

A SIMPLE LIFE?

**The symbolic significance of environmentalism in the
construction of a community.**

Case study in the ecovillage of Las Nubes in Veracruz, Mexico



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Live life simply so that others may simply live

— Gandhi

We hear and read about it every day on the news, on TV, radio and newspapers; human activity is having a huge damaging impact on the environment both physically and socially. Physically, we are witnessing a rapid climate change, eroded lands, pollution, increase population, disappearance of species, etc. In the social aspect, with a culture based on constant growth of markets and with a world which is more and more interconnected we are creating a vast disparity between people, the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. This causes inequality, hunger, social injustice, poverty and thus creates the potential for horrifying human catastrophes and wars.

In order to avoid this we must rethink our values and change our consumerist patterns of living. This is what Las Nubes is about, a group of people who have decided to do something about this. They have been brought together by a desire to protect nature and live in a more socially just society.

My project, a case study of a group of people in Mexico, from different backgrounds about to negotiate the construction of common identity based on a concern of environmental issues.

This study deals with the complexity of constructing a life in more equilibrium with nature, where a sense of community is important and with an ecological and socially oriented economy. This seems to be particularly difficult to achieve when modern day society is characterized by total opposite living standards.

It takes a great deal of courage, knowledge and resources to create a 'simple' life.

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1. INTRODUCTION

From ecotourism to environmentalism

I arrived to Las Nubes to study ecotourism defined as responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment and sustain the well being of local people.

My interest in ecotourism was a way of combining to passions of mine: travel, especially in nature and exploring new cultures. I have been attracted to nature I guess in a way because of the place I come from, Monterrey, a highly industrialized city, inhabited by 4 million people in the north of Mexico, in a desert area. Growing up here I lived a city life, I was never close to nature and sadly I do not know much about it. I remember I became fascinated with landscapes and nature ever since a friend of mine took me camping in the woods of Norway, 15 years ago. An indescribable feeling, being out in nature and trekking those mountains, being far from the comfort of civilization, having to make a fire, make food with limited equipment, listening to the sounds of the forest was overwhelming and changed my life.

Cultural adaptation and different ways of living have also been an interest of mine for a long time; I have lived in different places throughout my life, USA, France and Norway, and have also been fascinated with how people live in other places as well as how people is represented by others.

That is why I decided to research ecotourism for my fieldwork at Visual Culture Studies, a perfect combination of these two subjects.

I had been looking for a place where the relation between nature and culture was a concern for the locals as well as the tourists. I heard about Las Nubes and researched about it through the internet; they have a well documented site with updated information about their activities and their philosophy. I got in contact with Tomas, the founder and owner of the place, and he invited me to participate in their ecotourist weekend. Las Nubes is an intentional community which consists of 11 members (at the time of my research). It is a 406 hectares land trust, home to one of the few remaining cloud forests in the central zone of Veracruz, Mexico. It has been designed with the goal of modeling and sharing alternative methods of food production, responsible travel and sustainable living practices.

One of the ways Las Nubes raises money is through ecotourism, they invite tourists once a month to visit and participate in their community so that they can see how they live and how it is possible to live a sustainable and environmental way of life.

I participated in the weekend with the ecotourists; I heard all the conferences and listened to the explanations Tomas, the owner, gave about Las Nubes and became fascinated with the topic and the place. It was so much more than ecotourism, which was only a small part of a much wider topic. They were not only concerned with tourism and preservation of culture; they were concerned about health, agriculture, conservation of nature, education, economics and politics.

They were so good at explaining their ideas and giving arguments, answering questions to the tourists, it was impossible not to be but fascinated with what they are trying to do; simply, trying to find another and better way of doing things; trying to make a better world.

Even though I had decided to research my topic in Mexico because I thought I understood the culture being Mexican myself, I felt fascinated by the otherness of these people. I did not feel part of it at all. They were all trying to live a simple life, creating a new way of living different from the global world which I felt much part of. They were trying to create a community far from consumerism and individualism. What I think is important to say about me here, is that I come from an upper-middle class family in Monterrey, which I have mentioned is a very industrialized city also one of the most “Americanized” cities in Mexico, since we are only two hours away from Texas. The reason why I think is important to mention this is because growing up in this city and in this particular social class meant consumerism, a culture of waste, a culture of “shopping”; not being close to nature also meant a disregard for its importance. This is as I will talk about later in this paper a privileged position in wealth disparity society, important to mention Mexico as a developing nation and relation to the protection of the environment.

I feel I have changed since I moved from there and I have tried to move away from those attitudes of consumerism and waste, but it is still part of who I am. Nevertheless when I go back and meet my old friends, I don't feel 100% part of that anymore and I have been called a “hippie” for not being so concerned with fashion and the latest trends anymore, but what I feel is important here is that I heard that term used when describing the people in Las Nubes

as well. When I went back to Monterrey and told people I know about Las Nubes, the most frequent comment about them was “just a bunch of hippies”, so I wondered why was I called a hippie and so were the people at Las Nubes? Did we have something in common? I didn’t think so. What did they refer to when talking about hippies? These are stereotype ideas that people have about certain ways of living which are more in equilibrium with nature and anti consumerist attitudes.

The way I related to the people in Las Nubes was because the most of them come from the same background, Mexican upper-middle class (with the exception of Gaby, who comes from Denmark and Pablo her husband, who comes from an indigenous group in Mexico) trying to separate themselves from that very same culture they come from but feel that they don’t belong to.

I felt pretty much as an outsider from a topic that I did not know much about: environmentalism and an insider because I felt I understood the culture they are trying to construct themselves opposite from.

Structure of the thesis

In chapter two I will discuss methodology. First I will talk about events that I faced during and after my fieldwork which gave light to the writing of this paper, what kinds of representations and misrepresentations are faced when talking about environmentalists. I will continue by explaining my methods of data collection, filming and trying to get behind ‘the script’.

In chapter three I will first be giving a brief account on some of the reasons why environmentalists are active. Following that, I will introduce the theories I am using in my analysis. I found Kay Milton’s analysis on environmentalism relevant to introduce environmentalist thought

To explain how this group of people is trying to construct a community based on environmentalism, I will be focusing on Anthony Cohen’s work on “The symbolic construction of community”. Atkinson’s work will be used in explaining the use of health foods as symbols in their construction.

The concepts of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism will also be reviewed in order to explain the different views of the world between the members of Las Nubes and the peasants working inside Las Nubes.

Chapter four will be giving a brief history of Las Nubes to be followed with a presentation and description on each of the members of this community to be able to understand where each of them come from and how they started getting involved with the environmentalist discourse to later understand how their experience plays an important role on the construction of this community.

Having established the theoretical approaches which will be useful in analyzing my empirical material, chapter five will be dealing with topics and activities carried out at Las Nubes which are representing the different views and significations to create a common identity.

From there I move on to talk about the outside actors, people that are a strong influence in the construction of this community

Chapter six are my conclusions on these activities in which I will be linking the theoretical approaches presented in chapter three and my empirical material.

2. METHODOLOGY

Going back to the world

I did not realize how complex the topic was until I came back to the university and started writing about my fieldwork experiences. The community members are all so different from each other. The issue that brought them together was a concern for the environment. I decided to focus on their differences and the complexity of the subject. They care for the environment, they believe they can live ecologically correct, they have different educational backgrounds and understand the community in different ways. How do they manage to construct a common identity?

One of the things that caught my attention when I came back to Tromsø was the strong reactions my project caused to other people. I remember a classmate of mine said the very first day I showed my rushes “I hate this kind of people and I just can not understand them and feel that they are false, just pretending being so perfect”

The expression “I hate this kind of people” stuck with me. Who is this kind of people she is referring to? And how can one hate them if they are only struggling to make a change that will help make a better world?

It was a similar kind of reaction I got back in Mexico when I talked about them to my friends. What was it that caused these strong reactions about a group of people who are trying to improve their quality of life by respecting nature and being socially just? How is it that they are perceived by the outside world?

Whenever we talk about environmentalists a lot of images pass through our minds, we have seen on TV or read in newspapers about groups of people protesting about cutting woods, chained to the trees, or similar protests which are very radical. Environmentalists are seen as basically fundamentalists and extremists. In my opinion it is a mode of generalization which ignores or neglects the rich diversity among people.

It was through these experiences back home and in the seminar room that I realized that there are many misunderstandings and misinterpretations about this way of life; it is a theme that involves a vast aspect of issues beside a simple concern for protecting nature. And that

is why I felt important to do this study about the complexity of environmentalism and how the discourse is used in this community in order to create a common identity.

A simple life?

Through out my conversations and time spent with the members of Las Nubes, a recurrent topic was the search of a simple life. Everyone there agrees that they are looking to live a more simple life, but what does a simple life mean? Some talked about going back to a sense of traditional community, some talked about money and not falling into consumerism, some talked about going back to basics, some talked about a spiritual life and some about their relationship with nature. These are key symbols in their construction and will talk about them later in this paper.

They have in common an interest in nature but they don't have a common past. All of them have a good education and a wide knowledge of different ecological matters, but they do not have practical experience living a simple life (with the exception of Gaby who had already been practicing environmental living in Spain for several years).

