

Rancho Mastatal Updates

January 2007

We've been working diligently to get our newsletter back on track, a formidable task given the plethora of projects and activities underway at Rancho Mastatal these days. MAXINE's experimenting with palm oil and her candlemaking prowess to find a way for the Ranch to make all of its own candles. Something that we all agree would be an amazing step towards becoming a more sustainable entity.

NATE, KAREN, ALAN and others have been using up the majority of our collection of broken mugs, dishes and plates to produce a series of unforgettable mosaics destined for the new composting toilet and the Hankey House. Taking it yet to another level. MIKE and ERIN, playing around with the age-old building technique of timber-framing, designed and are currently putting the finishing touches on the Ranch's newest and arguably coolest composting toilet yet, something we've dubbed the powerful **Tower of Poo**. This is the Ranch's fourth composter, proving the immense popularity of this human waste reusal system. We love our ecological toilets like we do our Ultimate Frisbee. JON and CHRIS, after helping lead a wonderful and informative two-day furniture building workshop for volunteers and interns, have been demonstrating their building dexterity with the creation of the Mingle Single, the newest bed to find its way into the Hankey. They'll soon be heading up the construction of the entrance to the Hankey too, a pretty damn exciting proposition and one that will bring the inspirational long-term volunteer house one step closer to becoming complete.

JESSYCA, TODD, DANA, JOAN, JULIE and others have been dancing away in the poo and mud and applying their mix to raise the earthen walls of the Tower and the storage area off of the new classroom. TYLER, after a long month of learning how to save lives, translating renewable energy lingo and playing host to his wonderful parents, along with SPARKY are getting their heads around the new kitchen design and will begin constructing the new kitchen furniture in the coming weeks and months. I never thought that I'd see this project get the attention that it has this year. Proving me wrong has kind of become a game around the Ranch these days. GREG, well, let's see. What has our bald little friend been up to these days. I'm afraid I don't have the time or space to fill you in on all of the details. Let's just say our monkish handyman keeps all of us in line and this place running smoothly with his enormously diverse skill set, his incredible ingenuity and his deep



A closeup of a green iguana - a living relic from our Cretaceous past

intelligence.

Before moving on though I should at least make note of his superb overhaul of the new electric bike. This newest form of locomotion at the Ranch, generously donated by IAN WOOFENDEN, will be put into service in a matter of days, providing volunteers and locals with an assisted form of transportation that will make phone calls and visiting family and friends in neighboring towns a lot easier. HEATHER, our resident potter, has been kicking away on the wheel and doing everything within her power to bring the art of throwing clay to Mastatal. She's been teaching short workshops each week so that all interested at the Ranch have the opportunity to partake in this awesome activity. JULIE, in addition to her mudplaying, has been offering her services as a body worker to all interested guests. The reviews have been beyond glowing. GEOFF, our resident mule, has gotten his hands into countless projects and has altered the game of basketball here forever. Let's just say the quality of hoops in Mastatal has gone up a smidge. MISS JUMP as well seems omnipresent as she throws her head and body into numerous projects and a little energy into pushing her flight back every so often.

So, as you might have figured out for yourself already, there's some pretty incredible energy in the air around these parts right now. It's all overwhelming at times to be a part of. Before wrapping up here, I'd like to send a big thanks to Sparky, Miss Jump, Tyler and everyone else who has kept this newsletter on the front burner these past few months. It's certainly satisfying and a joy keeping you all abreast about what's going on down here, but it is also a lot of work. So, thanks for keeping the interest and enjoy the stories.

This month's update includes:

[RM Program News:](#) Solar, as in the Sun, and Energy, as in Energy

[Conservation Update:](#) Poo Power

[Building Report:](#) El Torre

[Volunteer/Guest Gossip:](#) The Cross-Cultural Implications of Mesh

[Community Facts/Stories:](#) A Brilliant Success in Simplicity

[Comida Corner:](#) A Lost One, Beer Bread by Joni and Liz

[Fútbol Follies:](#) Something's Brewing

[Inspirational Impressions:](#) A Classic from Sucia

RM Program News: Solar, as in the Sun, and Energy, as in Energy

In its fourth year at Rancho Mastatal, [Solar Energy International](#) (SEI)'s **Renewable Energy for the Developing World Hands-On Workshop** spent a week with us in late January to pursue a plethora of projects at the Ranch and in the community. Class began with the help of FATIMA MONTEALEGRE RAMIREZ and BERTILA ROMERO PIZARRO of *Sol de Vida* (women's cooperative in Guanacaste province) in learning about the wonders of solar cooking. The Ranch has embraced the solar oven for years now, both on its own as well as hosting a solar cooking contest for the community during SEI's course. This year only one woman showed up, with a killer lasagna that won her a solar oven of her own. In the meantime, this year's students constructed a new oven, which is now banging out ginger breads, chocolate chip cookies and all sorts of other snacks for afternoon consumption.



