

NEWS FROM HONDURAS

Honduras Community Support Corporation

November 2004

Helping rural Hondurans to live better on the land
and to protect the land they live on

A Unique Local Organization

A major focus for HCSC this year has been the formation of a locally controlled “land trust” – an idea that has stirred excitement and enthusiastic participation among residents of the mountain communities where HCSC has been working. As far as we know, this is a truly unique initiative in this part of the world.

The effort was launched with a Sunday afternoon planning session in April at Nola’s house on the coastal highway near Omoa. More than a dozen residents of the mountain communities participated (most having walked for miles to reach the highway). The group agreed on a name (“Fundacion Eco Verde Sostenible,” or “FECOVESO”) and a mission statement (“To support community efforts to protect the environment of Northwest Honduras and promote the health, education



Looking toward protected watershed from Nueva Vida corn field

and well-being of the people”). They also agreed to establish a board of directors that would include representatives of the communities in which and for which the organization will hold and protect land, plus a representative of HCSC and from 1 to 3 other Hondurans committed to the organization’s mission.

The process of legally establishing the organization has been slower and more difficult than the planning process, but with generous help from attorney Arturo Sabillon, the numerous steps required are now nearly complete. One of the requirements for incorporation that local people could not have met without help from



A meeting of the FECOVESO Board

HCSC was that the group-in-formation had to have a bank account with a balance equivalent to \$2000 – another example of how difficult it is for these hardworking, capable people to achieve the legal status needed to protect their own interests.

Once FECOVESO is incorporated, HCSC will transfer to it the parcels of land that have been acquired to protect critical watersheds. At present these lands include 13 acres above the water source for Las Brisas de Rio Negro acquired this year, 24 acres above the water source for Camino Nuevo and San Miguelito, acquired 2 years ago, and an adjacent 20 acres acquired this year, plus a small parcel surrounding the spring that

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FECOVESO Board members at work

Environmental Education

The work of this year's HCSC intern, Genevieve ("Gen," or, in Spanish, Genoveva) Williams was focused on environmental education. Gen, whose home is in Seattle and who had just graduated from Lawrence College in Wisconsin, arrived in Honduras in March after spending 6 weeks in a language school in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.

One part of her internship involved working in the elementary schools in Camino Nuevo, Nueva Vida, and San Miguelito. After familiarizing herself with the communities and their environments, she talked with students about the water systems serving their communities, the watersheds feeding these systems, the consequences of deforestation and other factors threatening the watersheds, and the importance of preserving forests and otherwise protecting the watersheds. Another part of her work involved presentations on government and environmental policy to students in an agricultural science class at a college in Puerto Cortes, and in a continuing education program for "rural administration" in Omoa.



Gen Williams with Nueva Vida children

"In the capital, the Olancho contingent was met by marchers who walked just as far from other parts of the country to denounce environmental degradation It might seem odd that in one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere trees and natural resources have riled such fervor. But at the heart of this grassroots movement are the demands for an end to some of Latin America's most traditional social ills, like corruption, exclusion and inequality. As march leader and Catholic priest Father Andres Tamayo explains, the mismanagement of natural resources causes poverty, especially in a country where the majority of the people depend on the land for their sustenance."

-- NPR report (7/6/04) on a demonstration in Tegucigalpa



Gen, Nola and local residents on the newly fenced boundary of protected watershed near Cerro Negro (see map on back page)

Las Flores: Road and School

When washouts from heavy rains haven't interfered, the tortuously steep road to Las Flores is passable for the community's one vehicle, the thirty-something-year-old pickup belonging to Francisco ("Chico") Portillo, who hauls people and supplies for local families as well as supplying the tiny store he operates in his home. Several ancient culverts have been crucial in keeping the road from washing out altogether, but these were rusting away and beginning to cave in. This year HCSC purchased used heavy duty metal drums, which Nola and Chico hauled to the site, where a community work crew installed them end-to-end to replace the failing culverts.

HCSC also continues to provide bonuses for Las Flores teachers on the completion of a year's work. This year, HCSC-supporter Isabel Guy – who conceived and launched this bonus program to help solve the teacher-retention problem that had plagued the community – was able to participate in the end-of-term ceremony at which bonuses were presented.



Las Flores children (hats courtesy of HCSC)

The Bridge

Residents of Camino Nuevo, Nueva Vida, San Miguelito, and Monte Vista travel on foot to the town of Omoa – some to shop or visit a clinic, some to work for wages, a few to catch a bus to travel further afield. Mountain trails from these communities converge on the Rio Omoa at a point where, in the past, people had to ford the river to reach the road that would take them into Omoa (see map on back page). At lower water levels, wading across the river was a mere inconvenience. At higher water levels it became dangerous, and following the torrential storms of the rainy season it became impossible.

The communities solicited funding from HCSC for materials for a suspension bridge that would provide a dry, safe crossing in all seasons. We agreed to help, and our commitment allowed them to obtain additional funding, so they were able to complete the bridge.