To do ethnographic research means to try to understand the "natives' point of view" (Geertz 1973:14) trying to perceive the world as the others understand it. Doing ethnography is like trying to read a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses incoherencies, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior. (Geertz 1973:10) To try to do this I participated in Las Nubes first as a tourist only for a weekend and then the rest of my stay, I lived at a cabin near the field participating in their work and in their activities.

Living there was everything BUT simple. It takes a lot of work trying to live in a different direction as the rest of society. No electricity, no running water, using dry toilets and changing the buckets so that everything is used in the field, not being able to use any poison to kill ants, spiders and mosquitoes in the cabin was a torture. As I said earlier, my experience with nature was camping and trekking, it was so exotic having to make a fire and bring water from a lake to have dinner but at the end of the day, I knew that I was going back to the comfort of civilization, living in the wild was only temporary. But at Las Nubes they are making their life

there and it is quite complex while everybody else does things a very different way. How do they manage?

Having an idea of how you want to live your life and being so different from what everybody else does, you need to create your own infrastructure, you need a group of people who want the same as you do and who are willing to live in the same way. Trying to create a community with a new environmentally friendly infrastructure created from scratch as well as creating new rules, new ways of living and working together is very hard work. It takes a lot of time, effort, resources, knowledge and patience to build all of these. It is as I said everything but simple.

As I lived there I noticed that they were very good at describing what they wanted, what they were doing, why they were there. They will tell me for example; “we are a community trying to live a simple life”, “everybody here is valued equal in spite of whatever job they have”, “we are redesigning our culture in order to be more in balance with nature”. With time, I felt very much that it was a kind of script. It was something they had learned and they had repeated the message over and over again. They were very self conscious of what they were doing and how they were doing it. I felt they were very aware of their differences among them and their differences in opposition to what they are not trying to be. These differences made them self-conscious about their identity, about what they are trying to do, how they are trying to do it and that was the reason for the script, the need to express over and over again the identity they are constructing.

This was somehow frustrating especially when it came to filming. Since they have people coming to watch them, to learn from them all of the time, they are very used to being observed and so it was not difficult introducing my camera and filming, but they were all the time aware of being filmed. Even when I was at their homes just having a cup of tea, or going to town in the car, having a normal conversation, everything related to what they were doing and how they were doing it. I think in general my film shows this point: through my conversations with them, they express themselves very aware of what each of them want, these were normal conversations among us, these were the topics of everyday life, they repeated and repeated them constantly, it is what Goffman (Goffman1959:15) called the presentation of the self and being aware of being observed. To clarify this point I will refer to an episode I had when visiting Gaby, one of the members of the community at her home. She

had invited me to her place instead of going out because her son was sick. The three of us were at the kitchen table; her son was sitting in her lap. I had the camera with me and I was playing with her son recording him and showing him what I recorded. He forgot about me as soon as the cat jumped into his lap and started playing with him instead. I left my camera on and thought they would, by now, be used to the camera and be more natural about it. I felt that was the case, but when I reviewed my rushes back in the seminar room with my classmates and teachers I noticed that Gaby was so used to being observed she seemed to be aware of herself when she was in the intimacy of her home with her son. The son was playing with the cat and had asked her something about the cat; she started explaining to him how to take care of the cat. It was not what she said, but the way she said it, it felt as if she was lecturing the son in the way she did with everybody else when explaining about anti globalization, taking care of the environment, it felt as a script and when shown to my classmates and teachers it caused again very strong reactions. I felt that, as Goffman explains, she was presenting herself to me when I thought she was not aware of being observed.

Another episode I think is worth mentioning to making my point on how they present themselves is the following. It was a conversation I had with one of the members of the community, Jose, one morning when we were going to pick up the milk from the cows. I had already been in Las Nubes for a while and it was until that day he told me he was an architect. I reacted quite surprised since I thought that was an important piece of information that he had not told me. He answered that he had not wanted to tell me and I asked why. He said because he didn't like people thinking that they were just a bunch of "fresas"¹ trying to live a hippie life. I became aware that these were things that he chose or not to show to 'others'.

I lived in the community, I ate with them and I accompanied them in their different shores. Sometimes I would participate in what they were doing to see how it was, how it felt, for

¹ Fresa (which is Spanish for strawberry) is a slang term for a cultural stereotype of superficiality in youngsters. The term fresa (then often likened to the "preppy" stereotype), was born in the 60's to define teenagers with a conservative mentality, who didn't drink and enjoyed being from traditional families. During the 80's the meaning changed and became a term to describe the lifestyles of the young and rich. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fresa>)

example in the field² or in the bio-intensive garden cleaning the beds to make them ready. But other times it was most convenient just observing as I was holding the camera, I would observe for long periods of time and they will just tell me what they wanted (which most of the time will be related to their dreams about the community).

But what I felt more challenging was to go behind that 'script'. As I mentioned, they are used to being observed and presenting themselves to a certain audience. The fact that I followed them around with my camera didn't make things much easier in this matter. I tried then being without my camera, participating in their reunions, just 'hanging around' with them so that they would stop seeing me as an observer, as the 'audience'. I felt over time our conversations became much easier and personal and it was then I could introduce my camera again.

I have changed the names of the people and the place because this paper will be published on the internet and the internet is the most important tool they rely on to be known to the outside world to transmit their message and to earn a living. They are very present and active through this medium and I felt it was important to maintain their identities anonymous so that people do not learn about them in a way they do not wish to be presented to. They trusted me confiding their lives and stories and I wish to be respectful of that trust by making their names anonymous.

² When I refer to the "field" I am referring to the area of land used to cultivate crops for agricultural purposes. It is a huge area and this is where the peasants normally work. When I refer to "fieldwork" I am referring to the period of time I spend doing my research in Las Nubes.

3. ENVIRONMENTALISM AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Western society has promised traditionally that our conquest of nature would result in social progress. The power that science and technology exercise over nature would liberate mankind from scarcity. (Wilden 1978:101)

But our sense of living in one of the most progressive times in human history may be an illusion. The increasing number of reports on the changing characteristics of the planet's ecosystems indicates that over the long term they are in decline. They also suggest that in the future we face the prospect of having to change the most fundamental aspects of our belief system and patterns of social life. The challenge will be to see through the illusions of a consumer-oriented, technologically based existence to a culture in more equilibrium with nature.

Western culture represents change as a progressive expansion of human possibilities: personal freedom and individual advancement, control over life threatening situations, power to solve problem and direct the course of future events, and of course an expansion of possibilities for consumption. But the growth in the number of people and the scale of economic activity has also increased the disruptive impact of humans on the habitat.

The image of progress is based on scientific-technological developments, such as synthesizing and introduction into the environment of approximately seventy thousand different kinds of chemicals, as well as transportation based on fossil fuel. This has a huge impact on environmental systems such as deforestation, concentrations in the atmosphere of methane and carbon dioxide, increased population, earth's atmosphere warming at an accelerating rate.

With the possibility of the earth's population doubling in the next thirty years, most of the increase will occur in Third World countries that are trying to enhance levels of economic activity in order to accommodate the raise in population and to improve living standards, the rate of environmental degradation will augment.

This may be seen as continued evidence of human progress but in terms of the environment it has catastrophic implications.

In recent years a wide variety of groups have taken on the mission of changing attitudes and social practices relating to the environment. They range from environmentalists who argue for a more responsible form of taking care of the environment to advocates of “deep ecology” – which is an umbrella term covering a wide array of groups who view the ecological crises as raising fundamental questions about our belief and value systems.

Some environmental groups for example see the need for a complete restructuring of society to restore the system to a smaller scale where the skills, interests and responsibilities of the individual matters again. Their concern is with participative involvement, non hierarchical social structures and an ecologically and socially oriented economy; it also involves specific proposals for changes in education. (Bowers 1993:9-17)

I will use Kay Milton’s definition of environmentalism as a concern to protect the environment through human effort and responsibility, rather than simply a concern that the environment be protected. In some contexts it will stand in opposition to an exploitative and damaging perspective and when it does so, may indeed drive a social movement. (Milton 1996:33)

People who refer to themselves (and are referred to by others) as environmentalists often intend to imply more by this label than a concern to protect the environment. They see it as implying a range of values and principles which inform their political allegiances, their behavior as consumers and the way they allocate their personal time and resources. It may designate a comprehensive political ideology which includes views on how human society should be organized as well as on how environmental issues should be addressed.

Milton argues that environmentalism does not belong to a specific culture – a particular way of understanding the world that is associated with a distinct group or category of people. Instead environmentalism is a perspective shared by people from a wide range of cultures. It is a matter of choice. (Milton 1996:217) The members of Las Nubes have made their choice.

The understanding that, if environmental damage is to be reduced, human activities must be changed, has turned ecology into a social commitment and led environmental activists to

seek alternative models for the organization of human society based on their ideas on how to live ecologically. (Milton 1996:37)

The people of Las Nubes are concerned with these issues, concerned with the environment in different forms, with different allegiances. They come from different backgrounds and are seeking an alternative model of organization in opposition to the consumer-oriented and technologically based modern society. They are trying to construct a community based on these ideas.

I will be exploring how people's experience of environmentalism is used in constructing this community. I will be trying to understand the community by exploring their member's experience of it and the way they organize their lives. What does this community in the making appear to be to them?