In addition to discussions of solar hot water and solar-electric designs, this year's course was privileged to participate in an electric bicycle conversion, under the guidance of ERIC BOGANTES and his crew from the *Compania Nacional de Fuerza y Luz* (national light and power company in San Jose). The 500-watt motor will be a great help for attacking the local terrain, though the topography and climate will also require more scrutinized maintenance of the machine. The Ranch is assuming control of the bike, which will be available to community members and volunteers alike for a small fee so as to maximize its exposure. Perhaps it can make some of the younger people think twice about all the macho motorbikes around town. Maybe not, time will tell.

Being a hands-on workshop, the course continued with the wind, pursuing the installation of an anemometer on the Ranch's property. Essentially a mini wind turbine wired to a bicycle odometer, the anemometer was mounted on a 30 meter bamboo pole and strapped to a mango tree. Though not a terribly windy region, the hope is to determine the capacity for a small wind-generated power system. So far we've recorded the maximum wind velocity at 29 mph with an average of nearly 4 mph.

The weekend portion of the course provided the most action and perhaps the most tangible learning experience for the students. With two intense days of solar-electric and biodigester surveys and installations, this year's class was privy to some prime examples of rural Latin American life. As the articles below indicate, these were exciting times, ones that greatly benefited all parties involved. Many thanks to head instructor IAN WOOFENDEN and his all-star guest lineup of CHRISTOPHER FREITAS, FATIMA y BERTILA, ERIC and crew, and JUAN CARLOS SANDRES, who came all the way from Honduras to facilitate the biodigester portion of the program. An additional and special gratitude towards ALSIDIS, DON MARIO, LUCIA, JAVIER, DONA MARIA and all other Mastatalenos involved in the workshop – it is our collaboration with

them that truly defines these times. All in all, a brief yet jam-packed week to be proud of.

-- Translated by Tyler See



Bamboo Showers at Jeannes

Conservation Update: Poo Power

Imagine yourself pink and porky, sloshing around with eight other pigs, of which three are on the verge of birthing at least ten little ones each. Needless to say, you're smack in the middle of a shit storm, which has typically been weathered by a garden hose and a neglected hillside. Yet in recent weeks you've noticed the humans who feed you constructing new pens, hooking up plastic pipe and digging a mysterious trench over yonder. To you, their purpose is unclear, but all the activity must mean a big change to come.

Indeed, changes occurred last week at the home of Mario and Lucia, where son-in-law Javier and Honduran biogas guru Juan Carlos Sandres collaborated, with the help of [SEI](#) students, to install a methane biodigester to harness the power of pig poo and turn it into cooking fuel for this family of four. The system is quite basic: animal waste and water enter a large plastic bag (lying in a meter-deep ditch 10 meters long by 1 meter wide), chemical reactions ensue, and methane

gas is released via plastic tubing or hose to a two burner stove, where it provides hour after hour of kitchen efficiency. Meanwhile, the remaining solid waste exits out the other end of the bag, where it is oxidized and can be used for fertilizer.

Last week's installation marks the third biodigester in Mastatal proper, which is steadily becoming home to the largest concentration of methane biodigesters in the country. Though the other two have had their setbacks (bags have been punctured by curious dog claws and faulty roofing), they're currently working at full capacity, each providing 8 hours of fuel daily with only 3 or four pigs. As the concluding hands-on activity of SEI's renewable energy workshop this year, the biodigester served as a potent, yet surprisingly not pungent, example of an affordable, simple, manageable technology which can be appropriately and successfully spread throughout the developing world. When we look at the bottom line – poop – we realize yet again just how valuable a material it truly is, used for building, fertilizing, cooking, and who knows what other capacities it holds. Plus it makes for a hell of a lot of jokes round these parts. But in all seriousness, we welcome Mastatal's newest poop bag and wish it all the best, and may the plans continue for a human biodigester at the Ranch. Keep the deposits coming.

