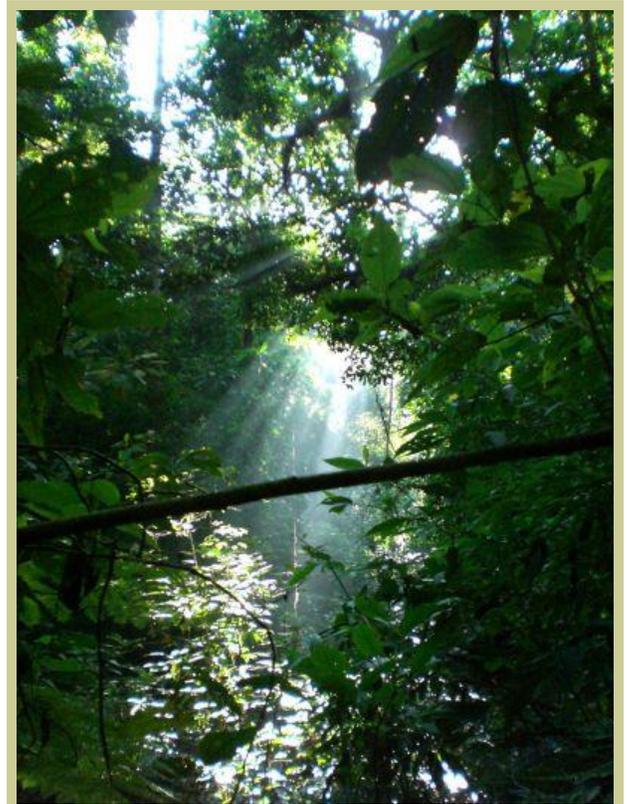


Rancho Mastatal Updates

April 2007

Rancho Mastatal UPDATE for the month of APRIL 2007 After many consecutive days of good rain in our area, the yearly "vernaniillo" arrived to temporarily dominate our weather. At the time when just about everyone in town agreed that the rainy season was here to stay, Indian Summer reared it's beautiful head and before we knew what had happened we found ourselves watering our gardens and playing afternoon Ultimate once again. Fortunately, for everything that depends on the rain, including us, the short dry spell has ended and been replaced by more characteristic rainy season weather. On one afternoon in late April the skies brought us 3.5 inches of water and in a recent 2-week period it rained over a foot!

KEYO HAYWARD, our good British Columbian friend, paid us another visit some weeks back with her friend LINDSAY and during their stay came up with an absolutely kick-ass Master Plan for the main house gardens. They also arrived bearing botanical gifts such as bags of tropical seeds and several starter plants that were to take up home in our new nursery. ALAN BUCK, one of our more recent long-term volunteer arrivals, along with a number of enthusiastic volunteers, has been heading up the new plan's implementation. He's taken to the task with "gusto" spending countless hours hacking, digging, cutting, weeding, watering and planting. It's been thrilling to watch it all evolve. HEATHER, currently making the tiles for the new kitchen sink with NORMAN QUIRÓZ (our Costa Rican potter friend) combined with her Joysey friends JEN and KRISTY for a few big days to contribute immensely to the Permaculture overhaul. We're committed to making this project and other landscaping and food production ventures a focus for the next many months.



*A shaft of light filters through the rainforest canopy
photo by Stephen Newbold*

The University of Washington class continues to go super well. SUSAN's students have their hands and heads in numerous projects at the Ranch and around town. They will undoubtedly leave their high- quality mark once again. They're more than halfway into their quarter already as we cruise into the fifth month of 2007. The new kitchen design has become more of a kitchen reality in the last month-plus as the revamped space now boasts a new sink, installed by ALEX and GILBERTH, and a gorgeous new bread table designed and built by TYLER. We'll be sure to keep you abreast of all new developments here as we may be moving the spices, fridges and stove sooner than expected. And speaking of kitchen news, the most exciting event since last month's Bingo is soon to be

unveiled though for now you'll have to wait for more information unless you want to track down KAREN and NATE somewhere in South Dakota and bribe them with some of NANA's cheese and corn tortilla soup.

