

Comments to the US-Mexico Border 2025 Sonora-Arizona Meeting, Douglas, Arizona (8 November 2023)

The following is a slightly expanded version of extempore comments I made at the close of the recent Border 2025 Sonora-Arizona Regional Meeting in Douglas, Arizona, a get-together of US and Mexican officials from federal to local levels to report on how they have been and plan to be addressing binational environmental issues.

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First, thank you all for the work you do.

I'm aware that it's late, it's been a long day, and as our delegate from the Consulate said, we all want to go home.

But I'm an old man, *un viejo*, who was working on environmental issues *en la frontera* before many of you in this room were born. Please bear with me a few moments.

I've attended all of today's sessions: Emergency Response, Environmental Justice, Air Pollution, Wastes. And now in this final session we've been hearing about our waters here in the Southwest and the important work you all are doing to protect and save them. Conservation is important. Improved infrastructure is important. Education is important.

But as we know, the Colorado is rapidly dwindling. The San Pedro is dying. The Rio Grande if not exactly dying, is certainly diminishing. Here in this valley where I live, wells are going dry. Family farms that have been here for generations have had to close down because they have no water.

Native trees that have been flourishing on my land for forty years and more are dying because the washes that used to run several times a year haven't run that way for a couple of decades and ran only a few times, and then only halfheartedly, in only one of the past three years. They haven't run because the chubascos that used to fill them regularly every summer have stopped coming as often and as strong, and now have nearly disappeared.

When I moved here fifty some years ago, it was said that there was one farm in the valley pumping water from 1000 feet down at a thousand gallons a minute, and we thought that was outrageous. Now there are industrial agriculture operations that have moved here in the past ten years or so that pump from 2000 feet and pump much more than the 1000 gallons a minute we protested back then. One mega dairy and feedlot operation pumps as much water annually as the city of Tucson to water its cattle and the alfalfa that feeds them. The water table is dropping, cracks and fissures are appearing in the land as it dries from below and subsides.

Everywhere we look today we see more industrial farming. The image of the small family farm most of us hold, when it's not just a romantic myth like the Marlboro cowboy, is a thing of the past. Today a small family farm to be economically viable will generally be 1000 acres or more

and highly industrialized.

The business model of more and bigger is better holds sway *en todo*. Bigger farms, more and bigger cars, more pavement, bigger TV screens, more walls, more militarized police. We teach conservation but encourage growth: more houses, more people, more commerce, more taxes, more debt. We talk about environmental protection but are addicted to abuse. We build more electric vehicles but dig more gas and oil wells. We insist on reducing pollution but burn ever more fossil fuels and emit ever greater amounts of greenhouse gases. We set goals that like treaties with Native Americans are apparently meant to be transgressed. Business as usual.

But business as usual is not sustainable. Never has been. From the very beginning, besides the environmental injustice of one group taking the resources of another by hook or by crook, it's always been a matter of taking more from the earth than we give back. Culture after culture, what we think of as civilization, collapsed after depleting the natural resources they depended on — the forests or grasslands, the soil, the game and fish, the water — usually with even more bloody wars than normal on their way to cashing out.

What you have been doing is important work, good work. But conservation is slow. Education is slow. Climate change is not slow. It's here now and accelerating. As we all know, tipping points are being reached all over the world. Icecaps and glaciers melting. Oceans warming and currents shifting. Sandstorms in Guaymas. Wildfires everywhere. Animals going extinct. Thousands of people dying from extreme heat. Millions of songbirds dropping out of the sky as they did here in the Southwest a few years ago, dying because they didn't have enough food to make their annual north to south cross-border migration.

I urge you to feel a sense of urgency in the work you do.

One of our speakers today spoke of an indigenous people's sense of gratitude toward the river. That is a very different attitude from thinking of land and water, air, flora and fauna, as commodities, as things to be extracted, bought and sold, used, used up. Or from knowing them as parts of our home or, as the Cocopah elder said, as our very selves.

Even if the work we do is, as the saying goes, in the vineyards of the Lord, business as usual is not sustainable. Techno fixes and endless growth economics that got us into the environmental mess we're in won't get us out of it. As Albert Einstein said, "You can't solve a problem with the same mind that created it." We have to think outside the box. "Like a mountain," Aldo Leopold said. Like a river. Like a cienega. Like a bosque. Like a responsible adult with a sense of gratitude and urgency.

Again, thanks for the work you do.