I refer to community as the members of a group of people who have something in common with each other and which distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other groups. Community expresses both similarity and difference, a relational idea: the opposition of one community to others. (Cohen 1985:12)

The boundary marks the beginning and the end of a community; it encapsulates the identity of the community. Boundaries are marked because communities interact in some way or other with entities which they are, or wish to be distinguished from. (Barth quoted by Cohen 1985:12). I will point out how the members of Las Nubes are constructing an identity expressing differences in relation to the globalized modern society and Mexican cities and similarities to the neighboring villages through their way of life.

The reality of community in people's experience is acquired in their attachment or commitment to a body of symbols, but the sharing of the symbols is not necessarily the same as sharing the meanings. (Cohen 1985:16) This is particularly relevant in Las Nubes as I will try to show in this paper, they support the same symbols but they give different meanings to them.

This is why I will focus my analysis on meaning rather than form (social organization). Cohen says that when looking at other people's communities we have to question the significance

we might be inclined to attach to the appearance of the structural form and seek instead the meanings imputed to them by their members. In other words we have to treat them as symbolic forms. (Cohen 1985:40)

Because symbols are malleable they can be made to fit the circumstances of the individual, they can provide a means through which individuals can experience and express their attachment to a society without compromising their individuality. (Cohen 1985:18) I feel this is particularly important in the study of this group because the individuals that form it have very distinct and different personalities, they have arrived to this place for extremely different reasons, their experience of 'taking care of nature' differs from one another, they have in common the symbol of the community they wish to be and the ideology of taking care of the environment but each of them give meaning through their experience and they are succeeding in this way without compromising their individuality.

Following up this I will be exploring the concept of selfhood, because the complexity of a society cannot be grasped without understanding the complexity of the individual. For this matter I will be describing relevant aspects of the members in Las Nubes and how they reflect on themselves and their experience in the community.

Cohen argues that ethnographic attention to individuals' consciousness of their memberships in a community is an appropriate way to understand the collectivity, because individuals are more than their membership and because collectivities are themselves the product of their individual members (Cohen 1994:133). Then, by analyzing each of the members of Las Nubes I want to make clear the complexity of the place and the movement.

I will claim that Las Nubes has been very successful in many ways. I will argue that interpretation implies subjectivity; it suggests imprecision, inexactitude, and ambiguity. This is the reason why the people in Las Nubes are oriented to the same phenomenon; they are likely to differ from each other in certain respects in their interpretations of it. They may not be aware of this difference, especially if the phenomenon is a common feature of their lives. Their disagreement is not necessarily, then an impediment to their successful interaction. Indeed often the contrary is the case. People can find common currency in behavior while still tailoring it's subjectively to their own needs. (Cohen 1985:17)

Food can be understood as one of the elements used to construct their identity. I will be using Paul Atkinson's work on "The symbolic significance of health foods" in exploring how environmentalism can be represented through health foods. Atkinson says that the symbolic significance of health foods can be understood in opposition to modern, industrial, scientific, western culture.

Atkinson says that the production and/or consumption of organic foods symbolize the rejection of modern industrial cultures through favoring a return to a more traditional and more natural lifestyle. "Eating green" when seen as a part of an alternative lifestyle, seeks to preserve the past for the future and works to erode the nature/culture division through rejecting the technological advances made in Western culture. (Atkinson 1979:86-88)

He goes on by saying that there is much of this sort of opposition embodied in health foods – between the positive view of the rural, natural mode of existence and the negative view of the city, with all it implies of 'civilization'.

Much of the opposition Atkinson talks about was observed in the activities and ideology at Las Nubes. What I encountered was oppositions as city/rural, past/present, tradition/research, global/local and will be seen later in the text.

In trying to explain the differences between the members of Las Nubes and the workers (peasants) on how they relate to 'natural resources' I will be using Niels Einarsson work "All animals are equal but some are cetaceans". Einarsson describes environmentalist thought as ecocentric – an ecocentric view of nature questions the right of humans to do as they please in the natural world, and also the arrogant assumption that what are perceived as human interests should always come first even at nature's cost. Nature has a value and right of its own and humans are but a part of a much larger plan. In this view it is the greedy, utilitarian and destructive ideology of industrial society that is responsible for the ills of the planet. (Einarsson 1993:77)

While the peasants working at Las Nubes have an anthropocentric view of the world; that is the world is to be understood and valued only from the perspective of human needs, interests and sense of rationality. This positioning of man at the apex or center of the world has had

the effect of privileging humans as superior to other life forms by virtue of their distinctive capacities as rational beings. (Bowers 1993:28)

I will argue that even when Tomas the owner of Las Nubes wants to consider the peasants part of the community, they do not relate to the place in the same way. The peasants are working trying to earn a living, while for the members of Las Nubes this is a way of being. The peasants view the land as a mean to survive, while in Las Nubes they relate to the land as being part of it, as being one with it.

The aim of this paper is to give an ethnographic description of a community in the making in the cloud forest of Mexico. It has evolved over the years, from an economic enterprise to a community in the making which has to be understood as a symbolic construction of the environmentalist thought. I will study their challenges, their success and their representations.



4. LAS NUBES

Background

The cloud forest is one of the most threatened tropical forests in the world and it is the ecosystem with most biodiversity per square unit in Mexico. Nevertheless, coffee plantations, cattle breeding and demographic growth have caused the destruction and fragmentation of this ecosystem which is put at risk plus its biodiversity and the water supply to the main cities in the state.

Even the agro-ecosystems in the area such as coffee plantations - which contribute with hydrologic environmental systems and maintaining biodiversity – are in great risk of disappearing because of the extreme low prices on the coffee market. The coffee producers in the cloud forests, from owners to farmers are face now with the question of changing to other alternatives much less sustainable crops, such as sugar cane, which even if it is not a profitable economic activity – at least is a marginal productive economic activity.

Bad agricultural practices and the abuse in agrochemicals have generated eroded lands and systems which are awfully dependant in external technologies and by consequence highly costly to maintain without mentioning water pollution and health problems which are not given the right importance.

All of the above plus the lack of alternatives for the local people generates a high migration to the cities or to the U.S. which results in the peasants having to sell their lands, uprooted people and abandoned families.

Las Nubes is an alternative to this huge problem. It is a 406 hectares land trust, home to one of the few remaining cloud forests in the central zone of Veracruz, Mexico. It has been designed by Tomas who is the owner and founder, with the goal of modeling and sharing alternative methods of food production, responsible travel and sustainable living practices.

Between 1995 and 2005 Las Nubes changed dramatically. Prior to 1995, the greater part of the land was dedicated to intensive cattle grazing for beef production. The impact of such

intensive grazing was clear -- severe soil erosion similar to that found throughout other parts of Mexico.

In 1995 Tomas sold all of the cattle and reforested 60 hectares with 50,000 native trees (sweet gums, oaks, walnuts and sycamores). In the remaining pastures he did nothing, simply allowing nature to take its course. Every season since then significant changes have been observed to “the heart of Las Nubes” - a swath of approximately 300 hectares of virgin cloud forest.

(www.bosquedeniebla.com.mx)

Goals to be achieved:

- To conserve and restore at least 1000 hectares of cloud forest in the future.
- To support the stability of rural communities through sustainable practices.
- To live in such a way that succeeding generations may live as well or better.
- To assist in the shift away from the current Western consumer model to one that does not deplete the earth’s resources.
- To include and engage the local community (farmers, schools, neighbors, etc.) in the conservation of our foundational resources (the forest, the watershed, fertile soil and local culture).

Las Nubes at the time of my fieldwork was composed of 3 different families:

Tomas, Alicia and their daughter Ana

Pedro, Eva and their daughter Lisa

Pablo, Gaby and their son Mario

Plus Jose and Betty who are both single.

They are the “members” of Las Nubes and they are members because Tomas has invited them to be part of the project of the community.

Working inside the community, but not members of it are the workers and the volunteers.

The workers come from Tepecingo; a small community near Las Nubes. They are peasants and are hired to work in the field, helping out with the ecotourists and the cows. There are

also some women from this same community who help in the kitchen to make the meals for the tourists and visitors.

The volunteers are people interested in the project for different reasons and they can come from different places (it could be from Mexico or outside). At the time of my fieldwork there were two Mexicans and Joelle, a German girl. They can stay for several months but at least one, and they must pay for their stay and work with the workers in the field in exchange for learning the techniques.

Ideology and the people:

Tomas describes their work in the following way: *“Our initial intention was to model a successful “green” business. We hoped to demonstrate that one could succeed using conventional business practices such as regular financial growth and increased market share, while respecting and caring for the natural environment”.*

“Our work led us to be even more ambitious. We have come to understand that the goal of developing a “green” business or modeling what is sometimes described as “sustainable development” is insufficient. We now recognize the need to identify “sustainable life practices” which go far beyond simply substituting conventional inputs and practices without altering the fundamental orientation of the larger system. We are now attempting to re-design our practical life systems – how to meet our basic needs for food, shelter, the education of our children, and honor our relationship to our local community and the environment. In short, we are re-defining our culture as a whole, to develop, implement, and transmit alternative practices which protect and conserve our natural resources while generating fair and reasonable income to model an enduring and socially just development.”

This text can be seen as the study of the implementation of this ideology.

As Cohen writes: “A rigorous distinction has to be drawn by the analyst between the ideological rhetoric of the movement - its aims and aspirations as enunciated by its leaders – and the actual motivations of its individual members” (Cohen 1985:108) I feel then it is important to give a brief presentation of the members and then point out some of the main

ideas I observed each of them talked about while referring to the community and what they did there.