Our website guru DELFINO CORNALI and his beautiful partner MICHELE were able to spend a few precious days with us recently too. These two have selflessly done so incredibly much for the Ranch and the community of Mastatal over the last five years that we're not even sure how to begin thanking them. They're inspirational individuals in so many ways and living in the Seattle area if you'd like to try and hook up with them.

May will see the arrival of a number of reinforcements as the popularity of our volunteer/intern program continues to grow in leaps and bounds. It's been a wonderful month even though the last few weeks have unfortunately been typified by some colossally cheerless farewells that we'll expand upon in next month's edition. So, until then, keep smiling, get our ass outside as often as you can, design your new composting toilet, eat your homemade yoghurt and give your mother a big fat hug. Love to everyone out there.

This month's update includes:

[RM Program News](#): Yet Another Try

[Building Report](#): La Nueva Cocina

[Conservation Update](#): Development

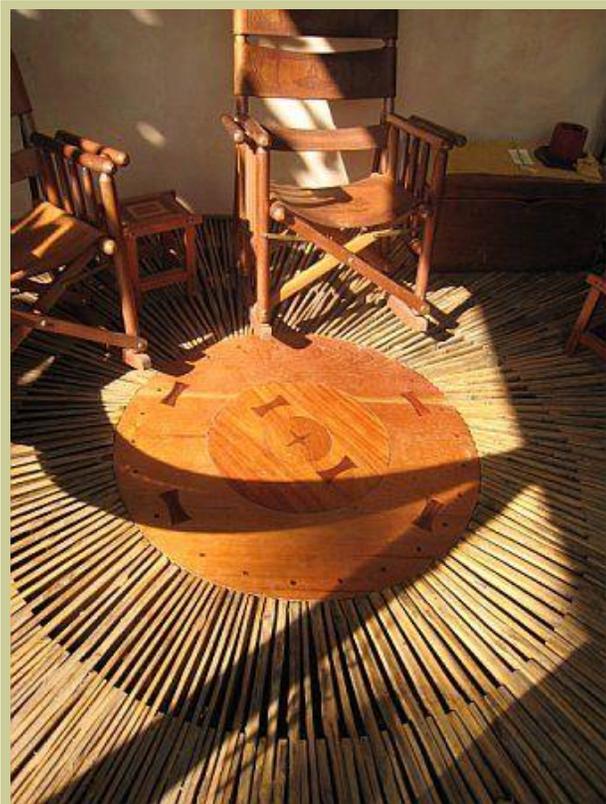
[Volunteer/Guest Gossip](#): Alcide's New Stove

[Community Facts/Stories](#): A Man's Struggle

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*Chairs on the front porch of La Choza
photo by Amanda Caudill*

RM Program News: Yet Another Try

Even though we feel as if there could be fewer places on Earth better for a Permaculture workshop than the Ranch, our last three attempts at organizing one have ended in genuine disappointment. Some say "the third time's a charm", but this week we're throwing that conventional wisdom out the Hankey House window by agreeing to give it another shot in 2008.

JENNY PELL, a well-known Permaculture educator residing in the Evergreen State contacted us recently to see about the possibility of hosting a course. We feel as if this is one of the key subjects that is not regularly represented on our Events Calendar and there's fewer courses that we'd love to get onto our annual itinerary. Permaculture, a relatively new term to many of us, comes from the words permanent and agriculture. One definition, as stated by David Holmgren, one of the developers of the Permaculture concept, is the conscious design of our working relationship with nature. According to Ross Mars it's about "producing edible landscapes and mirroring the natural ecosystems in their diversity and

production, and its designs endeavor to integrate all components of the ecosystem in a holistic approach to sustainable living and practice". Contrary to what some believe it is not necessarily a way for people to become self-sufficient, but rather self-reliant, with positive interaction and cooperation between all members within a community.

Right now we're tentatively planning the workshop for the month of February. Please help us get the word out. We'll post the course up on our [Events Calendar](#) as soon as we have more firm details.



