



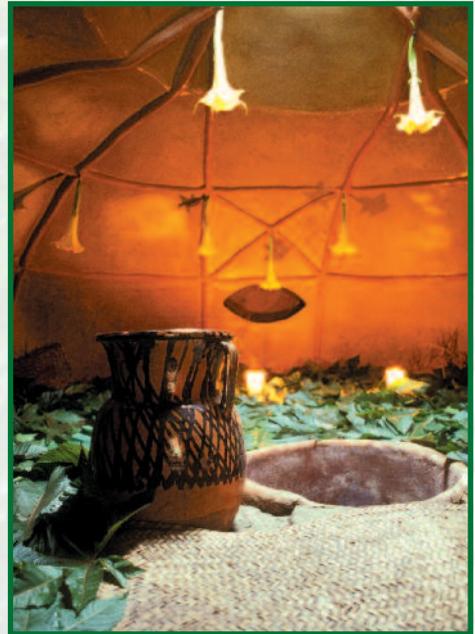
Mauricio Degollado



Courtesy of Las Cañadas, Bosque de Niebla



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# *Las Cañadas Cloud Forest*

Ricardo Romero\*

Cloud forests are one of nature's most beautiful sights. Also known as mesophilic mountain forests, they are made up of evergreen trees covered with lichen, moss, bromelia and orchids with brightly colored flowers, dozens of kinds of beautiful giant arborescent ferns, enveloped in an almost permanent mist, sparking fascination and respect. Considered an area of transition where species from the north and the south coincide and live together, it is the ecosystem with the greatest biodiversity per square foot in the country and one of the world's most endangered tropical forests.

In Mexico, cloud forests have disappeared in many places due mainly to the cultivation of coffee, cattle raising and demographic pressure. The effect of this deforestation has been soil erosion, greater rural poverty, flooding, a diminishing water supply and the massive extinction of animals and plants. All this alters the ecosystem's balance and causes the irreversible loss of genetic resources.

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\* Mexican ecologist and director of the Las Cañadas project.

This is why the 406-hectare community reserve Las Cañadas was born to protect one of the remaining cloud forests in central Veracruz. A private initiative, its aim is to contribute to changing the concept of protecting our natural resources, reverse the damage and inaugurate a different way of living and producing.

#### CHANGING DIRECTION

Until 1995, a large part of the area that belongs to Las Cañadas was used for large-scale cattle ranching for producing beef. The effect was clear: severe soil erosion, just like what happened in many other parts of Mexico. In order to reverse the damage, we sold all the cattle and reforested 60 hectares with 50,000 native trees (sweet gum, oak, walnut, ash and beech), and the rest of the meadows were left alone.

Since then there have been great changes between one spring and the next, thanks, in great part, to the "heart of Las Cañadas": an area of about 40 hectares of cloud forest, aided by an army of birds, bats and squirrels, plus the wind, that un-



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ceasingly spread the seeds of innumerable kinds of grass, shrubs and trees, sending new blood into the recovering areas.

At first, the aim was to consolidate the project as a conventional green company; that is, at the same time that it respected and cared for the environment, it would grow economically in each of its areas, improve profitability and insert itself into and compete in the market, etc.

However, what we learned led us to understand that more than simply complying with so-called “sustainable development,” we are interested in achieving a “sustainable life.” That is, now we not only attempt to replace inputs and conventional practices with “alternative” ones, but we also aim to redesign our systems, needs, food, children’s education and relationship with the communities. In brief, we aim to redesign our culture.

#### GOALS AND REFLECTIONS

Our objectives include not only preserving and recovering 365 hectares of cloud forest, but also

doing it in such a way as to guarantee the continued existence of the rural communities there sustainably so that the generations that follow us can do the same just as well or better. This naturally implies changing our current life style inherited from Western consumer society to one that does not rapaciously exploit the planet’s natural resources. To do this, we began by involving local people (peasants, schools, neighboring landowners, etc.) in the conservation of our resources (the forest, water, soil and culture).

We realized that true sustainable development necessarily requires a change of paradigm. Evaluating whether personal, community, national and world activities really allow for “sustainable development” or if it is all just posturing, a vacant discourse, with no real basis. Above all, we seek to oppose the contradiction of aspiring to “preserve” a place and at the same time live an unsustainable life that ravages resources in many other parts of this globalized world so that we do not directly see—or we do not want or are not allowed to see—the consequences of the life our society encourages us to live.