Nueva Vida residents gathering for meeting at the school

Nueva Vida Teacher's House

To walk the steep trails between Omoa and Nueva Vida takes somewhere between 1 1/2 and 4 hours, depending on one's age and physical condition. (For most gringos it is 4 hours.) The community has been blessed with an excellent elementary school teacher, but it was scarcely possible for him to make the round trip from Omoa every day, and the only housing available for him in the community was in the already crowded homes of local residents. Nueva Vida leaders knew that HCSC had helped the community of Las Flores to build a teacher's house, and requested similar assistance for their own community.

HCSC agreed to fund the cost of materials and several weeks of wages for a construction manager. Community leader Nestor Lainez (also a FECOVESA board member) offered to donate a piece of his land for the building. A community meeting was then held in the school to decide on the exact location and to



New bridge over Rio Omoa

complete plans for construction. HCSC President Nola White participated in the meeting, along with most of the residents of the community. A site on the hilltop next to the school was agreed upon, and the house has now been completed – a modest structure with spectacular views of the surrounding mountains and distant coastline.

Las Brisas de Rio Negro

Las Brisas de Rio Negro is a very remote community to the west of the Omoa region near the Guatemala border. HCSC acquired a critical piece of watershed in the community last year, and has been working with residents to solicit help in developing a community-wide gravity-feed water system. It is hoped that necessary assistance can be provided by the Honduran government and by volunteers from the University of New Mexico – but such arrangements take time.

In the meantime HCSC has provided materials for a water line to the school (pictured at right).



New Organization (continued from front page)

is the water source for Nueva Vida. It is hoped that more land can be acquired in the watershed above San Miguelito and Nueva Vida (see map on this page) as well as elsewhere.

In October, FECOVESO’s initial Board members met to begin developing policies for the management of these lands. Although it is possible that watershed protection can be combined with limited community use of the land for other purposes, the board was unanimous in insisting that the cutting of trees could not be permitted for any purpose and that HCSC should seek professional advice regarding the reforestation of areas where cutting has taken place. Projects addressing other needs of these subsistence communities are also being discussed.



Location of Omoa on north coast of Honduras



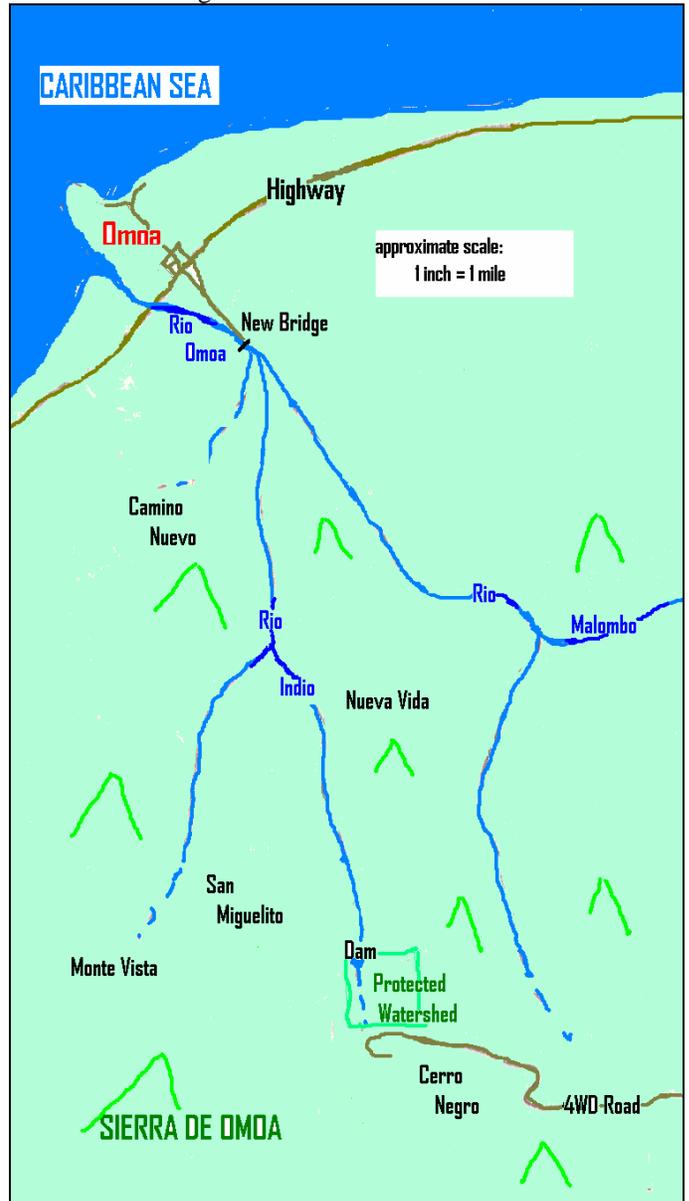
Looking northwest from the Cerro Negro height of land. The most recently acquired parcel of protected watershed land lies immediately below.

Thanks!

Thank you to Equity Trust, Inc. for the grant that allowed us to launch the work of HCSC and to the growing number of individual supporters whose generosity has allowed us to continue that work. The residents of the rural communities of northwest Honduras are deeply appreciative of the resources you share with them. Thanks also to McAdoo Rugs of North Bennington, Vermont, for their considerable help in printing this (and last year’s) newsletter.

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Rio Omoa Drainage



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