Tomas

Agronomist by profession, he is the owner of the land and the main visionary of the project. He has been brought up in an upper class society and changed his whole life to live this kind of life. He has given up his father's business (producing fertilizers) to dedicate himself to his project to protecting nature.

The way he started was after a few years of staying in Las Nubes. He had moved there after finishing university to work the land. He lived alone here for 5 years until he met Alicia. During that time he saw the damage the handling of the cattle made to the land and he started looking for other options. It was then he met Gapo and some other people concerned with the environment. He told me Gapo has been his main inspiration and the person who opened his eyes to a new ideology. She has been running her own farm ecologically for some years and runs her own business selling all kinds of ecological products and gives courses with him, her place is about 5 hours away from Las Nubes and she is part of the network Cosecha Sana.

Tomas also said that he started learning about the environment from this group of people and soon saw the need for different alternatives of living.

Tomas is a highly educated person but he is against conventional education. He said that what he learned at university was not useful at all, and for him, it is just a waste of money what universities teach. They only teach one point of view and do not look for other alternatives to how to do things or how to solve problems in life. That was his experienced he said (it is also an idea shared by the members of the community). He said he had to teach himself everything about cultivating in an ecological way, how to not have such a harmful effect in the land with the cattle, researching and implementing new ways in how to save energy and resources in his land, etc.

He has a huge library at the farm and posses a high degree of scientific and practical knowledge on the matter, he certainly grabs ones attention when he explains any subject.

He is involved in almost all of the activities inside and outside Las Nubes: He is in charge of the administration of the place, he pays the workers and is in charge of marketing for all the courses, workshops and weekends that are given there. He works continuously in the organization of the ecovillage. He is involved with the agroecological group called “Cosecha Sana” which is a group of farmers from the region who sell their products together; the main characters are Tomas and Gapo. He has his own business not included in the ecovillage which is the dairy production; he sells dairy products together with his partner, Jose. He is in charge of the apprenticeship program, which is having people from around the world working and learning from the way they work the land. He is also involved in a sustainable regional development program with the region which is the watershed with the locals. And he works in forming networks and alliances with peasant’s organizations, universities, NGO’s and government agencies to bring together peasants in the region to work in the same goals.

He is very aware of what he wants and is very involved in this. His whole day is about taking care of the environment and he is used to talking about it all of the time. Every time I spoke to him, he was highly aware of what he was doing and he always wanted to explain something.

He told me once that the idea of Las Nubes is still in progress, that he didn’t envisioned it one day and tried to do it. He has tried many things and failed in many others, it’s a process of learning he said.

Alicia:

She is Tomas’s wife, psychologist by profession. She comes from one of the biggest cities in the state of Veracruz. She has a daughter with Tomas named Ana who is 6 years old. She said she started being conscious about the environment when she met Tomas and Gapo. It was very difficult for her when she married Tomas and went to live to Las Nubes because she did not have any knowledge about that environment (the plants, the land, the animals) so she had to learn how to relate to her new environment.

She is very well educated and has very defined ideas of what she wants. Her main concern is the education of the children. She is also against traditional education and runs the school with Gaby. She feels it is imperative to teach the children in rural communities what they need to know in their own environment, not to take them out of their context and bring an urban

education which will not be useful for them in the country side. She is also very concern about the need to teach the children how to live a more simple life than that portrayed or followed in urban societies, she is against consumerism and it is one of her main agenda concerning the education of the children, because to teach new values means to build a new identity, one more in harmony with the environment, and this is a key subject for assuring the continuity of Las Nubes in the future.

She is also very concern with preserving traditional culture and indigenous knowledge. She is involved in a dance group with people from the neighboring town, which is based on pre-hispanic dancing. She then teaches the rest of the community and they perform these dances at ceremonies such as the temazcal and the crop seasons.

Gaby:

Gaby is a Danish woman married to Pablo whom is Mexican. They have a 4 year old son and they have been members of Las Nubes 1 ½ years (at the time of my fieldwork). Gaby's husband works outside Las Nubes and comes back only for the weekends. Gaby works hard on the project; she puts first the needs of the project in order to make it succeed even before her own needs.

She told me that when she was growing up in Denmark she wanted the same things as everyone else. She wanted to have a "good job" which paid well, had her own apartment and money to spend, but it was when visiting a farm with her mother that she decided that was what she wanted to do with her life, work the land and live in a community.

She married her first husband and went to live to Spain where they had an eco farm and she said they were almost self sufficient. After that she began studying forestry in England and did research in eco-coffee production in Costa Rica where she met her present husband.

Gaby knows a lot about the work that has to be done and she spends her days trying to educate others about the need for a community, ecology, education and anti-globalization.

Gaby was the member of the community I got closer to, she was easy to talk to and was very open to talk about her and what she had been doing before coming here; which was a bit

more difficult with the rest of the community, who were not that willing to talk about themselves, more about what they were doing.

I hanged around with Gaby a lot and through her I got closer to the others. I went with her shopping to town for food when they had visitors; I worked with her in the bio-intensive garden and went often to her place to have tea and talk.

In the bio-intensive garden the work is divided between several of what is called “beds”, these beds are a 2 x 5 meters area of land in which different crops are grown, these area is a research area and it is meant to see how much variety of crops can be grown in the least amount of space. The work in the bio-intensive garden is not as hard as in the “field” which is where all the peasants work at. The work that has to be done in each bed is to clean them, to “loose” the land so that it is apt for growing the crops and to rotate the kind of crops grown in each bed. Each member should be in charge of one “bed” but since not all of them participate in this activity, the ones working in the bio-intensive garden are always taking care of more than one bed.

Pablo:

Pablo is Gaby’s husband; he comes from an indigenous group from the south of Mexico – Oaxaca – and probably the only one in the community who was raised in the way of life they are trying to build since he comes from a small community of farmers and has worked the land all his life. He is educated in forest conservation and organic coffee production in Costa Rica, where he met Gaby. He is not very often in Las Nubes since he works in a city 4 hours away, so he comes only during the weekends. He works at an NGO helping communities implement their own programs such as ecotourism, etc. So the work pretty much relates also to the work they do in Las Nubes.

Even though he doesn’t contribute with his work at Las Nubes he is not seen in a negative way from the other members because Gaby spends all her time helping in the community (which is not the case of other members as I will point out later).

Jose:

Jose is the most recent member of Las Nubes, comes from Mexico City and he is an architect. He is single and comes here looking for a change of life, he is tired of the materialistic world he had been living before and wanted to find a much simple life to live in. Since he is not married, without children, he doesn't have a real interest on the community, but since it is the project of everybody else, he says he is happy to help. He says he had been considering the idea of a change of life because there was something missing in his life. He wanted to have his house outside the city and that was all he had contemplated, until he went to a course to Las Nubes and met Tomas. He was deeply motivated and interested and continued going there as a volunteer, he became a friend of Tomas and some time later, Tomas asked him if he wanted to become his partner in the dairy business. (Tomas knew Jose was interested in making a change in his life). Jose agreed and in a year he moved to Las Nubes. He told me his friends would not believe he was going to last there and there are several bets about how long he will last.

The day I met Jose was when I arrived, he received us and what I remember about him is a very cheerful, nice guy always smiling. One day he took us to where the cows are, to pick up the milk they will use that day for the cheese. He doesn't do the actual job of milking the cows, or making the cheese but he is the coordinator, he has to pick up the milk, see that everything is well, bring the milk to the cheese factory and see that everything runs smoothly.

Even though he doesn't have a real interest in the community (he told me once that he enjoys his solitude very much and likes to disappear for 2 or 3 days in a row if he is not needed) he is very open to participate and help in every possible activity there. He is busy all the time, running from one place to the other, he always seemed stressed with everything he had to do and I thought that was strange since one of the reasons he gave me to want a change of life from that of the city was to live a more "simple" life.

Betty:

She comes from Guadalajara, a big city in the west of Mexico. Biologist by profession, she is single with no children. She arrived to Las Nubes when she went there with a friend of her

who is Alicia's cousin. She liked the project and started going there as a volunteer, until they invited her to join them. She is the oldest member in the community after Alicia and Tomas. She works with the seeds and in the biointensive garden.

She is very quiet, it was difficult to get to know her, the first times we talked she seemed uneasy, did not want to talk much, especially about her personally. So it took longer to get to know her, but after a while she started telling me stories of her own

As Jose she is not very concern with the community but thinks is important to work on that in order to make the project succeed.

Her main concern is relationship with nature and the need for a simple life. All the others told me at one point or another that she was the one living with less in the community and that was highly regarded. She has a donkey to transport herself, she has a cabin, which consists of four walls made of some trees she had to cut from her piece of land, and she only has a roof where she has her bed. She makes her own clothes and she lives from courses she gives to other communities³. At the time I met her she was getting ready to travel to New Zeland to help a friend set up an ecological farm.

Pedro and Eva:

They have been living there for almost 1 year. Both of them work outside Las Nubes so they are rarely to be found there. They do have a conflict with the other members because they do not contribute to the work inside the community very often, but since they just build their house they have to work outside in order to pay it.

Pedro works at an NGO called Bio-planeta helping peasants or indigenous groups form their own communities and networks to help support themselves with different activities (similar to the one Pablo works with). He says he has been interested in nature since he was a kid through his father; he was a yoga guru and taught him the importance of relationship with nature.

