

Manifiesto of the Fourth National Meeting of *La Red Nacional de Manejadores de Maguey Forestal*

La Red Nacional de Manejadores de Maguey Forestal held its fifth national meeting November 16-17, 2019 at the El Rosario Community Library in Santa Catarina Minas, an iconic town in the municipality of Ocotlán de Morelos, Oaxaca. The objectives were to promote a dialogue of learning amongst all participants in order to reflect on the natural history and bio-cultural heritage of agaves, as well as to strengthen resource management practices through the exchange of experiences in agro-ecology and rural agro-forestry. One of the agenda items at this meeting was the most recent patterns of intensification occurring in the maguey-mezcal supply chain. There were numerous testimonials that illustrate extremely troubling trends in at least in two related areas: the raw material for mezcal, and issues related to mezcal's commercialization.

Mezcal is going through an expansive phase, evidenced by the fact that currently over five million liters are produced annually. Exports account for 60% of that total, as well as accounting for the fastest growth, growing by 650,000 liters annually. The intensification of production is also reflected in the gradual increase in the number of maguey species used for mezcal. In 1994, the Denomination of Origin for Mezcal (DOM) recognized the use of five species, and by 2016 it allowed the use of all species as long as “their biological development has occurred in the geographical area included in the [DOM].” On the academic level, in 2010 there were 23 species recognized for the production of mezcal, while in 2015 there were 53 species registered, 37 of these wild. There were frankly alarming allegations at the meeting pointing to the use of *Furcraea longaeve* Karw. & Zucc., for mezcal production in Oaxaca's Yautepec district.¹

¹Translator's note: these plants are not classified as agaves.

Even more problematic is the radical change in land use due to the expansion of agricultural boundaries occurring in the Tehuacán-Cuicatlán Biosphere Reserve and on the Tehuantepec Isthmus. With the increased devastation of areas that were previously set aside as forests or for agro-forestry use, traditional ecosystems, crops, and many forest resources are being supplanted by chemical dependent monocultures. We heard testimony to this effect, ringing the alarm about the loss of mid and low jungle in Puebla and Oaxaca, as well as areas of Jalisco and Michoacán.

Such practices have well known impacts in reducing the biological and nutritional richness of the soil, the effects of which will tend to worsen in the context of water stress, caused in various areas by the diversion of tributaries to irrigate commercial crops. The implications of all these developments on climate change at the local level are still to be documented.

The commercial boom in mezcal is attracting investors who promote extensive and intensive monoculture, in order to improve their financial returns, but without addressing any of the socio-environmental consequences. This arrival of large investors brings with it also pests and diseases, as, in the absence of any phytosanitary controls, monoculture generates various plant health problems. This also implies the displacement and loss of genetic material of native species. We have been in a severe crisis of raw material for years now, as the practices of extracting wild species have led to local extinctions in various mezcal producing regions.

The *mixteca poblana* region and the area surrounding the Tehuacán-Cuicatlán Biosphere Reserve are home to the greatest wealth of agaves in Mexico. Testimonies from these areas indicate a literal invasion of transnational companies that are causing all kinds of problems. Using various strategies of land occupation, they are extracting magueyes of all species and ages,

even causing the displacement of plant material by introducing plantations of *A. tequilana* F.A.C. Weber. These practices generate scarcity that triggers sudden spikes in the price of raw material, to around 20 pesos per kilogram, making it impossible for any but the largest companies to participate in that type of supply-demand relationship. We then see a kind of indirect economic displacement of all small producers that "can no longer produce anything because there is no maguey."

We also heard repeated complaints about the growing presence of unprincipled mezcal buyers. They buy bulk mezcal to bottle under their own labels. They engage in exploitative value extraction, marketing their product by highlighting local production techniques, (e.g., clay-pot distillation, fermentation in cowhide, etc.), or unique regional provenance (e.g., Minero, or *tuxca*) — selling them as such, but without fully recognizing the actual producer, only the bottler. The commercial boom in mezcal creates opportunities for bottlers that buy directly from the rural producer, but where only the middlemen benefit. That is why the producers emphatically mentioned that although "we are the repositories of mezcal culture, we are not really its beneficiaries."

Denominations of origin and their respective Norms have demonstrated their true limits as standards of recognition, as they function more as brands, making it increasingly difficult to successfully comply with their processes of certification. Producers feel harassed for not complying with the quality parameters set in the Norms, but they are surprised (to say the least) that the regulatory bodies actively or passively validate the range of bad practices like all the ones mentioned above. The imposition of regulations that standardize processes at the expense of quality and diversity, results in not only the loss of know-how in each producing region, but the fragmentation of cultural heritage under purely economic criteria. We are replicating the history of tequila with mezcal. The problem is that this time, the impact will be unprecedented, because the level of

ecological disturbance will be nationwide. We must remember that many groups of animals and plants in Mexico follow the distribution of agaves, columnar cacti and *crassulaceae*. What will happen when this type of vegetation disappears? At this time, it is already seriously threatened.

The cumulative effect of all these processes is a dangerous rupture of the social fabric, especially when the ambition of some parties leads them to participate in looting and predatory practices. Instances of violence in this context of robbery and looting have already begun. For us, rather than normalize these processes, what must be done is to start documenting them. We believe that the premise of "more is better" is false. The reality is that all extraction without management plans not only impoverishes natural resources, but brings them dangerously closer to extinction.

In our view, the dialogue of learning between traditional ecological knowledge and socio-ecological perspectives, from both environmental and social sciences, is of fundamental importance to building a future of sustainability in the maguey-mezcal supply chain. The basis of this dialogue must be systems of collective knowledge, without which it will be impossible to maintain and conserve bio-cultural diversity, promote effective ecosystem restoration strategies, and ensure the welfare of rural communities. The objective of the fourth national meeting of *La Red Nacional de Manejadores de Maguey Forestal* is to contribute directly to the construction of these visions, and as producers and researchers, we are committed to this goal.