

# Environmental Curriculum Development with Nature Trail Construction in Ticumán, Mexico

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## The Need

The inspiration for this practicum came while I was visiting with some fellow missionaries near my home in Mexico. My parents (missionaries with OC International) have partnered with the WEC missionary organization to build a pastoral retreat center and Mexican missionary training center near the rural town of Ticumán, Mexico. Ed Somerville, the site coordinator, expressed his strong interest for developing a nature trail on the ministry site. A goal of the trail would be to contribute to the healing element of the site, impart a sense of how God speaks through his marvelous creation, and what we as Christians can do to steward that creation. The 70-acre property of El Monte (The Mountain) is set on a lush hillside dominated by limestone outcrops and caves. The vegetation on this site consists of low trees, thorny shrubs, and cacti. Bats, iguanas, scorpions, mustelids, and a myriad of beautifully-adorned birds are commonly viewed at the site.

The environmental stewardship message is one that needs to be heard strongly in Mexico. Traditionally, this country has not allocated much money or effort toward protecting their amazing biodiversity (fifth highest in the world) and abundance of natural resources.

A call to environmental stewardship is particularly important for the Latin American church to hear. However, this is difficult to achieve in a culture that is still largely bound by mysticism and fear of the natural realm. Thus a basic understanding of the amazing complexities of nature is the critical first step in increasing environmental awareness and appreciation among the indigenous population.

To this end, my project consisted of building a nature trail with an accompanying trail guide describing El Monte's ecosystem, and writing a general pamphlet about a Christian vision for environmental care and engagement for God's glory. This pamphlet would be used by and distributed to all people ministered to at El Monte. My project took 3½ weeks in Mexico to complete. I spent as much time at home in front of the computer writing the curriculum as I did getting tanned in the great outdoors while carving out the nature trail with the volunteer help of some missionary friends.



**Griswell & Crew:**  
My faithful trail-building partners, John and Ned.

The leaf of the "Pegahueso", a milkweed relative whose sap makes a good antispasmodic.



**Hanging out with Balbino Diaz,**  
a local pastor and expert on traditional plant uses.

## The Trail

The building of the nature trail proceeded in several stages. I began by surveying the property and determining the best location for the path. This was done in a way to highlight unique geological features, native plants, and impressive views of the surrounding countryside. Knowledge of the local ecology came from several sources: analyzing the environmental impact study for El Monte, internet research, on-site interviews with local experts on plants and their traditional medicinal uses, and knowledge obtained from my coursework at Taylor. El Monte is situated within a federally protected environmental region known as the dry-season jungle, which means that the ordinarily dense shrub-scrub foliage is completely lost during the dry season. This region is an excellent location for teaching people about respect for the environment and its management.



**Map of the property with the new nature trail shown in the top corner.**

Once the course of the trail had been planned, it was time to begin hacking it out of the jungle. All clearing work was done with simple tools such as machetes, axes, hands, and even feet. After clearing out the overhanging vegetation to an easily navigable breadth and height, the borders of the trail were marked out by using the abundant volcanic rocks strewn on the ground. Such simple materials were used both for monetary reasons as well as to leave the habitat as undisturbed by human activity as possible. Trail maintenance will include yearly spraying with herbicide to keep the ground cover from overgrowing the trail, and periodic trimming back of the dense foliage during the rainy season.

The trail has been designed to be a one-hour hike, including stops at the posts along the trail. In choosing the trail's route, I had to keep in mind the various people who will use El Monte's facilities. I had to make it manageable enough for elderly people to walk on the rough terrain without overexertion, while keeping it challenging for the youth. I also implemented isolated points for meditation and reflection along the trail.



**The nature trail in progress: before clearing, and after clearing and lining it with stones.**

## The Curriculum

### 1. The Trail Guide

This document is a self-guided, 24-sheet pamphlet that orients visitors to the natural highlights that are seen along the trail. It provides accurate but non-technical information on the flora (focusing on local and medicinal uses), natural history of the fauna, geological formations, and hydrogeology of the property. This allows visitors to gain a greater understanding for the concept of an ecosystem. The nature trail features numbered station markers which correspond with the pages in the guide.

In addition to the scientific aspect of the guide, I also have used the curriculum to point people's attention to God's personality and promises as seen through the created order. This is accomplished by means of brief devotional thoughts at select stations. Devotional topics included: Jesus as the Water of Life, not interfering with God's plan for our lives, perseverance, and other themes inspired by the scenery. Upon ending the trail, visitors will have gained a greater understanding and appreciation of nature, and of God's creative acts and sustaining work in the world.

### 2. The Environmental Education Pamphlet

The final piece of curriculum I wrote in Spanish. This pamphlet will be distributed to all visitors that come to El Monte: pastors, missionaries-in-training, and youth groups. This brief pamphlet begins by instilling a sense of pride in Mexico's unique and high diversity of wildlife and ecosystems. It discusses key aspects of both the Mexican and the worldwide environmental crises. A key challenge discussed in the pamphlet is the consideration that a Christian should live in the role as steward and have a positive impact upon the environment. The emphasis of this challenge is on a scriptural worldview of creation and our role within it. The last portion of the pamphlet provides practical tips on how to be environmentally conscious in one's own community - thinking globally while acting locally.

**Copies of Environmental Curriculum**  
**Please pick up and browse**



**The faces of El Monte: the dense vegetation of the rainy season (L), and ongoing site construction during the dry season (R).**