Eva is a psychologist by profession and works in independent projects as consultant. They both have a daughter who's 3 years old, Lisa.

³ Communities of peasants or indigenous people in the region of Oaxaca and Chiapas.

Activities

The activities at Las Nubes are very diverse and can be outlined in the following order:

- 1. Ecovillage**
 - Forming community
- 2. School**
 - Formal and informal education
- 3. Conservation of the cloud forest**
 - Land trust
 - Environmental services
 - Research and ecological restoration
- 4. Agroecology**
 - Agroecological center 7 hectares for research and training
 - Biointensive garden
 - Seeds production
 - Courses and workshops
 - Agroecological group "cosecha sana"
- 5. Dairy production**
 - Production (sustainable cattle breeding in 30 hectares)
 - Processing (dairy plant)
 - Marketing
- 6. Ecotourism**
 - Ecovillage
 - Hotel
 - Weekend trips
 - Workshops
- 7. Environmental Education**
 - School and university visits
- 8. Apprenticeship program**
 - Local, national and international

9. Ecotechnologies

- Solar panels
- Hydraulic ram
- Biodigestor
- Dry toilettes, etc.

10. Sustainable regional development

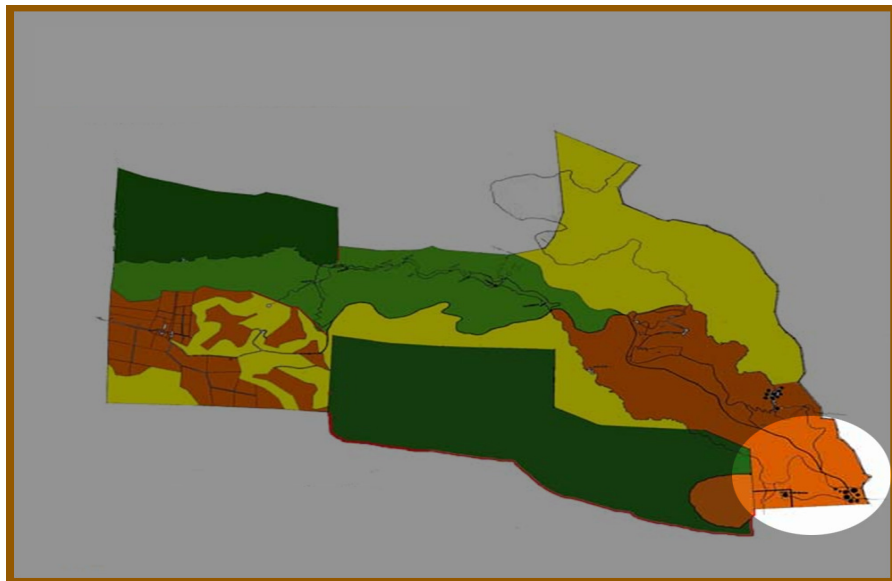
- Watershed

11. Networks and alliances

- Peasants organizations
- Universities
- NGO's
- Government agencies

Maps:

Total area of Las Nubes map:



The dark area is the area of conservation while the lightened area is the one reserved for the use of the people of Las Nubes.

Total area: 406 hectares

Total conservation area: 367 hectares

Location: Huatusco, Veracruz, Mexico 1,500 m. above sea level

Region: South – south east

Vegetation: Cloud forest

Land trust: The first one in Mexico

The area where they live and work is as follows:



5. ENVIRONMENTALISM AND LAS NUBES:

Finding Las Nubes was difficult; the main access was through the entry of University of Chipingo and then a long (15 minutes) drive through unpaved rocky road to get to the entrance of Las Nubes. Once there is a steel fence delimiting the beginning of it, right there the parking space for visitors. This is the main social area where we find the library, the store, the kitchen and dining room, the seminar room and hidden on the back, the volunteer's rooms, the school and what they call the "hotelito"⁴ (little hotel) which is the place where visitors to the seminars stay at.

This might be understood as the main social area, it is here where visitors as well as the members of Las Nubes come together for different activities. In the kitchen and dining area the member of Las Nubes have dinner twice a week, but there is always activity in the kitchen and dining place because the tourists and visitors to seminars have their meals here as well.

The library is also a common place to meet, here a large selection of books in many different topics as well as a computer but they do not have internet.⁵ This is where members of the community come together to work on the different classes they give.

Just outside the library there is a large bench overlooking the whole area, and here is where I saw the members of the community having their general meetings to talk about what they needed to do the following weeks or topics about how to organize the community. The volunteers also gather in this place late at night after the day's work. It is difficult to go out to the closest town if one doesn't get a ride with somebody who has a car so they generally stay there after work.

The store just beside the kitchen is where they sell various products from the network they have (Cosecha Sana). Here one can find eco soap, repellent for mosquitoes (eco friendly), diverse articles and types of foods that they make and books on organic production. The store also serves as the place where Tomas pays each week the workers on the field and the women in the kitchen.

⁴ The "hotelito" is only for visitors to seminars and courses. The ecotourists do not stay there; they stay at the cabins which are located 5-6kms away from this area, inside the cloud forest.

⁵ If they want to use internet they have to go to the store they have in town where they sell the cheese.

The school is hidden behind some big trees in the parking space, this is where the children (from the community as well as some children from the workers) come everyday.

The seminar room is an open room overlooking the whole area. This room is equipped with a projector, computers and it is possible to watch TV here (this is the only room in the community where one could do this, but it is not on very often)

The “hotelito” is between the seminar room and the parking spaces and it consists of 12 small rooms for visitors to courses and conferences.

One can continue driving from here on a small road, on the left side we find the research area the “biointensive garden” where they do research about how much they can produce in a very small space. After this the field; where we can find the “tree nursery”, (the place where they grow trees in order to replant them in the forest later), and the main field, where they grow different things in a larger scale for their consumption (beans, corn, etc).

All of these areas are connected within small walking distance, but if we continue with the road for a kilometer or so, taking the right side we will come to a walking path which goes through the forest for 5-6 kilometers to get to the cabins where the tourists stay.

Continuing the road with the car, for some kilometers we'll find Pedro and Eva's house, later Jose's and the last one will be Betty's house all of them separated by a good distance. Since the houses are not near each other and they are out of the road, it is not easy finding them.

Continuing this road, at the end, we'll come to the place where the cows are found, where they milk them and later send the milk to the cheese factory.

Tomas's house we'll find down the field also in a hidden place. The only house that is visible is Gaby's, but her house is the only one that is not a part of Las Nubes physically⁶ we can find her place just before entering the fence to the left side.

⁶ But she is considered a member because of the amount of work she puts into the construction of the community

Arriving at this place one could not notice that this was a community if it was not because they say it on their website and they repeat it several times during the presentation of the place to the tourists and visitors in general. There were not houses on sight, and I found it difficult to see who lived where and what they did.

Even though they have this common social area I described above, this is very far away from any of the houses and each house is very far from each other so they don't have the structure as other intentional communities do with common areas and houses near each other in order to contribute to socialization and to help each other.

In theory everyone at Las Nubes must be involved in every activity there, except the tasks performed by the workers. None of the members of Las Nubes work in the field or the actual making of the food in the kitchen but they supervise the activities taking place or plan for activities which will take place.

Common tasks in Las Nubes which rotate person in charge:

Leader during the courses or seminars

Guide tour for the tourists

Planning and supervision of the ecotourist weekend

School

Kitchen planning and supervision

Planning and maintenance in the bio-intensive garden

There are also some activities which are personal, these activities are mainly business oriented, and it is where the members that have no jobs outside Las Nubes get money from: The milk and cheese business is property of Tomas and Jose and the seeds business belongs to Betty.

Tomas and Jose own the cows together and make cheese and yogurt to sell outside Las Nubes; they sell specially to organic stores in Mexico City.

Betty is in charge of the seeds; she distributes them within the network and searches for new varieties of seeds to be able to have new vegetables or fruits the following season. Everything that she manages to sell outside the community and the network are earnings for her.

As I mentioned before they have the common activities, but not everybody is involved the same way here.

Pablo works outside Las Nubes; he works in a city call Puebla and only comes during the weekends. Eva and Pedro also have jobs outside the community and are seldom here. This creates tension within the community as I will explain later. Because these three members work outside, the work of the common activities is divided between the rest of them.

Alicia works mainly in the school, the bio-intensive garden, supervision of the kitchen and the planning and supervision of the tourist weekends.

Gaby works in the school, bio-intensive garden, supervision of the kitchen, planning and supervision of the tourist weekends and gives some conferences outside Las Nubes.

Tomas is the main tour guide for the tourists. He gives courses and conferences, deals with the workers in the field and has the milk business where he is mostly in charge of the marketing.

Jose is involved in the kitchen supervision, the tourist weekends, the planning of the courses and has the milk business (he picks up the milk in the morning to take it to the cheese factory and deals with the workers and problems that can arise here).

Betty works in the bio-intensive garden, the seeds and the tree nursery.

Although they have these common activities they very seldom work together. They divide the tasks so that they can rotate jobs not making it monotonous for them.

In theory, they would like to have common time working together, for example in the bio-intensive garden. Alicia, Tomas and Gaby told me in separate occasion that the way Las Nubes was planned was a mistake (talking about infrastructure), the houses were very far apart from each other and the common areas were very far from the houses, making it difficult to socialize. This makes it difficult to have a sense of community, which is a very important issue for them. So what they do is plan out activities where they work together.

