

Las Estacas A Natural Sanctuary in Morelos

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The state of Morelos is renowned for its natural resources and climate. That, together with its proximity to Mexico's political and economic center, has made it a favorite watering hole for Mexico City residents and celebrities from abroad. In pre-Hispanic times, the Emperor Moctezuma established the first known botanical gardens in what is now Oaxtepec, then a resort for Aztec emperors. Later, Hernán Cortés established his residence in Cuernavaca, and in the nineteenth century, Maximilian had his summer house in what we now know as the Borda Gardens.

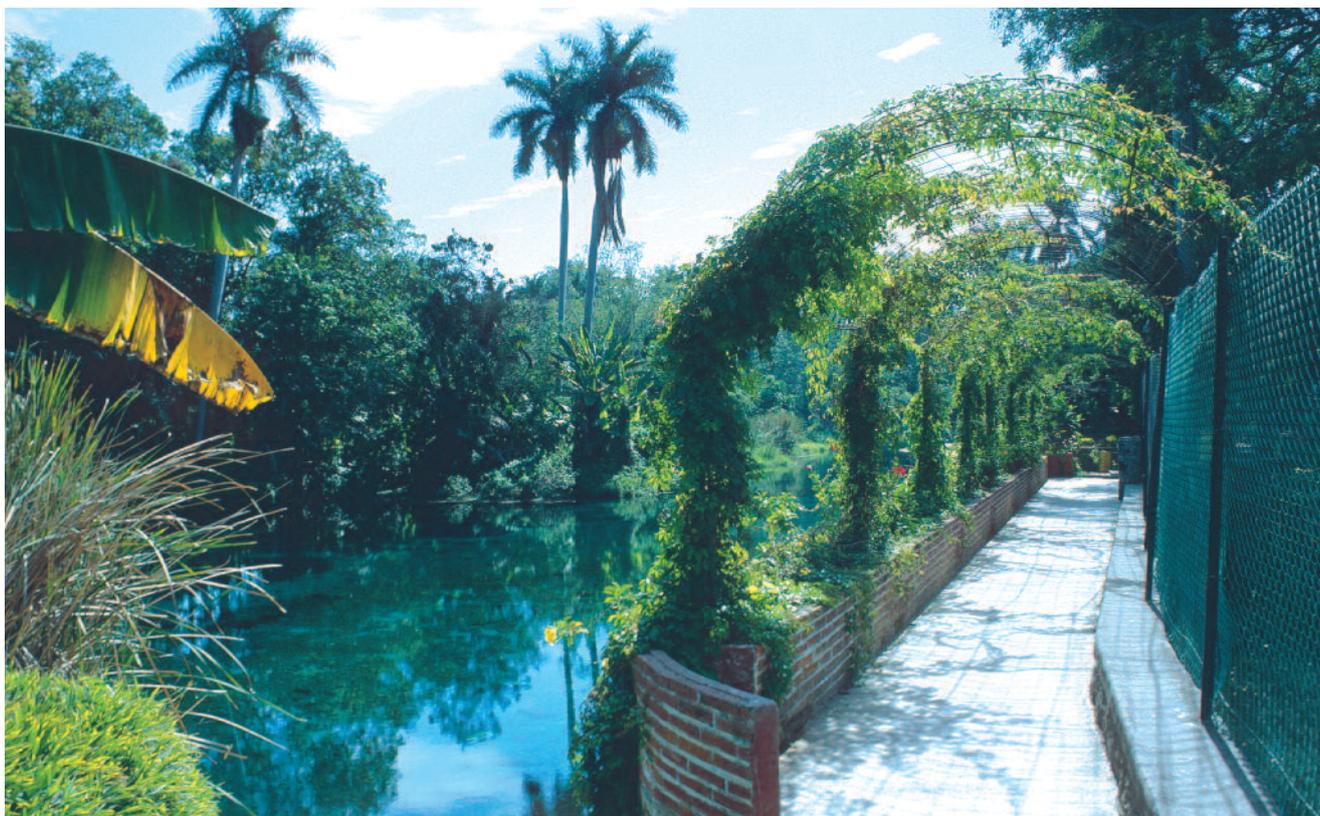
Throughout the state, we find a mosaic of natural ecosystems that range from temperate forest in the higher regions to low deciduous jungle in the subtropical areas. Also, thanks to the flow of underwater streams in the Chi-

chinautzin Mountains, the Morelos valleys have more than 50 springs that make urban development, agriculture and industry possible, in addition to tourism, particularly the state's 39 water resorts. Morelos boasts several traditional resorts with springs like Agua Hedionda, Los Canarios and El Papagayo and some technologically developed ones, like El Rollo and Oaxtepec. The Las Estacas Aquatic Park, however, is renowned for its natural endowments, its design and administration.

