

Trouble in Mexico's Shangri-la

Supplementary reading for Mazingira-Holdev

By Paul Salopek, Tribune Staff Writer.
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Perched deep in the craggy recesses of the Sierra Madre, Agustin Ramos' ramshackle cabin commands a million-dollar view. Actually, the view is worth about \$385 million.

A sparkling creek gushes through Ramos' remote little valley, reflecting a backdrop of blue-green mountains that could pass for Colorado or even British Columbia.

Woodlands that surpass some rain forests in biodiversity carpet the nearby hills. Parrots spear through the air, screeching at their own shadows. Just over a ridge, in a gaping chasm deeper than the Grand Canyon, the scent of pines gives way to the tropical perfume of orchids and orange trees.

"This land is what Onuruame gave us," said Ramos, invoking the god of his reclusive tribe of subsistence farmers, the Tarahumara. "We believe it can never be given away. It can never be sold. We can't trade it for radios or pickup trucks."

What Tarahumara customs have to say about sharing their pristine homeland seems a little less explicit. This may be why the Mexican government is proposing to do just that--with, say, 500,000 tourists a year.

Worried by market saturation at its beach resorts and eager to tap the burgeoning popularity of adventure travel, Mexico is launching its biggest tourism project in years in the rugged heart of the Sierra Madre Occidental, an untrammelled mountain wilderness that many anthropologists and environmentalists describe as this country's last Shangri-La.

Dubbed the Copper Canyon Master Plan, the \$385-million proposal involves paving enough roads, building enough lodges and staffing enough cultural centers with Indian musicians to turn an 8,000-square-mile corner of the state of Chihuahua into an eco-friendly getaway rivaling Nepal or Costa Rica.

Hardy trekkers, planners say, will ramble between trail-side huts, exploring canyon lands as spectacular as any in the world. Bird watchers can bag such exotica as macaws or emerald-green trogons.

The culturally inclined can tour neolithic Tarahumara homesteads during the day and compare notes at posh resorts in the evening--all just 250 miles south of the U.S. border.

"We're not talking Cancun here. We're talking Arizona's Grand Canyon National Park," said Alejandra Villalobos, the project coordinator in Chihuahua's Tourism Department. "We want to make

this as appropriate, as low impact as possible, and include the Tarahumara in the all the important decisions."

So far, they have been excluded only from one: the choice to say no thanks.

"Nobody knows this is happening," said Primitivo Cruz, one of the few Indians who has heard of the plan--not from its government promoters, but from the handful of human rights groups opposing it. "They come here and just do whatever they want."

That could pass for a capsule history of the Tarahumara's relations with the chabochis, or "hairy ones," as all non-Indians are called by the tribe.

Since the times of the Spanish conquest, the 65,000-member Tarahumara have parried the thrusts of Mexican colonizers, miners, dope growers and logging companies by simply retreating further and further into a labyrinth of mile-deep gorges and pine-forested plateaus.

That unique shield of geography has preserved both a biological treasure trove--local forests boast some 400 varieties of oaks alone--and a gentle, pre-Columbian way of life that values harmony above all else.

Scattered in countless homesteads, the Tarahumara still work their rocky farms by hand, dancing and offering corn beer sacrifices to ensure good harvests. The women, clad in colorful ankle-length skirts, weave intricate baskets from pine needles. The men, hardened by the lung-busting terrain, have become legendary long-distance runners, knocking off 50 or 60 miles in a single jaunt. Both sexes, when questioned by strangers, are famous for agreeing to whatever it is they think their interrogators want to hear in order to avoid conflict.

"Passiveness is their defense against the outside world. Tell the whites 'yes, yes' and then do nothing, hoping that after a while they'll just give up and go away," said Francisco Cardenal, a social worker who has lived among the Indians for 14 years. "Today, that strategy is failing."

A recent case in point: When the World Bank tried to launch an extensive logging project in the Sierra Madre five years ago, the Tarahumara didn't utter a complaint. International environmental groups did, and stopped it.

That sort of intervention seems unlikely to happen with the Copper Canyon plan, if only because many of the Tarahumara's defenders agree that low-impact ecotourism may be the only way to safeguard

the tribe's 6,000-year-old lifestyle. A controversy is brewing, however, over matters of scale.

"The government says we're against progress, that we want to keep the Indians in a museum, but that's not true," said Eric Urizar, a spokesman for Chihuahua's Commission of Solidarity and Defense of Human Rights, a group critical of the tourism project. "We're just saying that five-star lodges and paved highways are not low impact, and that you should consult the people before you build an airport in their back yard."

According to the Copper Canyon Master Plan, about \$190 million, or half of the project's money, will be spent over the next five years on improving infrastructure in an impoverished region where 85 percent of all communities lack electricity and plumbing.

After that, to accommodate the expected influx of 500,000 visitors a year, the plan calls for 3,700 hotel rooms, 500 camp sites and 1,500 trailer spaces to be built throughout the Indians' heartland.

About \$20 million already has been spent, courtesy of the InterAmerican Development Bank, a major project backer, in pushing the first paved road to the lip of Copper Canyon, the area's most famous land feature.

"The government secretly believes that Copper Canyon can compete with the Grand Canyon," said Urizar, noting that the U.S. park receives a staggering 5 million visitors a year. "For the people of the Sierra that burden would be nothing less than a disaster."

Villalobos, the project planner, groans when she hears such claims.

"We're not trying to turn the Tarahumara into a tribe of waiters," she said. "We will offer them training to run their own enterprises. If they want to go on planting their little patch of corn their whole life, that's fine, we respect that."

Truth be told, with or without the Copper Canyon Master Plan, tourism already is leaving an indelible stamp in the Tarahumara's secluded paradise. Some 70,000 visitors are thought to head every year for the Sierra Madre, concentrating mostly in a few whistle-stops along the mountain's single rail line. Their influence offers an uncharitable glimpse of what is to come.

In Creel, a rough train depot and logging town in the heart of Tarahumara country, camera-toting chabochis roam the dusty streets, past dozens of newly minted crafts shops and log-cabin-theme restaurants--all run by non-Indians. U.S. businesses such as a KOA camp and a Best Western hotel have popped up. On the gnarled cliffs outside town, a whitewashed tourist villa gleams above a smoky cave occupied by a Tarahumara family.

More troubling, the quick money from bus tours and entry fees to Indian festivals has begun to spark unprecedented feuds within some of the surrounding Tarahumara communities. Others have taken to erecting hand-lettered billboards that list, menu-fashion, the prices for every conceivable activity on tribal land: Simple admittance, \$1; picnics, \$2; riding a horse, \$6.

"That's what happens when you commercialize a culture -- it starts falling apart," said Rev. Gabriel Parga, the Roman Catholic priest in Norogachi, a Tarahumara village three hours from the nearest paved road. "We've already taken their trees, their lands, their gold, and now we want the last thing that's left: their self-respect."

Norogachi's elders, who haven't a clue about the Copper Canyon Master Plan, think they have come up with the perfect Tarahumara solution.

"We would like them to bring a hotel here," said gray-headed Merino Gonzalez, in an atypically blunt remark on tourism in his ancestral domain. "We just don't want it to come with chabochis."

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