They often have meetings, to plan out the activities that will take place or about problems that arise within the community.

They plan but it is not often things work out as planned. For example, in one of the meetings they have agreed that they should make Thursday the official day to work together in the bio-intensive garden. I was with Gaby and Betty the previous Tuesday to that day, where they were planning out what should be planted where and who should do what. Since this is a research area it took a long time to plan these activities, but that Thursday, nobody could work that day. There had been problems in each of the areas they had been working on and they had to follow up. During my stay this was a common situation. Each of them was very engaged in their activities, they were always very busy and I seldom saw them socializing in the common areas.

So my impression of Las Nubes was more that of a business than it was that of a community. It is run as a business and each of them engaged in the activities related to it as such. But when talking to them, they feel very much part of the community and connected to each other. They talk about the sense of community all of the time and how it is very important to them. Earning money the 'green' way contributes to the feeling of community

What makes them a community then?

None of them come from this place so they don't have a historical relationship to the land, but they do feel very attached to it, it is one of the symbols of their community.

At the time of my fieldwork, the only non Mexicans were Gaby, who is Danish and Joelle who is German. Pablo comes from an indigenous group in southern Mexico and the rest of them (Alicia, Tomas, Betty, Jose, Pedro and Patty) come from middle upper class in Mexico.

They all have higher education and these are very different from one another. Tomas is an agronomist, Alicia and Patty are psychologists, Jose is an architect, Betty is a biologist and Gaby and Pablo have studied forest conservation and organic coffee production.

Ethnicity didn't seem to play a role here either, since they came from different places but it was more a matter of educational background. The fact that they come from different educational backgrounds is important because of the knowledge each of them bring into the community and the way they understand it, but it does not seem to be a problem to construct the community.

I noticed that though the way they expressed themselves about the community and their expectations were different, what added meaning to their common project was the land, the ideology and earning money the 'green way'. I therefore decided to focus my research on the meaning given to the community rather than its structure and form.

But how is it that the group can cohere when their members perceive significant differences in them? How can the group speak as a whole to the rest of the world when the internal discourse among its members is so diverse? How does it come to pass those individuals who have such disparate understanding of the group's symbols, and of the world, come to have such a committed attachment to the group?

In the following section I will explain how each of them relates to each activity and how they express themselves about it.

What they talk about: Topics on environmentalist discourse

Preserving traditional culture and indigenous knowledge

One of the topics I observed they talked about, especially Tomas and Alicia was the concern with protecting traditional culture and indigenous knowledge.

In order to exemplify this I will talk about some experiences I had with Tomas and later explain how the community is involved here.

The day I arrived to Las Nubes the weekend with the tourists began; we got a presentation from the place, what they did there and heard about their goals. The presentation was fantastic, precise and detailed, Tomas explained first how the land was eroded because of the grazing of cows, how they fixed it with natural methods and how they changed their way of

life to more sustainable ways of living. It was an excellent presentation which lasted for about 2 hours. It was presented in a room equipped with computers, a projector and the presentation was done in power point. After that, we walked around the forest with Tomas, who continued telling us facts about the cloud forest, the vegetation, the life of the plants. He answered all the questions posed by the tourists and I was impressed with his knowledge. He knew every plant name in the forest as well as in the field, the animals that lived there and everything about ecological technology available in the market and in Las Nubes. He talked about the research carried out by them, how they worked the land without chemicals or machinery, what they use if they need electricity, the importance of dry toilets, etc. All day the tourists continued posing him questions and he patiently answered all of them.

After a whole day walking the forest and the field, we went to the temazcal, which Tomas said for him it was one of the most important parts of the ecotourists weekend and personally it meant a lot to him. The temazcal is of pre-Hispanic heritage and in Mexico the use of this ceremony has been recovered over the last 10 years. It is a ritual ceremony that was celebrated among indigenous cultures as therapeutic cleansing. A volcanic rock is heated until red-hot and it is placed in the center of an igloo type construction, where a group reunites. After the initial ceremony, the conch shell is sounded, signaling the beginning of the temazcal bath. The group gets comfortable inside the temazcal and the stones are called for. The door is closed, sealing off all the light and sealing in the heat. Herbs are thrown on the stones to create a curative vapor, heating the temazcal to even higher temperatures. The body may reach a temperature of 40°C during the temazcal.

As we were inside receiving the stones Tomas and an Argentinean woman who lived in the neighboring town, friend of the family, were leading the ceremony. Besides being therapeutic it is also spiritual, the meaning of the temazcal is also to reconnect with the mother earth, Tomas explained. The temazcal is a microcosm, representing the universe, the north, the south, the east and the west, also meaning earth, wind, fire and water. The fire heats the stones placed towards the east meaning the sun which is the father element which comes to fertilize the mother earth (which is the inside of the temazcal). When we enter the temazcal we return once again to the mother's womb. She is our beloved mother, concerned with the health of the children and she receives us there, this is a manifestation to cure us of physical and spiritual ills. The entrance way is low and small and through it we enter a small, dark and humid space in this way recreating the uterus, cutting off the outside world and giving us the

chance to look inside and find ourselves again. Our re-emergence through this narrow opening represents our rebirth from the darkness and silence of the womb – it was told. Trough out the ceremony Tomas and the woman were talking about this and asking us to leave any problems we had, any worries or anything that we dislike about ourselves, to throw it to the fire so that we could go out of there clean. They asked us to sing and scream so that we could leave our impurities there.

I felt skeptic about the whole thing, the woman leading the ceremony with Tomas had made us dance a pre-hispanic dance before going into the Temazcal, and the whole talk inside the Temazcal which made people cry and scream just made me skeptic about it.

How can all these great ideas about conservation and sustainable development be followed by this ceremony? To me the whole idea of conservation and sustainable development had really attracted my attention and made me want to stay in this place to find out more about it, but at the same time I was puzzled when I experienced the way this dance and ceremony were ‘used’ - which to me neither sounded logic correlating with the whole conservation discourse. It was as if there were 2 very different ideas running the discourse.

I found much of what Kay Milton explains as the myth of primitive ecological wisdom⁷ in the next episodes I will describe:

Tomas later commented, that the one thing he enjoyed the most was the temazcal session with the tourists, the people in the ecovillage and with the workers. He said it allowed him to share with them his relationship with the earth “the mother earth”. When he was explaining the temazcal to the tourists he said: “It is taken from different indigenous cultures, the representation of the north, south, east and west mean different things depending on the location of the sea and other symbols in each culture. But we have taken the Native American Indian belief because they were the first environmentalists. There is much to learn from the way they protect their environment and are in peace with the earth.

⁷ The understanding that non-industrial people posses a kind of primitive ecological wisdom is widely held within industrial society and has an important place on environmentalist thought. The myth of primitive ecological wisdom is fundamental to the radical environmentalist critique of industrialism, for which without the assumption that non industrial societies live sustainably in their environments, there would be no grounds for arguing that industrialism is the cause of environmental destruction. (Milton 1996:109)

Another time at the ecotourist weekend, while he was showing the biointensive garden to the tourists, somebody asked about a mushroom called peyote⁸ that they were growing. Tomas said: “We use it during the ceremony before we start cultivating and when we are going to pick up the crops. This we have taken from some of the indigenous groups, mainly the one from Veracruz⁹. They believe that it connects you to the earth and makes you become more aware of things. We do it with the family, and we sing and dance the whole night celebrating these 2 important seasons”.

These kinds of communities they are trying to imitate might have very ecological and low impact living, but protecting nature might not be their main concern. As Milton writes: “Some of them may live their lives in ways that are environmentally sound and ecologically balance because an incidental consequence of human activities and factors rather than being an ideal or a goal that is actively pursued. In other words, the practices in which some non industrial peoples engage may be environmentally benign but their cultures, their ways of understanding the world are not.” (Milton 1996:112-113)

Tomas was the most involved in these activities, although he said that the whole community participates in this. I heard Jose talking about the crops dance with the mushrooms, how he participates in this and how it was one of the activities he was invited to during the time he was thinking about joining the community which made an impact on him.

I never heard Gaby talk about participating in neither the temazcal nor the crops ceremony. She did not define her ideology through these activities as the others did. She was more focused towards politics, anti-globalization anti-consumerism and an equal society.

One day, Alicia invited me to go to the neighboring town where there was a huge religious party due to Saint Patron of the town (a typical festivity among Catholics). There were going to be dances honoring the saints and she would participate in one of them. When I arrived there I saw that everybody involved were indigenous groups coming from different areas in

⁸ A mushroom containing mescaline. (Myerhoff quoted by Cohen 1994:38-39))

⁹ He is refereeing to the peyote pilgrimage of the Huichol group; although they recognized the power of peyote to induce visions of the truth, it is not its visionary power that makes peyote sacred, but its derivation from the ancient homeland, to where the pilgrims journey under the direction of their mara'akame, partly to hunt the peyote. (Myerhoff quoted by Cohen 1994:38-39))

the state, dressed in typical dresses. The only ones who did not belong to these groups was Alicia's group, which was formed by middle-upper class people, all white and dressed in pre-hispanic clothes dancing pre-hispanic dances, contrary to the typical indigenous dances characteristic of these events. They were dancing at the same time the indigenous groups were dancing in the big square in front of the church. I noticed that it was Alicia's group being observed by the indigenous groups, they were 'the others', they were not part of that group.

