

Margarita

Water is one of the fundamental elements of life. I have met almost all rivers' headwaters: the Telire, the Cohen, the Yorkín, the other, the other the other... They are beautiful, little fountains from everywhere, the most beautiful waterfalls. At any moment, we crossed between Talamanca and Buenos Aires, for many special reasons with each excursion. I walked in almost all Telire headers. They are magnificent.

But down below, here in the middle basin and valleys, it's another story. Recovery would be a good word to describe the state that we find ourselves and are waters in. Across the valleys, we drank contaminated water for many years. First, because we have polluted the rivers immensely, mainly with the banana transnationals. Moreover, here we operate on wells. We learned that wells and banana don't mix. My property sits higher in elevation; thus, I gave what good water I had to the community. But all around our community well were plantations where any number of chemicals were irrigated with DDT to organophosphates. As the lands here are all alluvial, it's no wonder that they then all became penetrated with these substances. Our community here in Margarita for example, has the aqueduct in the same well which made the company (United Fruit Company). If you were to have visited Margarita, you would realize that there was a cellar of agrochemicals located directly next to our main water source. But not today. It has been gone for many years. I took it upon myself to fight from the outset of these findings, and report many of these things to every agency possible. What I noticed, I reported. I went to the Ministry of Health and met with the Minister of Health. We had a group here that

formed and it is was called, *the Civic Committee*, which has made history across the basin. Within this committee, were a group of fact, but not in law. It's important for me to state that I belong to the committees of fact and not of law. We came together on our own accord, volunteering our time and efforts to do right by the residents of the basin.



ORGANIC FARMING, MARGARITA, TALAMANCA, COSTA RICA, THE SIXAOLA RIVER BASIN. PHOTO: J. TANNER (2016)

When talking about good water or bad water, and how much is in the river system, and *water security*, the water here is plentiful. We have no shortage of water. Mother Earth blesses us in this way. But the water that we consume here is contaminated, because in my opinion, we are disorganized people, we are dependent on people that are removed from what our lived experiences are in our basin, and with this, politically we are poorly educated people. We are a product of a system that has taught us to not be interested in history.

'A people without history is like a tree without roots,' it was the great apostle Martí that once said that.

We learn all that we can from our rich indigenous communities and neighbors of the basin. We are lucky that we can have something to compare how we are by way of acculturations, and how we ought to be, with respect to our connection to Mother Earth, stewardship of the environment, and our waters.



**ORGANIC FARMER, MARAGITA, TALAMANCA, COSTA RICA, THE SIXAOLA RIVER BASIN.
PHOTO: J. TANNER (2016)**

I am a farmer. What I learned of my farming practices, I learned from my parents. I produce what I eat, and give away my surplus to neighbors and to the school. I tell the river, the river comes out does its job, does nothing, meets a natural process because we gave her the opportunity. We gave her the trees, providing stability for her banks, habitats for the fish and macroinvertebrates, and critical breeding grounds for the native birds. We leave her (the river) to her natural processes, and she goes wherever she

chooses. But that process, I would say, for some people of faith, the river is a blessing, because what it does is it brings organic matter, new fertilizer, it is beautiful, lovely for all the land. It is within this process, that the river fulfils its role, and we humans are the ones where we break that role, wherein we should not be disturbing, and destroying the natural barriers of the river.



ORGANIC FARMING, MARGARITA, COSTA RICA, THE SIXAOLA RIVER BASIN. PHOTO: J.TANNER (2016)

For me to be able to discuss the value of water resources in my corner of the Sixaola River Basin, it is fundamental that the history of this region is shared. The story of Talamanca is very cruel, and is one that most do not like to talk about. When the government of the last century wanted to make the railway to the Atlantic, they created an agreement that was carried out by a man named Minor Keith. That man was a bad man. Keith was dissatisfied with the agreement and said that he needed land too. Then the government without analyzing the situation, said we will give all of the

eligible land to plant bananas. At the time, it didn't matter that this was indigenous lands. Valle de Talamanca and Valle de Sixaola went to Minor Keith, and the Valle de La Estrella remained "unclaimed" for a period. These lands were delivered to Mr. Minor Keith and, given without having done an analysis of who lived there for thousands of years, who were our rich indigenous populations of the basin. Minor Keith then turned around and sold it to the United Fruit Company.

United Fruit Company came in, and started cutting down trees to make room for banana production, and in the process, damaging our vital resources of the Sixaola River Basin and the Valle de Talamanca. The indigenous who resided there, they were thrown up to the mountain tops with our other indigenous communities residing there – they were driven out from their ancestral lands, as they had no defense. They came, United Fruit Company, and brought bad people, people who went around migrating across our basin – they were murderers in Nicaragua, in Honduras, and elsewhere. They (the banana company) were murderers and what they did was, they changed their name to have a new face for themselves. Soon after, the local groups would take opposition to these murderers, and they came, they beat the managers with a machete. A saying from that time in our basin went: a payment without dead was a bad payment. People got paid to kill others. There were many murderers, throughout the Caribbean islands, everywhere.

It is a cruel history here of the *banana*. Years passed, and it is now different, because the cycles of life have already started to regenerate themselves, from the valleys to the Alta Talamanca's indigenous territories and communities. The land domain of the big banana companies is already

considerably lesser. Most of the lands here are in the hands of small farmers, not because the State gave the land back, but because the land recovered. That began to change, up there and here, in roughly the late 1970s when the indigenous territories and reserve below here were created. Seizures of land began, land grabs, in the region began in 1976 and 1979, and that is when the final fight that took place at the church of Limon. The peasants got into the church and they/we forced the State to negotiate. Monsignor Coto had lived during that time, and this business and, he said: 'I will fix the problem and tell the story'.

Monsignor Coto sat with the government and started to negotiate the land, these dealings were able to be completed in 1976. All of these lands were recovered, the indigenous groups won the fight. Now, that's the inside story. It has been very difficult here, but the importance of all that is Talamanca and all of this rich basin that it is our home, it rests upon the blessings of these lush and fertile lands and our precious rivers that feed them. I and many of the community members here think like our basin's indigenous, we're not separate from these resources. That said, in the end, even with our beliefs and our fighting, we weren't able to prevent long term damages.

If you do a study on Margarita in the last 20 years, people out there, most people die from cancer. They died of bone cancer, died of stomach cancer, people have been dying of cancer everywhere and that's not by chance. Air pollution, water pollution, which when we consider it, are the same here. We are understanding that we have plenty of water in the Sixaola River Basin, but contradictorily the quality of water, we are not water secure. It is contaminated water that we consume here. This is counter to

how I was taught to keep the land, how many of us were taught to take care of the rivers. If it weren't for the companies, I would be telling you a different story than this...

To understand how our water works here in the middle basin and across the basin, it is important to understand how these profound past historical currents that we have experienced and how these experiences share our valuation for these resources that we hold so dear, especially our rivers. We didn't ask to become ill, we didn't ask for lands to be taken away, we fought enough. We did what we could. But for today, I understand that to change a system, it is not a fast process. But I hope with our continued efforts across the basin, we can continue healing, together.

This text is an excerpt from "*Navigating Cultural Currents: The Sixaola River Basin Story*, that can be found here:

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