

# Oaxaca activist leads recovery of devastated lands

## Wins environmental prize for work in Mixteca

TEXT AND PHOTOS JONATHAN CLARK • THE NEWS

**Feature**  
SAN ISIDRO TILANTONGO, Oax.— Jesús León Santos stands in a dry, barren field high in the Mixteca Alta—a mountainous region of some 6,000 square kilometers in the northwestern corner of the southern state of Oaxaca—and surveys the landscape around him.

Scrubby hillsides stretch for miles and miles in every direction, scarred with huge swaths of eroded red clay and white limestone earth. Five hundred years earlier, the conquering Spanish introduced goat herding to the region, once known to its indigenous Mixtec inhabitants as “Nuu Savi,” or “Land of Rain.” Now, centuries of overgrazing, combined with unsustainable agriculture and unfettered forest exploitation, have turned much of the Mixteca Alta into an ecological disaster.

León Santos points across the field to a massive, lone encino tree—a species of oak known to live as long as 1,000 years. “This tree gives us some idea of how it once was here,” he says. “This area is 2,000 to 3,000 meters above sea level. There should be pine-oak forests here. It wasn’t always semi-arid. It wasn’t always like this.”

For the past 25 years, León Santos has campaigned to restore the Mixteca Alta to a more sustainable condition. Through his 10-member non-governmental organization, Centro de Desarrollo Integral Campesino de la Mixteca (Mixtec Small Farmers’ Center for Integrated Development, or Cedecam, by its Spanish acronym), he has worked with local communities to begin the process of reforestation by planting hundreds of thousands of trees. And he has helped small farmers rediscover a traditional indigenous technique of building mountainside drainage ditches to slow erosion and boost groundwater absorption.

As a result of his efforts, León Santos will be recognized Monday in San Francisco as one of seven worldwide winners of the Goldman Environmental Prize, an annual award for grassroots activists working to improve the environment and living conditions for their communities.

“Jesús León’s work is truly inspiring,” said Richard Goldman, president



A lack of development has caused young people to leave San Isidro Jaltepetongo.

and founder of the prize. “His efforts to both retain indigenous farming methods and restore an eroded region serve as an improved model for environmental protection.”

The key to Cedecam’s approach, León Santos says, is to provide Mixteca communities with models they can sustain and take ownership of. As a contrary example, he points to a hillside a few kilometers away that has been carved into neat terraces, but that has clearly gone unused. According to León Santos, a government agency arrived there a few years earlier with heavy machinery in a show-and-tell effort to teach local farmers how to take advantage of uncultivated hillsides.

When the government left, he said, the farmers turned their backs and went home.

“This is what happens when the campesino (small farmer) is not directly involved,” he said.

“The government comes in with their big machines and does a project, and then leaves without leaving them with the tools or knowledge to sustain it. We are giving them a tool. We give them the trees and combine it with what they already know, and in two or three years they have taken it over for themselves.”

He gestures next to a mountain ridge in the opposite direction. Like the other mountainsides around it, the



León Santos says the encino tree behind him offers a glimpse of the Mixteca’s past.

### About the Goldman prize

- The Goldman Environmental Prize was established in 1990 by San Francisco civic leader and philanthropist Richard N. Goldman and his late wife, Rhoda H. Goldman. It has been awarded to 126 people from 72 countries.
- Since receiving a Goldman Prize, eight winners have been appointed or elected to national office in their countries, including several who became ministers of the environment. The 1991 winner for Africa, Wangari Maathai, won the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize.

- Prize winners are selected by an international jury from confidential nominations submitted by a worldwide network of environmental organizations and individuals.
- Four Mexicans have won the prize: Jesús León Santos, 2008; Isidro Baldenegro López, 2005; Rodolfo Montiel Flores, 2000; Edwin Bustillos, 1996.

ridge and its slopes are largely treeless and eroded. But on a closer look, faint clusters of light-green specks become visible where, during the past seven years, residents from the village of San Isidro Jaltepetongo have planted 100,000 pine tree saplings in an effort to reduce erosion and recharge a mountain spring.

Of the 27 communities with which Cedecam is involved, León Santos says, none has embraced reforestation and soil recovery better than this one.

#### TRADING GOATS FOR TREES

The road leading into San Isidro Jaltepetongo is unpaved, heavily rutted and best navigated in a four-wheel drive

vehicle. The road climbs a steep hill from a dry riverbed before leveling off on a plateau next to a large unpainted and unfinished cinder-block church. The village of approximately 500 inhabitants spreads out from here along a dusty lane lined with purple-flowering jacaranda trees. Most of the homes are small, one- or two-room adobe brick huts, many with tin or thatched-palm roofs. At the local primary school, children sing the national anthem both in Spanish and in the Mixtec language.

There is no secondary or high school here, however, nor are there many jobs. Like other rural communities in Oaxaca, San Isidro Jaltepetongo is populated almost entirely by children and the



Faustino Célis Cruz shows off spring flow.



Federico Cruz Juárez sold all his goats.

elderly; the young people have migrated to the cities or the United States.

“As soon as they turn 18, they leave,” said Faustino Célis Cruz, local civic leader and current president of the town’s reforestation committee.

“We know that if things don’t change, the community will be deserted in 20 or 30 years.”