Research and tradition:

Research was actually what they seemed most concerned with. The research carried out in Las Nubes, is primarily in agriculture, the research area is the bio-intensive garden, where they try to cultivate as much as possible in the smallest space available. They are very thorough with the research as I observed several times when Gaby and Betty were working there. They wrote down everything they planted in each of the beds, how often they rotate crops, what they can plant with what, and try out different kinds of seeds which also the kind of research carried out by Betty. They use the latest technologies on solar panels, hydraulic pumps to get water, composts and transform manure from the cattle into methane gas to be used in the same way as propane.

One day at a conversation I had with Tomas he commented: "Many things that we have learned are from people who might be a last generation, things so simple as to drive the cattle in the field, to produce a determinate thing; industry is taking the role of doing most things in our lives. I like to think of this place as the monasteries were a long time ago in Europe, where knowledge was kept in the middle of all the chaos outside, so that it could be used whenever it was necessary...We feel we have the responsibility to learn, erase and leave behind bad attitudes from this culture, take the good things and grow into another way of living where we don't destroy our planet...but in order to do that we obviously have to live here, we need to do research in agriculture, in education, etc... we realized that to live here we couldn't do it alone and we need a community, so we formed a community, our water needs the forest, so we conserve the forest, to produce our food we need to learn agro ecology so we learned agroecology..."

For example, instead of using the tractor to work the land they use an ox to pull the plough, Tomas told me that it was difficult to find someone who knew how to work with the ox, since

nobody does that anymore. Something else they did in a traditional way was to try to get rid of moles since that is the biggest problem they have as a pest. They hired somebody who makes traps for the moles instead of killing them with poison. Tomas said it was difficult finding a person who still knew how to do all of these activities which are replaced by the use of chemicals or industry.

The global and the local:

The person that talked most about this topic was Gaby. She was very clear when it came to how the community should be, why it was important. The topic she talked most about was the need to support local economies. She would not go to town and shop in big supermarkets but preferred going to each vendor in the street. She said that if they did not buy from them the economy would suffer; big chain supermarkets take peoples jobs and ruin economies. The same came when she talked about large scale agriculture, she was totally against it since she explained it ruins the land and ruins economies. One should produce locally and buy locally. One should be aware of the seasons, it is not possible to be aware of the seasons when you go to a big supermarket, and they offer products all the time, even though they are not in season because they bring them from far away. The benefits of trade do not remain then locally.

She talked a lot about anti globalization but I noticed that they are a product of globalization themselves, they are a reaction to it proposing an alternative path more responsible to people.

Relationship with Nature:

Betty and Jose were the ones who talked most about this subject.

I observed Betty several times at the tree nursery, watering the plants, taking care of them and then in the seeds room, where she would spend hours separating the seeds from crops and categorizing them carefully. One day at the seeds room, she told me what was important to her was her relationship with plants. "I talk to them she said, and they do respond to me. People ask me all the time what do I do to make them grow as they do. It is because I care for them. If you are in peace with the plants you are also in peace with the world".

Another day, I was sick, I had a terrible cold and I was on my way to town to go and buy a medicine which could help me right away (in Mexico you can get medicine for almost

anything without a prescription) when I met Betty who was heading to the bio-intensive garden. I told her where I was going and why and she said “but you don’t need to get medicine, I have some herbs that will help you get rid of that cold, no need to buy any chemicals”. I just wanted to get rid of that cold as soon as possible, but I could see how it was important to her for me to take the herbs instead, so I took them and eventually got better.

Spiritual Awareness:

Jose was the person who I saw most concerned about this topic. One day I was walking with Jose going to his house, he had invited me to see it and have a cup of tea there. He said we should take a short cut and we walked through the field, where there was not really a path, it was quite a long way to his place so we talked a lot during the way there. Suddenly he stopped and was silent in front of a tree, I asked what had happened and first he hesitated telling me but then he said “I had to cut a branch of this tree so we could walk through and was apologizing to the tree”. Later on when we arrived to his place he told me that one of the things he loved the most about his cabin was that he could just go out and get water from the water path that passed just outside his cabin. I went with him to get some fresh water and then he got quiet again while picking up the water, he said he had to give thanks for what he was taking from nature. That was his daily ritual, going outside his home to be with nature and be in peace with the world.

I had to ask him at that point if they belong to some religion, and he laughed, he said “why? Do you think we belong to a sect? No, we don’t belong to any religion, we just like to enjoy things, we like to dance and we like to play music (the drums mostly) and that is all. I enjoy my relationship with nature and I don’t know about what the other ones believe in.

Education and sense of community:

Education is the most important topic for Alicia. For her, traditional schools perpetuate consumer oriented activities and environmental disruptive practices, so having the school at home and being in charge of teaching the children allows them to change attitudes and their belief system. They avoid the competitively based model of traditional education.

Beside reading, writing, math, languages they teach the children practical training in what they do there. They teach them about the land and how to build homes, how to make their own clothes. What I find interesting is that they do want the children to learn how to work the land and be able to do everything but none of them work in the field themselves, this is one of the contradictions they are facing, but are aware they must change.

Another important topic that they are concerned about and want the children to grow up with is equality. That everybody's job should be regarded and valued in the same way regardless of what it is. I will illustrate my point in the following story.

I was having tea at Gaby's place one day, when she told me that while they were living in the city of Puebla, where Pablo works, their son Mario used to play pretending that he would go to work with his briefcase and his laptop. She asked him why he would go to work with a briefcase and not with a hammer or with something else, to what he replied "but that is what work means, to go to your office with your briefcase and your computer!" She told me that she didn't like that at all and that was one of the reasons they started looking for places to live outside the city. She said that now she loves when he plays that he goes to work and he pretends being a cook in the kitchen, or working with the cows or building houses.

Simple life:

This was a subject that everybody talked about, and what they meant by it, was the need to live an uncomplicated life only with what is necessary and not more than that. I heard the expression many times "to live a sustainable life only taking from the system what it can give and not more than that". As I mentioned before it was Betty who was the representation of this 'simple' way of life they are searching to achieve.

This was an important topic to them and they did have problems dealing with it. For example Pedro and Eva were not regarded as well because they built the biggest house in the community and they did not work there but outside in order to pay that house, without contributing to the community as much as the others.

Tomas told me a few times that he felt they still lived with many inconsistencies in their lives when it came to this matter, he said that they were charging a good deal of money to the

tourists to teach them how to live a simple way of life, and he didn't feel right about that, but he explained that it was needed if they wanted to continue with the research they were doing.

He said, having a car was another inconsistency, and they would probably need to get rid of it in the future, but it was very necessary and they were searching for ways to solve that problem.

The power of food

During the weekend I participated as a tourist I had the opportunity to be served the food they offer the visitors. It was an exquisite buffet for every meal (breakfast, lunch and dinner) beautifully presented and it was announced as vegetables produced in their own garden and made by locals with traditional dishes. I have to say it was delicious. When they talked about the cooking and living in Las Nubes, they proudly mentioned their kitchen and how it was for them one of the important points of living there. It was healthy since it was grown at home, organically and it was the representation of their healthy way of life in opposition to industrialized society with processed foods which are bad for the health.

It wasn't all the time this food was made and they ate together, but when they had a group of visitors coming, the kitchen would work all day to present these delicious dishes to the outside world as a representation of their way of living.

In a course they held one week, teaching people how to create their own ecotourist business, at the end of the week, they took them through the bio-intensive garden to pick their own vegetables so that they could prepare them for dinner. The participants were excited, it was the culmination of the course and the food represented what they had been learning about.

Atkinson describes this in his work "The inhabitants of modern, urban society are described as over cultured, cut off from their cultural roots. Their distinctive lifestyles, including their diet, are de-natured, robbed of goodness and so on. It is therefore the task of health related practice to restore our lost balance". (Atkinson 1979:86)

The outside world

Workers in the field

Most of the workers in the field come from a small community close to Las Nubes called Tepecingo and some of them have been working with Tomas since he moved here. Tomas told me that he had invited the workers to form part of the community in the beginning but they have not agreed. We like their way of life, they have a traditional community. Tomas had explained to me that everyone at Las Nubes is respected and seen as equals and that most of the workers that have been with him from the beginning were considered part of the community. But it is my perception that the locals did not consider this their project or their way of life.

One time when I was talking to one of the workers at Las Nubes, he said to me: "I don't understand why tourists come here all the time to see how we work the land. What is interesting about that? If I had money to travel I would go to a city, I think I would like to live in a city, but I don't have money to do that".

During my stay, it happened twice that the workers were having a celebration in their community, so they just simply did not go to work, none of the workers showed up while Las Nubes was having courses and tourists and they needed all of the workers there. I remember Alicia was so upset that took the car and went to pick them up. Some of them showed up later, some didn't show up at all.

Another time, during a course for people interested in doing ecotourism, everyone was introducing themselves in the beginning of the course saying where they were from, and why were they interested in taking that course. The participants were from very different backgrounds, there were mostly Mexicans, working in tourism, privately and publicly; some managers of the tourism offices in Mexico, some other ones wanting to have their own business and some others already owning a business. There were also 2 French girls who had come there only to take the course. They were studying international development and have heard about Las Nubes and were interested in the way they do ecotourism. There was also an Italian woman who had been living in Mexico for a while and had met Tomas; she was interested in having a little eco business of her own. In addition to the above mentioned there were also 2 local farmers, friends of Tomas who he had invited to be part of the course.