Front view of La Choza

photo by Amanda Caudill

Building Report: *La Nueva Cocina*

Anyone that has had the pleasure of rubbing butts behind the kitchen counter has learned both the virtue of cooperation and the value of convenience. For over five years a space the size of your aunt's walk-in closet has managed to produce an absolute wealth of sweet and savory for up to 45 hungry bodies. The fact that the quality of food has always kept up and most often surpassed its quantity is indeed a tribute to both the management powers that be as well as the dozens of sous-chefs that have aptly and willingly lent their hands to the cause. By now the system is a pretty thoroughly tweaked and greased machine whose gears continue to crank out serious eats. Yet beneath the surface there lies a master plan of such epic proportions that its progress has to date been kept discretely under wraps. I now present the following, a sneak preview of what could very possibly change the face of Rancho Mastatal as we know it...

Several weeks ago, outside the office window, TIMO and TYLER were spotted sealing the earthen floor of the nueva cocina, a concept which has until recently been exactly that – a theory, a dream, but far from a reality. As you read this, we are several steps closer to making it happen. Amidst all the other building projects strewn about the Ranch, the kitchen has quietly chugged along, bit by bit making its presence felt. Following a consensus on MISTRESS ROBIN's master design, members of Team Cocina set out on their respective missions. Long-time veterans GILBERTH and ALEX tackled the concrete double-sink station, putting the current washbasin to shame and establishing a domineering sense of permanence in the space. In turn, resident clay specialist HEATHER is currently collaborating with our favorite Puriscal potter, NORMAN QUIROZ, to create the constellation-themed ceramic tiles which will face the structure and give it one of those unique Ranch touches. The handmade tiles would not have been a reality without the generous donation

from our friend, *cocinera extraordinaria*, JEN SNYDER.

Another early addition to the foray came in the form of "spice mountain," a beautiful, through-tenoned teak and cedar spice rack created by long-termer CHRIS (a.k.a. Long Arms Larry). The unit sports a Buddha pedestal and ample shelving for all the *garam masala* you could possibly handle. Meanwhile, across the room, moves have been made on the two food prep tables, each designed with specific tasks in mind. Brujita finally started racking up some shop hours with the nine foot-long baking table, comprised of classic cedar mortise and tenon technology. Below rests a shelf for prep bowls as well as space for flour, bean and grain storage, while the top incorporates a few pieces of harder cedar (*caoba*), including six butterfly keys for a little flare. Now, having taken a few weeks off the project to focus on the couples cabin and Alcides' stove, he has gotten back into the kitchen game, making headway on the second table, the central chop-block station. So far the frame has been dry fit, though much work remains on the countertop and shelving. Comprised of teak legs, hardwood rails and top, with a built-in compost bucket, it should be a beefy one, the centerpiece of a Rancho revolution. Here's hoping all ends well there.

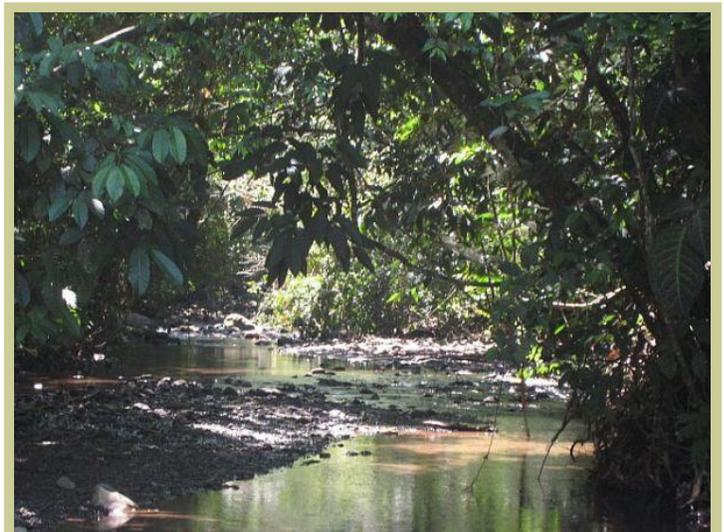
On the stove front, Robin is still on the hunt for an appropriate unit for the new space. Something that will keep operations rolling smoothly, especially in the future world of the humanure biodigester planned for the main house bank. In addition, shelving for cookbooks and other trinkets has been set in motion by EL GRANDULON and will be seen through to the end in due time. *Poco a poco* we should have Phase One of the new main house kitchen complete, from where we can move on to the dish and beer parlor down below. While much work remains over the coming months, the critical, for some almost unbelievable fact is that things are moving forward, which puts a big smile on Robin's face.