Believing that an improved local ecology might help improve the town’s development opportunities, the people of San Isidro Jaltepetongo have joined up with León Santos and Cedecam, who have helped them to expand their system of runoff ditches, or “trincheras,” as they are called in Spanish. The ditches, fronted by rock walls,

## A widespread problem

Deforestation is a problem not just for the Mixteca Alta, but for Mexico as a whole. According to Greenpeace, the nation loses 600,000 hectares of forest per year; the fifth-fastest deforestation rate in the world.

In an effort to confront the problem, President Felipe Calderón joined the United Nations Environmental Program’s tree-planting initiative in February 2007. At the end of 2007, he announced that his government

had spent \$540 million to plant 250 million trees nationwide.

The campaign, known as the Programa Pro Arbol, or Pro Tree Program, targeted the nation’s most marginalized communities, with 85 of the nation’s poorest 100 municipalities participating, according to the president’s office.

“We used public funds to pay forest and jungle dwellers, most of them from indigenous communities and

among the poorest people in Mexico,” Calderón said during a tree-planting ceremony in December.

San Isidro Jaltepetongo has received additional funds for its reforestation program through the National Forestry Commission, or Conafor.

However, critics say government efforts have focused too much on numeric goals and do not do enough to integrate local people into the programs. Others say the government has given little thought to where and what kind of trees it plants.

—THE NEWS WITH WIRE REPORTS

### THE ‘LAND OF RAIN’

The Mixteca Alta (shaded) makes up part of the greater Mixteca region, which lies in Oaxaca, Puebla and Guerrero.



Residents of San Isidro Jaltepetongo began planting pine tree saplings in 2000.

The fast-growing pines help to stabilize the soil with their root systems and provide organic matter for an absorbent topsoil, León Santos says. In addition, the roots dig channels into the rock-hard subsoil, allowing more absorption.

Much of the town’s water supply comes from a spring high up on the mountainside, and, according to Célis Cruz, the spring’s production has increased noticeably since the reforestation effort began.

However, before the project could succeed, the locals knew they would have to make an important change. Since there is no greater enemy of the tree sapling than a grazing goat, they had to stop herding on the mountainside.

“This is a community effort, and so there is no one leader, no one making laws or setting penalties to keep the animals away,” Célis Cruz said. “We plant an area, and then the animals don’t pass. Since everyone is part of it, just by saying it, it happens.”

Federico Cruz Juárez, 74, sold his goats and bought sheep as soon as the reforestation began.

“Goats eat the trees. Sheep don’t,” he said matter-of-factly.

Local leaders say the trees sprouting up on the hillside—some now 3 meters high—have generated a new optimism in San Isidro Jaltepetongo.

“The project has brought life to the town,” Célis Cruz said. “The ecology has changed. Now our neighboring communities are looking at us and getting rid of their goats, too.”

#### STARTING TO BEAR FRUIT

After a 15-minute drive around the mountain over more bumpy dirt roads,

León Santos arrives at his small 3-hectare farm in the community of San Isidro Tilantongo.

While San Isidro Jaltepetongo is now starting to serve as a model for its immediate neighbors, San Isidro Tilantongo has been the center of a sustainability movement in the Mixteca Alta region for the past quarter century. It was here in 1983 that León Santos and a group of friends decided to take action against the environmental degradation around them.

“We were a group of young people in the community, and we would get together and talk about how difficult life was here,” he said. “We had to do something, but we didn’t know exactly what.”

They considered following the majority of their peers and migrating to Mexico City or the United States. “But we thought more about what we could do here, together, to make things better,” he said.

Somewhat serendipitously, at about that same time a group of refugees fleeing civil war in Guatemala had come to live in the community. The international aid organization supporting them had experience with sustainable agriculture, and León Santos eagerly picked its members’ brains for practices that might work in the Mixteca Alta. Soon, the idea for Cedecam was born.

When his father gave him a 3-hectare plot of land, León Santos began planting trees. He started with native-species pines, then experimented with a local deciduous species that had previously grown only alongside stream beds. Later he added acacia and peach trees, planting them in rows perpendicular to the mountainside, between long, narrow plots of corn, wheat and beans.

The tree rows, now close to 10 meters high, have helped to stop erosion and enrich the soil with organic material, he said.

León Santos also planted stands of pine forest on patches of eroded soil around the farm. He stands in one patch of 3-to-5-meter-high trees he planted behind his house in the mid-1990s and eagerly points out a bird’s nest and then a paper nest of wasps. The return of trees to the mountainside has encouraged wildlife to return as well, he says.

A breeze starts to blow, whistling through the pine boughs and stirring up a rich, organic smell of forest.

“A few years ago, we couldn’t hear this,” he says of the rustling of the wind. “In only 12 years, you can start to see conditions like this. The environment can change so much when there’s a sponge to soak it all up.”

As for the Goldman Environmental Prize, he says he is honored that his work has been recognized, and he hopes the publicity will help inspire others. “But we don’t do this for the purpose of competing or to win prizes,” he added. “We do it to improve the conditions that we campesinos live in.”

“Everyone thought it was impossible to rehabilitate an area as devastated as the Mixteca,” he said. “But we have to care for our environment so it keeps giving us life, and so our young people can stay here on our lands and not have to migrate.”

“And we are seeing from our work that there is hope,” he said. “The tree is starting to bear fruit.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Contact Cedecam by telephone at (52) 951-526-2091 or via e-mail at [jl\\_santos@yahoo.com](mailto:jl_santos@yahoo.com) or [itanun02@hotmail.com](mailto:itanun02@hotmail.com).