## THE ECO-VILLAGE

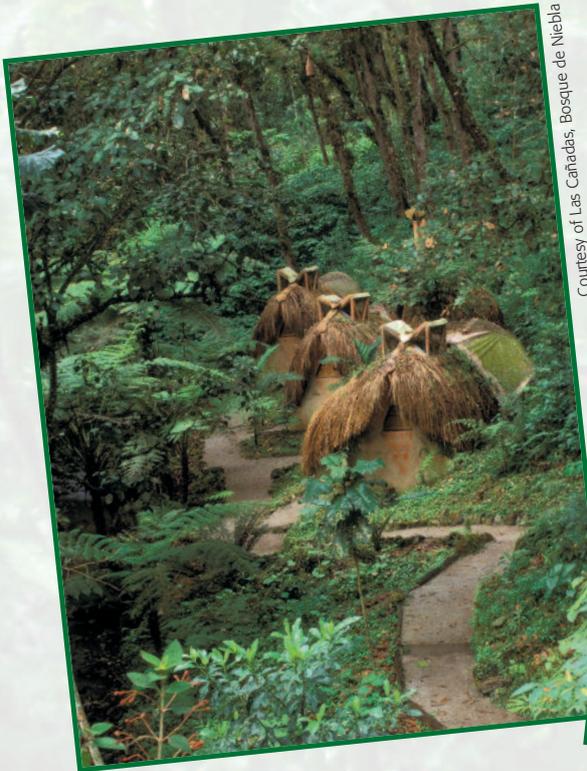
Las Cañadas is organized as a community structure, made up of 13 adults and seven children, called an *Ecoaldea* or Eco-Village. Decisions are made by consensus in the Eco-Village Council, made up of the seven coordinators of the project's different areas who reside permanently on the reserve and share the responsibilities and benefits of this way of life.

The Las Cañadas proposal is comprehensive, holistic and aims to:

- reinforce the project's sustainability over time;
- achieve a high degree of food security, producing *in situ* and integrating neighboring producers' lands and others in the bio-region;
- guarantee the supply of potable water from the cloud forest;
- educate our children and our neighbors' children to link up the next generation with the work we have been doing;
- work in the region with the concept of micro-basin;
- have a regional and national impact.

To achieve our goals, we have developed interacting, complementary activities and instruments to create economic, ecological and social stability for the community.

1. *Agricultural ecology*. Research, training and support activities that include local and regional peasant organizations, municipal authorities, giving workshops and a bio-intensive garden.
2. *Environmental education*. Mainly through student and university group visits.
3. *Eco-tourism*. Guided tours of different duration, visits to peasant farms, training and consulting services.
4. *Conservation*. Through protective concepts like an "ecological pledge" and the constant use of eco-technologies like dry toilets, solar panels to generate electricity, biodigesters and the treatment of semi-waste or grey water with aquatic plants, among others. We also foster links with educational institutions, environmental, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and government authorities of all levels.



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### THE ECOLOGICAL PLEDGE

In 1998, together with Pronatura, we constituted the first “ecological pledge” in Mexico. This is a legal mechanism for the conservation of land which limits our use of our own land, so that the forest we are caring for and the areas in recovery will always be an island of cloud forest.

The ecological pledge is a commitment that can be short- or long-term or in perpetuity, as we decided on in Las Cañadas. Through it, the private, *ejido* or commune owners commit to preserving or managing their land in a certain way, creating zoning in accordance with their own decisions. After zoning the land, a document is drawn up before a notary public and registered with the public property registry. An ecological pledge incumbrance is placed on the land for the time agreed upon and this incumbrance must be respected by the children of the current owners or the new owners.

The ecological pledge is entered into by two persons who may or may not be neighbors so that each neighbor monitors the other. Normally, an environmentalist organization can participate to monitor both parties. Because of the way the documents are made out, it is very easily to legally obligate either of the two neighbors (if the case arose) to respect the agreements. The only way in which an ecological pledge can be dissolved is when the property comes under a single owner. At no time during the process does the government or its bureaucracy intervene, although its participation is desirable to create incentives so that other parties also create ecological pledges on their land. Our project managed to involve the owners of neighboring lands to increase the protected surface area and the land managed sustainably. In 2004, 100 more hectares of land were incorporated, also in perpetuity, through the ecological pledge of one of Las Cañadas’s neighbors. **NM**