So as we continue to dance and duck through the current kitchen, let us give thanks to those who make it happen, especially KATTIA and LAURA, without whom we'd seriously be up the creek. I can only hope that their joyful spirit will grow exponentially as we move outside and fill the back porch with the daily hustle and bustle that keeps our lives flavorful.

Conservation Update:Development

What can we do as an entity and a community to assure that Mastatal does not fall prey to developers as it grows and matures? What can be done to keep the condominium corporations from buying up huge tracts of pristine countryside with hopes of luring unsuspecting retirees to the area? How can we assure that large hotel chains with deep pockets don't decide to build a 20-story monstrosity near the entrance to La Cangreja National Park?

I certainly don't foresee us having to act on these questions anytime within the next year, but these may some day be legitimate issues



A calm pool on the Quebrada Grande river

photo by Amanda Caudill

that our community will have to face. The answers to the above questions are certainly difficult and frightening ones. It seems that the fate of many towns throughout the world with Mastatal's traits; beautiful, strategically located (La Cangreja, close to the capital), tranquil, affordable; is the same; unstoppable development that more times than not destroys what made the community so attractive to so many to begin with. The growth that we've seen since arriving to Mastatal almost six years ago has definitely not been explosive, but it's certainly been detectable. It will be critically important for our community to produce a growth plan in the near future to determine how best to guide any subsequent development. Without a growth plan in place, our town and its surroundings will be subject to the whim of businesses and developers and their inherent interests.

I travel to Jacó on the Central Pacific Coast one to two times a month to chip away at my overflowing email inbox. I'm nauseated by what I encounter there on each trip; unabated construction, polluted rivers, a growing culture of drugs and prostitution and countless billboards and advertisements selling condominiums and houses in gated communities. Florida developers are bankrolling much of this new expansion. The structures that they're raising are reproductions of what one might see in Tampa or West Palm Beach. The increased use of concrete and the exploding demands for water, electricity and first-world comforts in areas such as Jacó are contributing to countrywide rolling blackouts as the national grid gets stressed beyond its capacity, wholesale destruction of the surrounding rainforests as the demand for materials to build houses lived in for a few weeks of the year goes through the roof, and the death of the Costa Rican way of life as local populations move away or are subject to low-paying service jobs taking care of the often-times ignorant and pampered people taking up part-time residence in their towns.

After my bimonthly Internet marathon comes to an end I can finally turn off the coastal highway and work my way back into the mountains. I can feel the layers of stress and societal filth peel away with each kilometer that passes. Though as ugly as it feels I try to prevent my Jacó memories from straying too far as these are what also motivate us to continue working towards a unique paradigm in Mastatal. It's a daunting reality really. But also a beautiful opportunity.

Volunteer/Guest Gossip: Alcide's New Stove

On a more positive note, Alcides' new stove is up and running. Those of y'all that have been keeping up with your newsletter reading will know that an ongoing project has been taking place at Alcides' humble abode in an effort to improve his cooking abilities. After the [SEI](#) installation of a solar panel in January, another issue was brought to light. A rusted out barrel on his mud floor has been his primary cooking source for decades, a system that requires constant attention and nursing a fire twenty-four hours a day. It also produces extraordinary amounts of smoke. The health issues are obvious and cannot be easily dismissed, as a matriarch of the greater Mastatal community now suffers from emphysema as a result of cooking over an open, unventilated fire for the greater part of her life. Something needed to be done to prolong the life of a man that is respected by all who know him.



A shielded fire stove, similar to the one made for Alcides. Image courtesy of Renewable Energy Policy Project

One afternoon, Alan Smith, a long-termer here at the Ranch (and one of the most noble men I have the pleasure of knowing) stopped by Alcides' place and noticed right away that something had to be done to reduce the smoke inside his home. Having been a firefighter for many years and seeing first hand the damage smoke can cause, not only to structures but the human body as well, he took the project on, rounded up a few vols and set the wheels in motion.

