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**ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES ON THE MEXICO-U.S. BORDER:
AN INTRODUCTION***

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ABSTRACT

The Mexico-U.S. border is one of the most dynamic regions in the world and represents one of the greatest economic contrasts between the developed and developing world. The construction of policies and programs such as the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has been primarily responsible for massive population growth and industrialization along the Mexico-U.S. border region. Such changes have also placed tremendous pressures on the environment and natural resources spanning the international boundary. This article provides an introduction and a description of the context for the articles featured in this special issue related to environmental concerns on the Mexico-U.S. border.

The Mexico-U.S. border has experienced extremely rapid population growth and industrialization over the last half century. This 2,000-mile border is one of the most dynamic border regions in the world and represents a stark contrast in the abutting of a developed and developing country. Over the last half century, policies such as the Border Industrialization Program [which spurred the growth of the *maquiladora* (assembly plant) industry] and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), along with tremendous growth in agroindustry and manufacturing have affected both the local population and the quality of the environment.

The border region—consisting of communities situated on both sides of the international boundary—shares much in common. Indeed, the binational region is linked economically, socially, and culturally. In many ways, communities in the region have more in common with each other than they do with many localities in their respective countries. Both borderlands are situated far from their political centers of Mexico City in the case of the Mexican borderland and Washington, D.C.

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in the case of the U.S. borderland. Yet, the currency (*pesos* and dollars), the people, the language, and ideas of each region have readily traversed the international boundaries for centuries. Likewise, air, water, and other natural resources flow back and forth, irrespective of legal and jurisdictional barriers. Political, industrial, economic and demographic changes on one side of the border affect communities on the other.

Another borderland commonality is that no matter which side of the border the community resides, the borderland region is viewed as different from most non-border locales. El Paso and Ciudad Juárez provide illustrative examples. From the perspective of the United States, U.S. border cities like El Paso are poorer with higher rates of unemployment and poverty than non-border U.S. cities. Looking south into Mexico, many Americans see what they imagine to be a third-world country—replete with crime and poverty along with unsanitary living conditions. Timothy Brown (1997) in an article entitled “The Fourth Member of NAFTA: The U.S.-Mexico Border” summarizes the clouded views of residents in both nations:

In central cities of Mexico and the United States as otherwise different as Puebla and Sacramento, or Mexico City and Washington, D.C., there exists one common thread, false perceptions of the border based on mythology. The images engraved on their popular minds are caricatures: the border is drowning in the filth of a putrescent Rio Grande aglow with toxic waste; it is terminally ill with a rampant pox of poverty known as *colonias*; it is a land of social injustices where evil foreign *maquiladoras* unmercifully exploit downtrodden workers for their cheap labor; swarms of huddling illegals poise nightly to pour northward across the border to overwhelm American social services and steal jobs from honest workers while free-loading on the largesse of hard-pressed American tax-payers (1997:107).

From the Mexican perspective, the Mexico-U.S. borderland is a dynamic region with high rates of employment and prosperity not found among many interior locations. For example, when compared with cities in the interior of Mexico, Ciudad Juárez and the other major Mexican border cities are doing much better socially and economically. Overall, border cities like Ciudad Juárez have higher rates of employment, higher wages and more developed infrastructures than many interior Mexican cities. While no doubt the infrastructure of Ciudad Juárez has been strained by the tremendous influx of people, still 98 percent of the population is hooked up to tap water and 80 percent is connected to the city’s main sewage

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system. In short, despite its deficiencies and environmental problems, as seen from the point of view of Mexico City, Ciudad Juárez is booming. Borderland people are seen as different as well. As Casey Walsh details further in this issue in his article titled “To Come of Age in a Dry Place,” borderland Mexicans have been perceived historically as “more advanced; harder working; more European; and more white.”

The enterprising nature of the Mexican borderland along with its gateway position into the United States has spurred its growth. Indeed, population growth in the region has been tremendous. According to Lorey (1999), between 1950 and 1990, on the Mexican side of the border, the border population expanded 3.5 times (from 3,762,963 in 1950 to 13,246,991 in 1990) while that of the U.S. side increased 2.6 times (from 19,728,191 in 1950 to 51,926,828 in 1990). By 1990, “every Mexican border city was larger than its American twin” (Brown 1997: 111).

This growth and its attendant problems have exacerbated the perennial tensions between Mexico and the United States. Further straining relations is the escalation by the United States under the guise of national security of border security measures aimed at keeping Mexicans out of the United States. The increased surveillance of the border by the United States has stemmed the movement of people across the international boundary and has made it more difficult and time-consuming to go back and forth across the border. This unilaterally imposed separation between the two nations has also contributed to the erection of mental barriers that have made it more difficult to consider the borderland region and its environmental problems in its broadest context.

