

Poor hardest hit by environmental collapse, says conference

By Hamish Copley
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MONTREAL (CUP) - The world's environment is worsening and the biggest losers are poor countries, said delegates at a recent

conference of activists from across the Americas.

The three-day gathering, held at the Université de Montréal, discussed links between injustice, ecological collapse and the global

economy.

Delegates from North and South America focused on the effect of environmental damage on the poor and the powerless.

"There's no water left to drink in El Salvador," said Rosendo Mauricio Sermeño, an environmental activist from Central America. "Sometimes you get earthworms out of the

tap. The [logging] companies call this drinkable water."

Mauricio said logging in El Salvador has destroyed the country's water table and polluted its rivers and lakes.

"A large part of the territory can no longer support life," he said.

Mauricio added that between the country's environmental

collapse and its civil war, one-fifth of El Salvador's population has left the country in the span of a few years.

He said native populations, who are the poorest segment of society, are the hardest hit.

Marie Mazalto, from environmental activist group Eau-Secours, said the first world has no reason to feel safe about its supply of drinking water.

She said many countries have sold off their water supply system to private companies, causing the price to rise.

"The repercussions have been shocking in Great Britain," Mazalto said, "where running water has become expensive for the poor." She added that in one region in France the price of water tripled after privatization.

Lucia Antonio Montero, a native activist from southern Mexico, said large corporations, with the help of the Mexican government, are now pushing native farmers off their land and cutting down the region's forests.

"The government has privatized land that belonged to the community," she said.

"[The new owners] plant eucalyptus trees, which destroy the soil."

Montero described the situation as a "debauchery."

"It's a question of life or death," she said. "The destruction of our forests and rivers matter to all our

peoples. [Canada and the U.S.] invests the most money into these companies."

For those who want to change corporate policies, Toronto activist François Meloche suggested making a small investment in the corporation doing the damage.

"For three dollars, I become a shareholder," he said. "Then I can present the point of view of [protesters]."

Meloche is one of the activists fighting to get Talisman, a Calgary-based oil company, out of the Sudan. A recent Canadian government report said Talisman's drilling interests in the African country are helping fuel Sudan's civil war.

Meloche said activists should invest in companies that are environmentally and socially conscious, to encourage other companies to do the same.

"It is possible to buy 'ethical funds' at a Caisse Desjardins," he said. "Anyone can buy these at any bank, for \$20 a share."



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