We have Greg Watson, our resident Renaissance Man, to thank for the initial research on the various types of stoves that would be feasible for construction in a place like Alcides'. After some debate we chose a shielded fire stove design as the most applicable, narrowly beating out the Rocket and Lorena varieties. A little explanation for those of you that are not up on your stove lingo. The shielded fire stove is one of the many variations of old world cooking technologies found throughout many cultures across the globe. The design used in our case was based on a stove built as a case study in Uganda. That model was constructed with sawdust, anthill soil, and sections of banana tree stem; we flirted with the idea of using sawdust and clay and trying the banana stem as a form for the combustion chamber, but in the end, went with that which we know, cob, tried and true. Messing with new ideas and new materials at the same time was a bit much to handle at the time.

The idea behind the stove is quite simple, genius really. It is designed to burn hot and efficiently and to give off minimal smoke. It doesn't need a bulky chimney, it uses very little fuel wood, and can be built on site with mostly sustainable materials. It also directs all of the heat to the cooking

vessel rather than losing it into the air, which is not only a waste of resources but also damn uncomfortable here in the tropics.

The Principles: The stove body is essentially a squat cylinder that contains a combustion chamber insulated by earthen material (cob for our purposes). The combustion chamber is L-shaped and acts as a small internal chimney on which the cooking pot sits, with a bit of help from some reinforcing supports. The horizontal section contains a firewood shelf that keeps the fuel wood elevated allowing for airflow on top, as well as, underneath therefore preheating the air entering the combustion chamber. As the hot flue gases rise they are forced against the bottom and the sides of the cooking pot creating maximum heat transfer. The diameter of the gas outlet is determined by the diameter of the cooking pot being used, plus a couple of centimeters to allow for gases to escape. Simple eh! It may sound a bit complicated on paper but in actuality it is so basic. Watching it work in person is an awesome experience. If you need more explanation do an Internet search with the key words [shielded fire stove](#), [Rocket stove](#), or [Lorena](#). You can find some pictures online that can better explain the thermal dynamics and all; I usually need pictures to understand most things.

So, hopefully this addition will make Alcides' everyday existence simpler, happier, and tack a few years onto his life. It was an extraordinary experience to work side by side with him. And what could be more rewarding than helping a fellow human for no other reason than that they could use a hand? He showed his gratitude in his own special Alcides way and presented us with two beautifully carved, Howard Finsteresque Jupas, a local gourd. If I can only sneak one under the nose of the agriculture customs guys I will forever have a reminder of my time here.

Gracias Alcides.

By Nate Sander



An operational rocket stove. Photo courtesy of <http://e-stoves.blogspot.com/>

Community Facts/Stories: A Man's Struggle

Alcides, who you've gotten to know a bit in past newsletters, is a man with few of what most would consider modern comforts. Nevertheless he's the owner of an enormous heart. He's brightened the lives of many in the Ranch family and will likely do so for many more in the years to come. Unfortunately this is not a story of hope and happiness but rather of unfairness and possibly selfishness.

Alcides has been living in the same unassuming and simple house for decades. He's diligently tended to his gardens, worked his fields and lived a humble life. Within the last six months a collaboration of many

people has helped bring him electricity via a small solar installation and a healthier way to cook his food by way of a high efficiency cob stove. The end result of all this work has undoubtedly been

positive though in ways that were by us unforeseen also negative. The constructive outcome is easier to appreciate and understand. Alcides now boasts a higher quality of life by being able to see past dark and cook without the health risks of a smoky kitchen.

The unconstructive outcome is perhaps a bit harder to get one's head around. After finding out about the above mentioned projects, the owner of the property on which Alcides lives became angry and asked that we never set foot on his property again. The message, passed on to us by one of his workers, caught us entirely off-guard. What could be wrong with helping improve the quality of life of one of the poorest members of our community? We still don't have all of the answers, not knowing the entire history of our community and its inhabitants nor having ever had the opportunity to speak with Roger, the owner of the property where Alcides lives. Nevertheless, we've had plenty of time to speculate. Does Roger simply want to keep Alcides under his thumb? Or is he concerned about Alcides' right to acquire the piece of land on which he's been living as may be stated by Costa Rican law? We don't have enough information nor do we understand the intricacies of squatter's rights in this country, but the issue needs to be discussed. The explanations are most likely more complicated than we think at this time. It's possible that our emotions have gotten the best of us, as the general feeling traveling around the Ranch of late on this subject is one of suspicion and anger.

