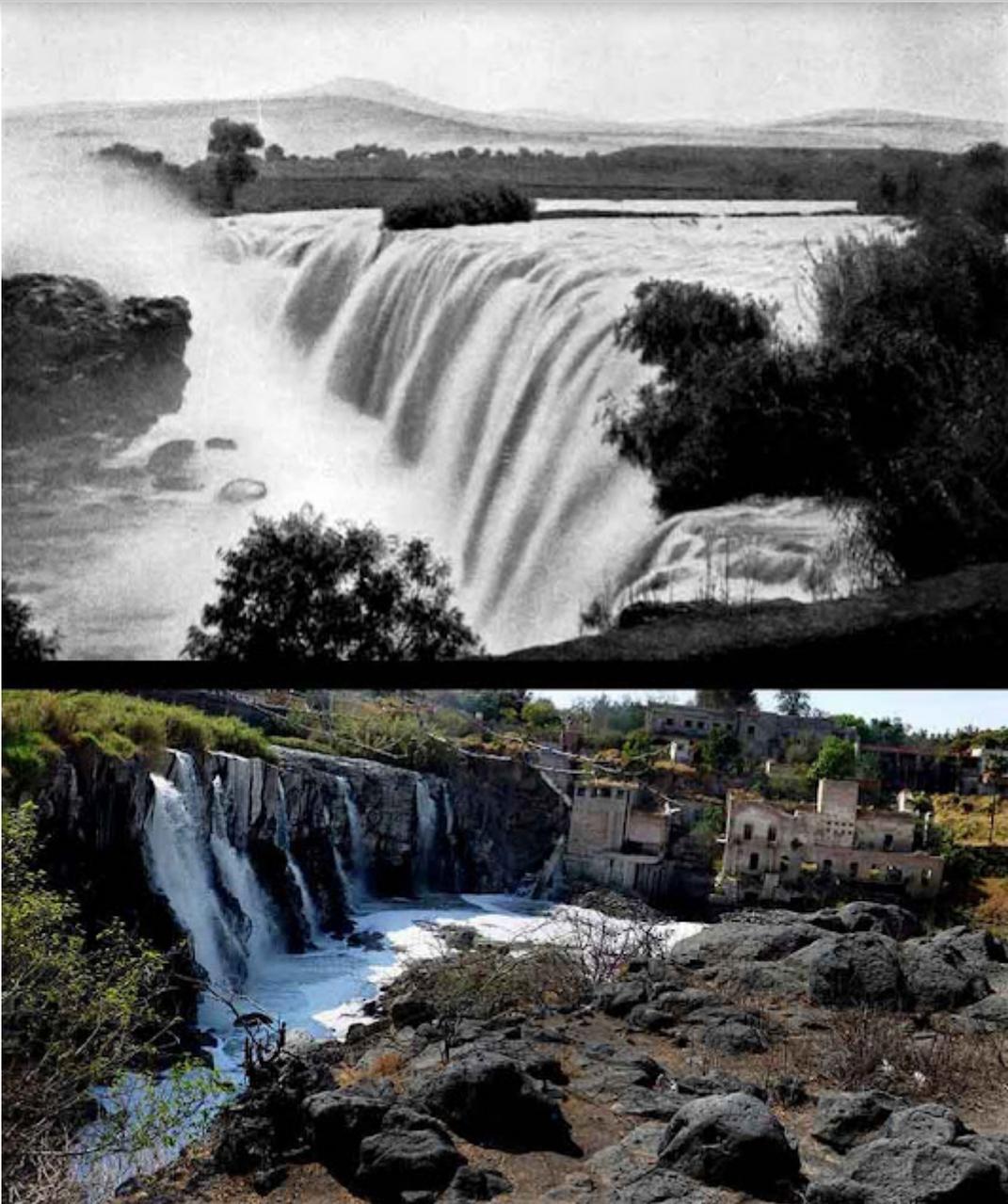
“This is everybody's shame, the shame of the government, the industries, the university and the students. How is it possible all of us have permitted a catastrophe of this magnitude! We aren't aiming at confrontation here. No, all of us, all the actors, need to work together in the recuperation of the river basin.”

Shame Economics, as described by US economist Paul Sutton and Mexico's Peniche, proposes imposition of a universal duty on all factories near the river, based on their individual revenues: a “Collective Industrial Victim Impact Compensation Cost” (CIVIC Duty).

“This financial levy,” say the two economists, “should be sufficiently painful to incentivize behavior change of the polluters. The beauty of a CIVIC Duty is that, as the river's environmental qualities improve, the tax goes down. If the river gets worse the tax goes up.”

“I think the public will like this.” adds Peniche, “because we are not blaming anybody in particular, but rather

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El Salto, "Mexico's Niagara" as it looked in 1909 (top) and as it looks today.