Building Report: El Torre

You awaken in the 'Schwankey' and are overwhelmed by the peace and tranquility you feel when dwelling in such beauty. And then you are overwhelmed by a different sensation, a low rumbling in your bowels, produced from three days of beans at every meal. You spring out of bed, throw on your clothes, and run from the building hoping not to wake your roommates. You hit the path and a decision must be made; can you reach Jeanne's in time, and if you did would you have to wait in line? This morning this is not an option and you make a hard left and take off running. When you are out of sight you drop trou and are immediately relieved, but you are



One of several composting toilets on Rancho Mastatal - this one in back of Jeanne's

not in the clear yet. You squat near the bean field quietly praying that Chepo, Junior, and Don Mario are not out working this morning. And although you now have an amusing story to tell all at the Ranch you know something must be done about the bathroom situation.

This problem will not be faced by long-term vols in the Hankey House or the Hooch again. El Torre, or 'the tower of poo,' is now in its final phases of completion. It has been a long, oftentimes frustrating, but definitely enjoyable learning experience. It all began back in December, right after Christmas a mass exodus to the beach left Mike and I as the only volunteers at RM. So we began digging and after two days had ourselves a big hole to fill with poop. Well not quite yet, first GILBERTH, ALEX, and CARACA had to build the foundation for us and after a small miscommunication we ended up with vaults slightly larger than expected, but the more room for shit the better, right? After the completion of the foundation we were back on it; it was Mike the builder and me his assistant eager to learn all about sill plates, posts, beams, becoming an expert at planing and sanding, as well as perfecting my 'handing' skills. You know "hand me this," "hand me that." I was the self-appointed aesthetic director of the project to balance my partner's purely functional sensibilities; I mean doesn't every loo need a woman's touch?

The road was slow and bumpy, requiring a lot of constant reevaluation and trouble-shooting since this was Mike's first attempt at a timber framed structure and I—well, I've already established my skill level. But within a few weeks we had four teak posts, four pine beams, and 8 angle braces, all joined without the use of nails. We reveled in our accomplishments but were daunted by all that was left to do. So we called in the troops; GEOFF, NATE, and CHRIS created the wattle for the wall systems, NATE and MAXINE began the mosaics that would add a splash of color to the

building, GREG and NATE made the throne, ALAN made doors to hold the doody in the vaults, a flood of volunteers affectionately dubbed the `Poo Crew' daubed the walls, while Mike and I installed trusses for the roof.

The project was moving along beautifully when it happened. Mike and I returned from a short trip to San Jose to find that part of the roof had collapsed while GILBERTH was installing the clay roof tiles. He fell to the ground amidst the cascading tiles but was thankfully uninjured. Mike felt awful but was reassured that everyone makes mistakes when they first begin and the problem could be fixed without major reconstruction. So we consulted all the builders at RM and made a plan for the repairs, which only set us back three or four days.

The structure is now strong and in the final stages of completion as I write: GILBERTH and ALEX are working on finishing the bamboo-slatted stairs and the entrance, NATE and KAREN are painting and installing the vent pipe, Mike is working on some teak angle braces for the front of the building and a decorative bracing system for the entrance posts, and TIMO and I dance in manure and clay so we can `shmeat' the walls tomorrow. All in all not much is left to do and hopefully by the weeks end the toilet will be fully functional and the most important moment of the process, the christening, will take place.

Happy Deposits,

Erin



Junior back porch Jeanne's

Volunteer/Guest Gossip: The Cross-Cultural Implications of Mesh

One of the first things to greet newcomers at the Ranch is the eminent sense of style of some of our favorite local workers. From curly, luscious mullets to black rubber boots, from skin-tight bluejeans to brightly patterned halters, Mastatal style is fluid and undeniably smokin'. Above all other style components, the strongest statement to the senses is definitely the mesh tank top. Don Mario pulls up on his bright yellow moto and the first thing you see is the seemingly effortless ensemble of floppy hat and.... mesh tank top. Sometimes it's yellow, sometimes he sports a

classic 76ers jersey. Many local men rock the mesh tank tops, pulling it off with such enviable flair that I couldn't help but take note.. No matter the hue, I have been jealous of Mastatal's pimped out style since 2003. I began poking around in a half-assed search for these gems years ago, but to no avail. Not to be found in Puriscal, not to be found in Quepos.... I scratched my head and flew home with visions of mesh dancing in my head. This year, I finally worked up the nerve to ask the origin of these tanks but only received the unhelpful, and perhaps purposefully cryptic response.... *Están en San José*. Ehem, yeah that narrows the search.... To the entire capital. Thanks, boys.