What I found very interesting here, was how everyone introduced themselves. All of the managers talked about politics and how tourism is a very important part of development and how it is not taken care of in Mexico. The French girls talked about international development and they were interested to see how Mexico was dealing with tourism. While one of the locals said: "I have no education so I don't know most of what all of you know. I grew up here and I have worked the land all of my life. The word ecotourism does not mean much to me and that is why I am here trying to learn new things. Tomas invited me to participate with all of you so that I could learn, so I want to learn new words and new ways of working the land as all of you know how to, to see if we can make things better here."

What I find interesting is that the course was trying to promote the very kind of life of these workers while they were only doing what they had done their entire lives.

The way I see it is that a concern about the environment, has to do with a privileged position. When you already have the means, when you don't have to worry about what to eat or how to pay for your basic needs, then you are in the privileged position to worry about the environment.

Tomas is in a privileged position to do this kind of work because he has inherited this land, he does not have to worry about how to pay the mortgage for it, what they will produce and how they will feed their children because they already have that taken care of, so they have a clean start to build an ecological business.

For the members of Las Nubes taking care of the nature is a 'way of life', an ideology whilst for the workers and the peasants at the course it is the medium through which they can survive, they use their environment to cultivate their food and earn a living. They don't share the same view of the world; they don't share the same ideology.

The volunteers

At the time of my fieldwork there were three volunteers working at Las Nubes. There were two Mexicans, a guy and a girl and a German girl. The Mexican guy had just finished

university; he had studied communications and was looking for “something” meaningful to do in his life, he had arrived there through Betty who is a friend of a friend.

The Mexican girl was studying nutrition at university and was very interested in organic food production, she had arrived there through her university, they had gone a year before to visit the ecovillage and she started writing to Tomas.

The German girl, Joelle, was in her first year of university in England and was studying International Politics and Economics; she arrived there through the internet. She was looking for a place to spend her summer doing research related to her studies and when she found the website about Las Nubes, she thought it was very interesting, applied and went there.

I got close to Joelle in this group and it was actually through her that I got to know the workers in the field and the other volunteers. She was interested in researching sustainable development and had been working a year before in Beirut. She worked together in the field with the workers all day. She was very impressed with the work they did in Las Nubes but felt that that it was not the reality that she wanted to see; she said “I think this is part of the solution, not the problem”.

The volunteers normally come from different places, and they mostly contact Las Nubes through the internet which is a very important tool for Tomas to be known in the outside world, and it works. They are also known through visits from universities and conferences they give, such as the case of the Mexican girl.

Tomas commented once about this subject “We do need that more people are willing to do this because everything will be easier then, it is easier to learn when you have a reference of somebody else who has done things that way, you take that knowledge and improve it and you can get ahead faster and then be able to transmit that knowledge to another project, region in the world (now with the internet communication is easier) and of course while more people know and do this then magically it becomes an explosion and people will be aware that it is necessary to do this”.

The use of the internet is a very important tool to be present in the environmentalist discourse in the global world, they are contacted by people all over the world and the discourse is transmitted this way globally.

The tourists

Tourists are only allowed in Las Nubes once a month, but they do play a very important role. Most of them are upper-middle class Mexicans, from big cities. Tomas said that it was a very limited niche for this kind of tourism, because the whole experience would not be comfortable for the very rich Mexicans and the price was too high for low income class. It is through ecotourism that Las Nubes earns money to subsidize the research they do.

I feel the ecotourists play a very important role on the making of the community because the members of Las Nubes are representing themselves to the tourists as an alternative way of living, a construction against the modernized world, technology and the stress of modern society. This is where much of the script is told over and over again and thus the building of the identity develops.

6. CONCLUSION

The community as a symbol here provides a medium for the expression of very diverse interests and aspirations. It is different what they express themselves as a community as to what they express as individuals. What they express as a community is a simplified version presented to the outside world which is quite specific “this is a place designed for the modeling and sharing of alternative methods of food production, responsible travel and sustainable living practices”. The movement or the cause they stand for is symbolic and it summarizes all the ambitions, political issues and aspirations of its members.

When they are representing themselves publicly, the internal varieties disappear; they are searching for a simple way of life but privately it is a complex and varied group of people some with political and economic interests such as anti-globalization, some spiritual and some with social interests, all of them negotiating a common identity.

It is a community in the making so a lot of the structures and forms are yet not laid out; they are still trying to find a way on how to organize themselves socially, how to organize the business and their economic activities, they are continuously negotiating. What makes them successful is the use of the community as a symbol, that each of the members input their own meaning allowing them to relate successfully.

Symbols are effective because they are imprecise, they are therefore the ideal media through which people can speak a common language and behave in apparently similar ways, and participate in the same rituals. They continually transform the reality of difference into the appearance of similarity and hereby unite them into their opposition both to each other and to those outside. (Cohen 1985:21)

My perception is that they see the community and the way the community should be different, they all have different backgrounds and different reasons for being there, they are looking for different things, but they still have a successful relationship because they speak of a ‘community’, a ‘simple life’ which may appear as a common interest, but they way the are experiencing it is different.

The fact that each of them is drawn to the community for different reasons and understands the community differently makes them conscious of their differences and helps them create their identity by formulating what they want to become and not to become. This is what Cohen describes as self-awareness.

Tomas defined the community as egalitarian “everyone here is the same”, and so it may appear to the visitor, but they do have ways of attributing reputation and status, for example, the amount of work done inside the community and living “simple”.

The community provides the members with a model of political formulation of their interests and aspirations, but it does not mean that they perceive an exact identity between themselves and their community.

They are constructing themselves in opposition to the globalized and modernized world. This is important in the construction of the community; they are expressing their identity in opposition with the consumer oriented, technological, individualistic modern society, this is where they express how they differ from the outside world, their boundaries. The boundary helps then symbolized the community in two different ways, the sense they differentiate themselves to the globalized world and their sense of community experienced through all the complexities of their lives and experience.

Communities might import structural forms across their boundaries but having done so; they often infuse them with their own meanings and use them to serve their own symbolic purposes (Cohen 1985:37). We see here the use of rituals such as the Temazcal and the peyote which are brought in from other cultures and given new meanings help them create both a sense of community and a common identity.

We observe how the past is being used as a resource; it is a “selective construction” of the past with the use of the ox and the way they catch the moles, the way they use the traditional dances.

Rituals are important in symbolic repertoire through which community boundaries are affirmed and reinforced, they confirm and strengthen social identity and people’s sense of social location. It is an important mean through which people experience community (Cohen

1985:50). The ritual of the temazcal, the peyote and the dancing and the playing of the drums are important rituals to form a sense of belonging, a relation to the place since none of them come from there, to create a common identity.

The fact that this group have different backgrounds seem to play an important role on the construction of this community, each of them bringing a specialized knowledge into it and bringing in their own experiences.

Las Nubes is a specialized community with a high degree of professionalism. The work Betty does do not interfere with the one Jose does and so for. Their business is only a way to get money inside the community to do their research but it takes all of their time. They are living a stressful life, not a simple one.

It is run as a business they coordinate and administrate all of the activities while the workers in the field and the women in the kitchen do the actual hard work. It is a typical employer-employee relation. The workers in the field may be in appearance part of the community but they do not form part of the movement, they don't share the same symbols, this is the reason why the conflicts arise when they don't go to work, for example.

They are successful in the business, what is a challenge is the social aspect of it. It is difficult to socialize starting by the way the infrastructure is laid out. They live very far apart from each other making it difficult to meet. It is particularly difficult to have a social life when their landscape is challenging, bad planning has social consequences.

The food they produce, their 'green business', the presentation of the place to the tourists are all symbols of pride that are helping them create their identity.

The use of the community as a symbol is helping the transformation from a green business to a community, because symbols have only a loose relation to their content, therefore the form can persist while the content changes.

They are transforming into a community, creating a relationship to the land. The school plays a very important role in this matter, it is the way they are making sure their ideology will survive; the children are acquiring these values growing up here.

The script is evolving. There are agreements like the need to take care of nature, create a community, living sustainable, living 'green'. There are disagreements with those who do not follow the script. Negotiation is going on. Environmentalism is a huge debate, they all link to it differently, this makes Las Nubes a successful enterprise, and the economy is the key to their success.

Wilden writes that so long as quantified labor potential circulates as the primary commodity in the social ecosystem, and so long nature remains commoditized – rather than simply used – it is impossible to see how any variable array of properly human solutions to our economic-ecological crisis will be available to us. We have to discover a way of circulating between each other the qualitative component of labor potential: the creative aspect of human ability to organize and in-form matter and energy and relations. (Wilden 1978:122)

In a society based on the circulation of creativity and the true recognition of human diversity and difference, the economic abstraction and reification represented by the so called free and equal autonomous individual – the modern self – would disappear. In such a society, the exploitation of nature, class, race and sex as we know them could no longer exist. For in matters of creative capacity, as distinct from the ability to perform in a rigid economic system of caste and class, all human beings are truly equal. Wilden 1978:123)

They have demonstrated that they can be very creative in suggesting alternative ways of living, both socially and economically

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