The amount of the fine would reflect the cost of health care for the afflicted and also the loss of income, water sports and tourism along a once magnificent river that no one can approach because of the stench.

The Santiago River's "untouchable beauty" is immediately apparent to those few people who have walked its tree-lined shores at the foot of the magnificent canyon that forms the northern boundary of Greater Guadalajara. Visually, the rocky river bed, backed

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The small Colimilla hydroelectric dam lies at the northeastern corner of Guadalajara and is no longer in operation.

But postcards have no smell.

What is the city of Guadalajara losing because of this situation?

San Antonio Texas has shown the world how to turn a pretty river into fame and fortune. The city's celebrated River Walk---billed as "The Number One Attraction in Texas," brings in over 11 million visitors per year, who are delighted to sip coffee at quaint cafés as they watch the river flow.

Imagination and good taste has turned the River Walk into a successful attraction, but the Santiago, as it flows along the northeast corner of Guadalajara, has a natural beauty that far surpasses anything that the San Antonio River has to offer. As you walk downstream along the river bank, watching the water swirl and eddy through great moss-covered rocks shaded by tall, lovely trees, you gaze in awe at a towering red canyon wall on your right, while hot springs cascade down the gentle slope

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would long ago have transformed into a first-class tourist attraction.



John Pint enjoying one of the natural hot springs along the shore of the Santiago at the north end of Guadalajara.

Eight kilometers downstream, we come to the beautiful little Puente de Arcediano, which crosses the river.

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The Arcediano suspension bridge marks an area of haciendas and orchards on the banks of the Santiago.

Constructed in 1894, this was only the third suspension bridge to be built on the entire American Continent, a testimony to the importance of this section of the Santiago before pollution turned it into a sewer.

This area around the bridge was bustling with activity in Guadalajara's early days. Near here were located Haciendas surrounded by fertile fields and orchards that took advantage of the semi-tropical climate at the bottom of the canyon, supplying Guadalajara with mangoes, papayas, sugar cane, oranges and caracolillo (peaberry) coffee beans. This was also the spot where donkey caravans crossed the river, transporting goods between Guadalajara and Zacatecas.

Forty-three kilometers northwest of the Arcediano Bridge, lies the Santa Rosa Dam which has created a gorgeous lake on the Santiago, with a sharply rising carpet of green topped by the 500-meter high red canyon wall on one side and on the opposite shore a veritable sea of blue agaves stretching as far as the eye can see.

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The picturesque Santa Rosa Dam is an hour's drive from Guadalajara.

But this fairy-tale lake is dead quiet: no lakeside cabins, no fishermen, no water skiers, no laughter. No, this lake of unspeakable beauty is also a cesspool of unspeakable odors and poisons. How much money is lost because an idyllic lake located only an hour's drive from the city's Ring Road is unusable? The amount needs to be calculated and added to the Shame Economics duty on the polluters of the Santiago.

From the Santa Rosa Canyon, the river flows into the state of Nayarit and somewhere along the way, a miracle occurs: the river actually manages to cure itself!

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300 kilometers downstream, at Las Cuevas, the Santiago has cleansed itself of pollutants from Guadalajara.

Years ago I stumbled upon a pueblito in that part of Nayarit called Las Cuevas. As I drove down its few streets, I saw a boat in front of every home. Because the only stream I knew of in the area was very shallow, I couldn't imagine what the boats were for.

Finally I asked a local man.

"Well, here at Las Cuevas we are blessed with something not every village can enjoy," he told me. "You can't see it from here but at the bottom of the canyon behind our village, lies the Santiago River, right before it enters the Aguamilpa Dam, and our favorite pastime is to go boating there.... and of course to catch fish."

"What? You actually eat fish from the Santiago River? "

"Yes, the dam is full of lobinos (bass), really big ones y muy ricos que son! (and they're really tasty!)."

I wondered whether 300 kilometers of winding river could remove the coliforms, chemicals and heavy metals

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sewage. He told me that at this distance the waters of the Santiago show no influence from the pollution in the Guadalajara area, "but they still suffer from local contamination. The worst thing we found in these waters were parasites. So, as long as you fry or cook these fish, you can eat them."



A happy fisherman from Missouri shows off his catch at the Aguamilpa Dam. As long as they are fried or cooked, the fish are safe to eat.

The river finally ends its long journey from Lake Chapala to the sea 20 kilometers north of San Blas in Nayarit. Will Shame Economics succeed in restoring the entire Río Grande de Santiago to its former splendor? If we all pull together, it just might happen.

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The Montezuma cypresses on the Santiago River may be long-lived, but today they are dying because of the polluted water.



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