This summer, I stumbled across a stash of them in a small town in Nicaragua's island of Ometepe and bought out their meager supply. I was informed they were called "camisolas" and I was smitten with their awesome power. They hit the Seattle scene like an H-bomb and brought joy to many a photographer in the houses of long-time volunteers, MEGHAN VITA, GUSTAVO and EMILY SINSHEIMER (formerly GREEN), and ERIN HANLON. I was sent back to Latin America with strict instructions to FIND MORE MESH and bring it home to the crew.

After a special trip to scour the streets of San Jose, Nate, Sparky and I pulled off the impossible and introduced 18 bright new MESH TANKTOPS to the festivities. The search was long and arduous, required ingenuity and a taxi ride home, but was worth every second. The Mesh, also known as the Camisola, has added epic levels of silliness to all activities ever since. Each volunteer expresses their unique qualities through color choice: I am proud to wear mine in what I like to call classic Vindas green. The mesh has mesmerized and dazzled the Ranchers, and each day you can find someone sporting the duds. GEOFF has cut his into a crop top, adding new dimensions to our fight for enthusiastic style. The Camisola has also shown its infinite versatility, adding depth to our ceremonies and nightly reflections. I think it is safe to say that the Camisola is here at the Ranch to stay.... And nothing will ever be the same again.

By Emily Jump

Community Facts/Stories: A Brilliant Success in Simplicity

As you leave the carretera down by the Quebrada Grande bridge and start hoofing it along the old road towards San Vicente, past one of Mastatal's former futbol pitches (known only by the old-timers), the terrain quickly shifts to a horse and buggy thoroughfare. For lack of buggies, those who travel this route today are left with their trusty steeds, their own two feet, or on an occasional weekend the comfort and exhilaration of an off-road motorbike. Pedestrians beware of cow patties and pony piles and forge the mighty Negro to a land rich in pasture, forest, and water. While these resources are ample for many needs, the river's isolating power has kept this land "fuera del servicio" for the public utilities providers. Yet it's amazing how well people adapt to their surroundings. Not far up the trail on the other bank lives one such person whom I've had the pleasure of meeting.



Houses like this one (which belongs to Doña Maria) are typical for Mastatal area. Simply constructed of local hardwood and corrugated steel.

Alsidis Mora was raised alongside his seven siblings in San Miguel until the age of 12, when his father removed him from school for fighting with the other children. They moved to a small house on another man's land on the outskirts of Mastatal, where Alsidis' father handed him a machete and put him to work in the bean fields. Today, 34 years later, Alsidis lives alone in that same house

above the river, finding temporary work in some of those same fields, and taking care of his self-dubbed hacienda in the meantime. As you pass over the barb-wire gate (watch your crotch), piles of wood surround the front porch and nearby chicken coop. A month ago, you would have first been greeted by Alsidis' wily yet loyal canine, who was recently dealt a lethal bite from a terciopelo. Indeed, snakes in and around the house have long been Alsidis' main concern, and it seems as if every time I went to see him there was another story or dead snake strewn out back.

Alsidis' home, made of pure hardwood and zinc roofing, consists of two parts, the kitchen area and main house, connected by a wooden ramp. Due to its deafening darkness, the main house sees much less of Alsidis than the kitchen, where a wood-fired oil drum stove burns 24 hours a day, evident from the sooty roof and walls. Bamboo trays of eggs, onions and tomatoes share the shelf with other foodstocks, with a couple pots and pans hanging on the wall. The sink is lined with 2 and 5 liter plastic bottles of water which Alsidis fills at his own personal spring located a short walk behind his house. He took us out there one day, past the outhouse and bamboo grove to a small streambed, where we found fresh water pouring out of a bamboo pipe into a 5 gallon container. This is also where Alsidis bathes, meters above the river into which his spring eventually runs. He has already started to plant out the banks in order to better protect them against erosion and also maintain a more abundant and cleaner water source. Over the last 30 years Alsidis has planted a large number of fruit trees, forest species, pineapple and banana around his property, which was once totally cleared. These small feats of ingenuity have kept Alsidis living happily on his own, though for lack of steady work and the constant threat of poisonous snakes, his quality of life can be compromised. Our hope was to lend a hand through a simple addition, one that we all too often take for granted – electricity.