NATURE

The wellhead of the Las Estacas spring spews out more than 7,000 liters of water a second, creating a river of crystalline waters surrounded by the riparian forest that looks like a tropical jungle. Sixty-eight species of plants have been found here, and its upper reaches are dominated by fig

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Photos by Daniel Munguba

Las Estacas has been recently declared a state reserve.

trees and palms. Thanks to the abundant water, this vegetation stays green all year round, making it a refuge for many animals, among them 132 species of birds (including 12 kinds of hummingbirds), 8 kinds of mammals and different reptile species. But the spring itself also holds other species: 11 kinds of aquatic plants and 9 species of fish, some of which are native to this area. All this makes it a veritable sanctuary, particularly given the serious deterioration of the region's aquatic ecosystems.

THE HISTORY

On a sunny winter morning in 1941, Don Julio Calderón Fuentes took his daughter Margarita to see one of the most beautiful natural sights in central Mexico. Months before, on a hunting trip, Don Julio had found an amazing wellhead

that created a river of cold, crystalline waters surrounded by luxuriant vegetation contrasting sharply with the dry land around it. From that day on, Don Julio fell in love with the place and moved heaven and earth to get enough money to buy the land; he could think of no better legacy for his favorite daughter.

Fifty years later, in the shade of an ancient fig tree, Doña Margarita de González Sarabia tells us the marvelous story of Las Estacas, a history that dates from the twelfth century when the Tlahuica people settled in the area. During the conquest, some of the Tlahuica towns—among them Yautepec and Oaxtepec—became villas belonging to the Marquisate of the Valley, owned by Hernán Cortés. In the early seventeenth century, the Barreto and Temilpa haciendas were built. A little later, Temilpa became a sugar plantation and refinery, using the river water to drive its mill, incorporating Las Estacas into the hacienda.



Before the revolution, President Díaz would bathe in Las Estacas' mineral-rich waters when he felt ill.



Vegetation stays green all year round making the area a refuge for many animals.

During the War of Independence, the royalist army laid siege to Cuautla, commanded by José María Morelos y Pavón, who picked Generals Ayala and Galeana to break through the enemy lines. They managed to get out of Cuautla, but the royalists defending the haciendas trapped them in Temilpa. The two rebel generals defended themselves until the enemy set the hacienda on fire and killed most of their men. During the 30-year regime of Porfirio Díaz that ended with the Mexican Revolution, the Temilpa hacienda belonged to Manuel de Alarcón, the governor of Morelos. When Díaz felt ill, he would bathe in the spring, seeking to cure himself with the mineral-rich waters. During the revolution, Zapata picked Tlaltizapán as his general headquarters, which would lead us to think he visited Las Estacas. It was in that period that the Temilpa hacienda was destroyed and abandoned by the Alarcón family.

THE STRATEGY

Seeking to preserve the natural wealth of the area for present and future generations, for the last three years, Doña Margarita Sarabia and her children have been working closely with a group of conservation biologists from the Morelos State Autonomous University Center for Biological Research. Their efforts are aimed at developing and implementing a proposal for sustainable management of the area that would provide visitors with both leisure activities and comfort, as well as promoting environmental culture. The project includes different kinds of activities, from the design of the concept and image of the park to concrete proposals for conservation and ecological restoration.

Among the important results to date of this group's efforts is the fact that Las Estacas has been declared a state reserve, which at least ensures that no new development projects will



Las Estacas is an example of what can be achieved by people committed to preserving the environment.

be carried out there without taking into consideration existing environmental legislation. In addition, a nursery specializing in plants from the low jungle will be the basis for a reforestation program in the entire protected area as well as the propagation of some endangered species like the *pegahueso* (*Euphorbia fulva*).

One of Las Estacas' successful projects has been environmental education through the "Explore" program, offering training courses and workshops on all educational levels. These include one or several days of land and aquatic activities, such as the observation of nocturnal birds and mammals, or underwater observation of river fish.

Las Estacas may well be the only project nationwide that works to conserve and restore endangered fish species; its efforts include protecting Balsas River Basin species like the native cichlid perch (*Cichlasoma istlanum*) and the Balsas River catfish (*Ictalurus balsanus*).

What can be achieved by linking business people committed to the environment —like the Sarabia family— with research groups is truly remarkable. This work has rendered its first results with the changing attitudes among visitors and the awards given: for example last year Doña Margarita was given the José María Morelos y Pavón medal for ecological merit, a yearly honor bestowed by the state of Morelos to those who have worked to defend the environment.

In 2000, the park itself was given an honorary mention in the "company" category as a recipient of the National Ecology Prize, awarded each year by Mexico's president as part of the celebrations of World Environment Day.

While enormous strides have been made, a great deal is still left to be done. Undeniably, however, there is real commitment to conserving this invaluable natural patrimony of the state of Morelos. ■■■