Border regions on each side of the border confront many environmental problems that do not recognize international perimeters. However, the newly raised obstacles besides reactivating long-standing tensions between the two countries have made it more difficult to consider environmental issues from a binational perspective. In fact, the more arduous border crossing process has been counterproductive regarding the environment. Idling vehicles waiting to cross the border have exacerbated the already poor air quality that defines the Mexico-U.S. border region. Further, the onerous cross-border commute makes the binational dialogue more difficult and hinders the relationship-building process as well. The “us-versus-them” mentality heightened by the construction of walls and the demonization of immigrants further impedes holistic thinking.

One issue that warrants more attention is the interdependent relationship that exists between United States and Mexico. While NAFTA accorded Mexico equal trading partner status along with Canada, Isidro Morales (1997, 1999) has documented a myriad of ways this relationship tilts in favor of the United States.

Nevertheless, the United States and Mexico have a long history of interdependence that continues today. The tightening of the U.S. border has created severe labor shortages particularly in agriculture that has traditionally relied on cheap immigrant labor. Consequently, as documented by the *New York Times* (Preston 2007) many U.S. farms are shifting their crop production to Mexico. For example, the production of watermelon has increasingly shifted from Texas to Mexico after the passage of NAFTA. In addition, California and Arizona farmers are increasingly leasing land in Mexico for lettuce and broccoli production. These shifts in production sites along the border have a historical basis. Casey Walsh in his article in this issue links the growth of Mexican borderland cotton production to ties with United States firms during the 1930s. The point here is that the economies of both Mexico and the United States are intertwined.

This special issue includes five articles that highlight various environmental issues that communities across both sides of the border have confronted and are continuing to face. In the first article titled “Sharing Water Internationally, Past, Present and Future—Mexico and the United States,” John Donahue and Irene Klaver offer a historical perspective for understanding transformations in the international allocation and management of waters from the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo and Colorado Rivers. They argue that while current policies continue to be developed in the context of treaty obligations, the historical context has changed significantly. Donahue and Klaver point out that we are transitioning to a third period (basin-based period)—from the nationalist and geopolitical periods—involving public participation in the watershed management and the recognition of a need for a sufficient river flow to maintain—or even restore—an environmental habitat.

In the second article titled “To Come of Age in a Dry Place: Infrastructures of Irrigated Agriculture in the Mexico-U.S. Borderlands,” Casey Walsh continues the historical and water themes. Walsh draws on the social structures of accumulation and regulation schools perspectives to understand historical changes in the agriculture industry of the northeastern region of Mexico. He provides an overview of the development of the physical and social infrastructures developed in the first half of the twentieth century resulting in the rise of irrigated cotton in the region. Walsh describes in great detail and with rich words from ethnographies how this industry and its people came of age and grew old, eventually giving way to forces associated with the crisis of overaccumulation. The article provides a good historical foundation to better understand contemporary conflicts over water in the region.

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In the third article titled “One Decade of Drought and Two of Neoliberal Reforms in the Sierra Sonorense: Responses by the Rural Poor,” Marcela Vásquez-León follows on the theme of water. Vásquez-León offers an analysis of smaller farmers in the state of Sonora, Mexico’s leading irrigator state and a region that has faced drought since the mid-1990s. The region has experienced a significant decrease in the cultivated area, abandonment of land, and the out-migration of rural people. She describes the challenges and changes that small rural farmers in the region have faced given neoliberal reforms, social inequality, and NAFTA. Vásquez-León also shows how informal social networks and collective organizations have helped small rural farmers deal with the numerous political, environmental, social, and economic forces that they confront.

The final two papers focus on *colonias*—unincorporated areas, many without services that most of us take for granted—that line the U.S. side of the border. These two articles continue a theme advanced in the previous article—the social agency that the poor establish to defy the political, environmental, social, and economic challenges that they face in light of limited economic resources. In the first of these articles titled “The Political Ecology of the *Colonias* on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Human-Environmental Challenges and Community Responses in Southern New Mexico,” Guillermina Núñez-Mehiri uses a political ecology perspective to describe the transformation of farmland to *colonias* and the environmental challenges that *colonia* residents confront. The article focuses also on the agricultural and dairy industries that are solidly linked to the daily lives of *colonia* residents, as the employers of many and the sources of environmental problems as well.

The final article titled “A Social Currency Approach to Improving Health-Related Quality of Life for Migrant Workers,” Alfonso Morales provides an overview of a ten-week pilot project called *Nuevos Amigos* that assisted participants in a New Mexico *colonia* in organizing themselves to meet a variety of basic needs including health care. The article represents an example of how academics can work alongside community agencies and local residents to create organizations as well as survival strategies that help the poor gain organizational and leadership skills to better their conditions.

In sum, the five articles featured in this special issue are instructive in helping us better understand the environmental issues that many people—especially the poor—on both sides of the border confront on a daily basis. The articles, as a whole, amply illustrate the fact that international boundaries do not stem environmental, health, and economic issues—these are permeable, affecting people on both sides of

the region. They also show how historical and global forces—alongside power differences between countries and social inequalities within countries—shape the lives of the poor and the challenges that they face. We hope that the articles also stimulate interests among sociologists, anthropologists, and other social scientists alongside policymakers in continuing to study this dynamic region and to develop solutions to better the lives of people in the area.

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