



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Mac Chapin's well-written article "Travels with Eucario: In Search of Ecodevelopment" (*Orion* Spring '91) did not give a fair evaluation of the "small-scale agricultural projects advertised as sustainable development or ecodevelopment projects." To say that these projects were initiated "invariably" by biologists and received by "faceless aggregates" of people is misleading. As one of the accused biologists, I would like to respond that Dr. Chapin presented a narrow and biased view that ignored the context in which those projects were developed.

A two-month trip to see the sites of former projects (allowing one to two days per project) is not enough to understand why or how the projects were initiated, or why they were not continued in that particular location. In addition, I consider it highly unethical to use Eucario Angeles as a mouthpiece to endorse Dr. Chapin's evaluations or as an ethnic representative for all rural communities in Mexico.

In defense of efforts in rural development, I would like to mention one example with which I am very familiar: The raised bed (*chi-*

nampa or *camellon*) projects that were "overgrown with weeds and in the process of being reabsorbed into the swamps" were the basis for the construction of a larger project, called *Camellones Chontales*, in the Chontal region of Tabasco. Because of this project, new agricultural fields were created out of government granted "land" of which 90 percent had been under water. These fields are now in the hands of the Chontal people.

A recent meeting of more than 150 people included traditional farmers (local Chontal Maya and other farmers), and researchers (biologists, anthropologists, soil scientists, agronomists, and others). The results of several years of research and development in raised-field agriculture were discussed. There was harsh criticism for present-day policies that are financed by international banks with government approval and that are threatening the environment and disrupting the lives of the local people. None of these government-backed initiatives take into account the needs and aspirations of the traditional farmers and the options available for improvement in natu-

ral resource management. They include only token consideration of ecological or cultural factors. These plans are made not by biologists but by bankers and politicians.

Though not mentioned by name, the projects criticized by Dr. Chapin most likely were pilot projects set up to explore possibilities for research application in rural development. Unfortunately, these projects also are usually funded through government agencies. As a result, their life-span is often only too short, even if the project is successful.

All of us—even biologists—who are concerned citizens find ourselves frustrated with short-term pilot projects, and would like to develop long-term projects that produce lasting benefits in rural communities. I invite Dr. Chapin to join the efforts to provide viable, sustainable options for rural communities.

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Mac Chapin replies: Contrary to what Dr. Gomez-Pompa seems to believe, it is quite feasible to gain a working understanding of projects

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during short stays in the field, if one goes about it with sensitivity. Most recently, proponents of Rapid Rural Appraisal and similar approaches have shown their effectiveness in this area. The backbone of these methodologies is accompanying farmers and technicians and others involved in rural development into the field and asking them what they think is going on. They, of course, are the ones who know the history and wider context of the project, the social and economic dynamics of the region, and the factors affecting success and failure.

This is my own approach to the field, and in this regard it seems to me that Dr. Gomez-Pompa has gotten things backwards. For the truth of the matter is that virtually all of the insights in my short article came to me from Eucario and people like Eucario. In this sense, it might be more correct to say that Eucario has used me as a mouth-piece for his evaluations.

The perceptive reader may sense that this is not the first time Dr. Gomez-Pompa and I have crossed paths. All I want to do here is refer those interested to some of our earlier exchanges in *Grassroots Development*, the journal of the Inter-American Foundation, and repeat that when I visited the *chinampa* projects engineered by Dr. Gomez-Pompa and his technicians in Tabasco and Veracruz they were indeed disappearing into the swamps from which they had been originally dredged. Today, not one functioning chinampa unit, from among all those implanted during the 1970s and 1980s, remains among peasant or Indian farmers anywhere-in lowland Mexico. Dr. Gomez-Pompa claims that these were all "pilot projects set up to explore possibilities for research application in rural development." At this point it seems reasonable to ask when rural people might expect to see some real benefits from all of these experiments.

While I am flattered by Dr. Gomez-Pompa's invitation to "join the efforts to provide viable, sustainable options for rural communities," I must say that I have already been working in this area for more than twenty-five years.

Mac Chapin
Cultural Survival
Arlington, VA

Biophilia! [Winter, 1991] Your writing, illustrations, and overall tone go right to the heart of the matter. Thank you.

I notice that while you are clearly aware of the perils that confront us, you are neither alarmist nor despairing. That's refreshing. Even hopeful. Sometimes we get so caught up in fear of future loss that we are immobilized by it: cardboard figures sitting at the edge of our seats with doom imminent for years on end. Thus we do not experience the present moment: the buffeting of wind on cheek, the clean smell of rain, the delicious coolness of a summer stream. Fear dulls rather than whets us. Nature restores us to our senses.

So I subscribe wholeheartedly to your aims. Live them, in fact, to the best of my ability.

M. J. Foyle
Galapagos, Ecuador

I would like to commend the staff at *Orion* for their obvious dedication to bringing to the public's attention, in an attractive and professional way, some of the current important issues relating to our economy and our environment. Since I am sure you are as concerned as I am for the objectivity of published information, I feel I must comment on one of your recent suggestions for further reading.

My comment concerns your Spring 1991 issue's recommendation of "The Ancient Forest" by Catherine Caufield in *The New Yorker*,

May 14, 1990. As you might expect, this ministry has a somewhat different view of the article from that reflected in your endorsement. The piece carried a number of significant inaccuracies alongside valid information, between which the average reader would have no way of discriminating.

John R. Cuthbert
Chief Forester
Ministry of Forests
Province of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC

We will send interested readers a copy of the technical review of the article prepared by the staff of the British Columbia Ministry of Forests and sent to us by Mr. Cuthbert.

I was crouching beside Adrian Dorst when he took the photograph you used for the cover of the Spring 1991 issue. It was pouring rain and the clouds in the background were racing across the face of a steep forested mountain. The deer casually munched away on the grasses of the estuary, periodically lifting its head to wonder at the sight of the two strange men covered from head to foot in suits of green rubber. As I look at the photograph I am reminded again of what a privilege it was to have been there with the deer in the rain forest in the rain. And I think that anyone who sees that cover can't help but be drawn into the essence of that time and place.

Cameron Young
Victoria, BC

"Doing Ecology" is the focus of articles in the special section of this issue. In forthcoming issues we will be looking at:

- The Life of the Soil
- Restoration
- World Religions and the Environment