Out of habit, Alsidis typically goes to bed an hour after nightfall and is up before dawn to restoke the stove. It is at this time that he is at his most vulnerable to the slithy creatures which took his dog just weeks back. Snakes are most active during dusk and dark, but are usually repelled from homes by simple lighting, something Alsidis has not had, apart from candles, for 34 years. Over the years he has found 8 snakes in his house, including one just recently which nearly bit his bare foot as he stood by the stove in the early morning hours. Thus, for this and many other reasons, Rancho Mastatal chose Alsidis as this year's recipient of solar power in collaboration with Solar Energy International's annual renewable energy course.

Having given Alsidis fair warning of the massive gringo invasion he was about to experience on installation day, we arrived in force with supplies in tow. After a quick introduction to Alsidis and his life, we split up into groups and set out to accomplish the various tasks by morning's end. Factors working against the group were walking on the hundred year-old tin roof, drilling through the badass hardwood planks, and withstanding the sweltering heat inside the house. Our high numbers inevitably led to some standing around, but communication was strong both amongst the team members and with Alsidis. For his part, he told me he never had anyone come and genuinely give him help like this before. As overwhelming as it must have been, with cameras flashing and hordes of pale-skinned humans speaking a strange language, in the end the smile on his face when he flipped the switch for the first time said it all. Technically we installed three LED lightbulbs powered by one solar panel connected to one deep cycle marine battery, but for Alsidis all that matters is that he has light.

Earlier that day Alsidis showed us his old notebook from elementary school, which consisted of some simple writing and a few basic drawings of plants, animals and houses. The next time I saw him, he again broke out the notebook, only this time there was another page of flowers and some new cats, drawn in pen after dark under the lights. Count it.

-- Daryl



Everyone in the community shares the cooking chores - here Timo, Geoff & Sparky take over the kitchen

Comida Corner: A Lost One, Beer Bread by Joni and Liz

This Rancho classic got lost in the shuffle these past few years. It was a staple in our kitchen for well over a year before getting overlooked for the likes of our awesome corn bread and the all-time favorite focaccia. It's temporary disappearance could also have been due to the fact that this recipe calls for a few precious beers, something that folks around here aren't so readily willing to eat.

They would generally prefer to put our sudsy friend into their gullet in the liquified form.

Fortunately for everyone around here, the following recipe was rescued and found it's way onto the menu a few weeks ago during a men's night in the kitchen extravaganza. We served it with a red bean gumbo and let's just say it was very well-received.

Ingredients:

- 2 tsp salt
- 4 cups of flour
- 6 tsp baking powder
- 2 warm beers
- 5 tbs sugar

8 tbsp butter

Directions:

Mix ingredients and pour into an 8"x12" pan. Bake at 350°F for about 40 minutes. Pour melted butter over the bread and bake for another 20 minutes.

*optional: mix in rosemary and garlic to the bread and mix with the butter to sprinkle on top.

Yeah! Drink your beer and eat it too!

F?tbol Follies: Something's Brewing

Given the extent of content in this month's update, as well as the relative lull in futbol action round these parts in recent weeks, we'll have to keep the follies brief this time. It should be said that a couple full field mejengas have occurred, with promising results. In addition, the *Galacticos* first official match in nearly five months has been scheduled for this upcoming Sunday in San Vicente. Many can't help but look forward to donning the black and gold again.

Meanwhile, UEFA Champions League Round of 16 action is finally back up and running, though to date has scandalously been missing from Tico television coverage. But that didn't stop Liverpool from dealing it to Barcelona again, 2-1 in the Spanish homeland. Lots of good matchups to be had, the results to which you probably have better access than I, so I'll leave it up to you to fill yourselves in on any blanks from this end.

Fire in the taco bell,

Brujita

Inspirational Impressions: A Classic from Sucia

"I bet she cleans up good."

----Alan Smith

Abrazos,

The Ranch Crew



Alan working on his mosaic