

There is No Environmental Sustainability Without Social Sustainability

By [Saybrook University](#) | January 25th, 2012

The following is a guest post by our friends at Saybrook University's [Organizational Systems Program](#) (a 3p sponsor) – designed for students who want to understand the nature of organizations, collaborative practices, and transformative change.



Valle del Bravo, Mexico

By Kathia C. Laszlo, Ph.D.

Sustainability is a global challenge. But in every place around the world, it requires a local response. The particularity of the problems — and also of the solutions — is connected to the culture and circumstances of specific places.

Some of the work I'm doing in central Mexico involves coaching ecosocial entrepreneurs and designing learning processes to translate ideas into action to regenerate social and environmental

conditions. Last summer, I was part of a learning event that was a collaboration between my nonprofit [Syntony Quest](#), the [University of the Living Environment](#) in Mexico, and the German social entrepreneurship organization [ThinkCamp](#). The event was a reunion of ecosocial entrepreneurs and other social leaders from Mexico committed to create sustainable solutions. We took the group to three day camping adventure in the woods near [Valle de Bravo](#). The experience was filled with nature walks, conversations around the camp fire, group games and sharing meals. The purpose was to share experiences from the different contexts of our practice with the intention of establishing deeper connections among ourselves and with nature—those connections, after all, are the foundation of the work we do in the world.

The campsite of our event was high in one of the mountains that surround the village of Valle de Bravo, which is pretty far away from modern civilization. The artificial lake of Valle de Bravo is an important reservoir that provides drinking water to Mexico City, which is just northeast of the area. The health of the forests in the surrounding mountains is a key factor for water catchment and other critical environmental services. However, the many communities that surround the village depend to a great degree from the forests for their survival.

In preparation for the event, I went with one of the camp guides and two other facilitators to scout the site in order to design the walks and conversations in nature. To everyone's surprise, many of the trails were blocked and seriously damaged from recent logging. It was a sad scene since many of the trees logged were old growth. This camp site belongs to a rural community as an "ejido," or "common land," shared by the people of the local indigenous community. This

group's survival hinges on subsidized, monoculture, agricultural practices and from the selling of fire wood.

As I managed my way through pieces of logs and debris splashed with plastic bottles and other garbage here and there, I experienced a wide range of emotions:

- I felt sadness — This forest is old and beautiful. We can't afford to lose it. How can we protect it? How can we value it intrinsically rather than as a source or "raw material"?
- I felt anger — How can anyone treat nature in this way? Don't they see its sacredness?
- I felt despair — But, what can I do?
- I felt guilt — I'm part of the problem. I am privileged. My lifestyle contributes to an economic system that is unfair and oppresses large portions of the population.

Social issues are intrinsic to environmental issues. As long as there are people living in poverty, we won't be able to protect forests or clean lakes. Poverty is not only lack of economic opportunities, but also lack of educational and meaning-making opportunities. The human community that lives near this forest is simply seeking for ways to make their lives work. How can we create rich lives (as in simple, but with abundant well-being) without exceeding the regenerative capacity of the planet?

This forest can be sustainably managed. The wood gathered could be transformed by the community into valuable products rather than be sold off as firewood. There are many herbs and mushrooms that can also be sustainably harvested. There are permaculture projects that can be initiated to increase the food production by and for the community. And many people, like our group of entrepreneurs, would be happy to visit and enjoy hikes and other outdoor activities while contributing to the resiliency of such a magical place.

By the end of the camp, our group considered a simple question: Do we want to have our next gathering in a different place or do we want to come back to this mountain? The idea of learning in nature and with nature is intrinsic to these gatherings, but a new dimension was added: the idea that we need to be reciprocal. We received so much from this place that it is our responsibility to give back. So the agreement was to return to this forest and to this community in the future in order to create an ongoing connection and contribute to its development.

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