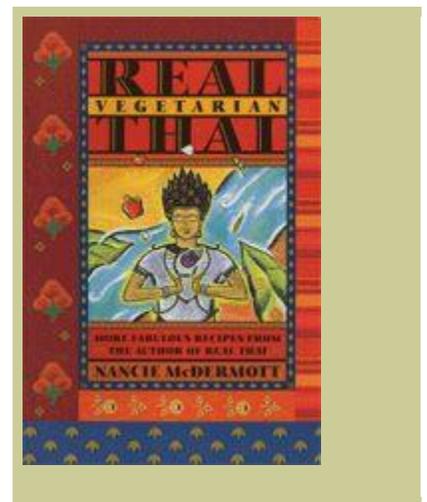
We hope that the issue will work itself out in the coming months and that we'll have Roger's blessing to visit Alcides again soon. The volunteer crew has plans to work on more projects with Alcides in the future. We hope that both sides can soon continue to benefit from what has become a special relationship for everyone.

Comida Corner: Lemongrass Ginger Sorbet

This frosty treat comes from the Real Vegetarian Thai cookbook and is best served in a tiki glass, mixed with rum, and with an adorable little cocktail umbrella. That is how we roll down in paradise during afternoon cocktail hour. Either as dessert or drink enjoy the delicious combination of tartness and sugary goodness.

4 stalks lemongrass 1-cup sugar
¼ cup ginger, peeled and julienned
1 cup fresh lemon juice
1½ cups water

1. Cut away and discard any tough root portions from the lemongrass stalks. Trim away the tops, including any wilted or brown leaves. You should have a nice stalk about 6 inches long.
2. Slice each stalk crosswise into thin rounds and place in a heavy saucepan along with the ginger, water, and sugar. Stir well and bring to a boil over medium heat.
3. Adjust the heat to maintain a gentle boil and cook, stirring occasionally to help the sugar dissolve, for about 5 minutes.
4. Remove from the heat and let steep for 10 minutes.
5. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve into a bowl. Stir in the lemon juice.



6. Pour the sorbet base into 2 ice-cube trays and freeze until almost completely set, but not hard, about 2 to 4 hours.
7. Remove from the freezer and put into a food processor. Process until creamy and combined. Transfer to a container, cover and return to the freezer to harden for at least one hour or overnight.

Buen provecho!

F?tbol Follies: Commemorating the State of the Pitch

The month of April posed little action for *Los Galácticos*, save one outing up in Zapatón on what has been labeled one of the greatest fields in Costa Rica. Apart from its utter lack of grass, half of one sideline is a sheer wall off of which you can play the ball, while across the way the terrain zigzags and drops off into a canyonesque abyss below. Balls flown over either endline warrant a solid five minutes of searching, resulting in an overall 30-minute lag time throughout the game. (Stoppage time does not necessarily correspond, however.) That being said, the home squad had a slight advantage in intimately knowing its terrain, and despite a seemingly powerful Galactico lineup, came away with a 4-3 victory. Although a valiant effort, a late run in the second half wasn't enough for the yellowshirts to surmount the tie, yet a new ball was awarded for their participation.

During the last week of April, members of *Los Galácticos* received word of the possibility of a matchup with the new team from La Fila del Aguacate on the Mastatal pitch. La Fila, a sparsely settled community just beyond San Miguel, has in the last few years been largely purchased by a group of Austrian entrepreneurs, who have taken to convert much of the land into teak plantations. They own a largish sawmill and employ dozens of *peones* to work the plantations, such that their presence hardly goes unnoticed. Likewise, in recent weeks they have helped to initiate a new *fútbol* squad, who has apparently not dropped a game in their first six outings. Back in Mastatal, the prospect of a home match loomed over the heads of a community that has not hosted a true game since this time last year, though there was minimal talk in town about fixing up the field. Sadly unsurprising though given the lack of maintenance and sheer disappearance of the Sporting Committee over the past year. While an effort to enlist some grass-chomping horses for clipping the pitch fizzled throughout the week, the nearside goal repair moved forward thanks to the work of Ranch volunteers NATE, NIC, and GREG, who used a combination of concrete and bamboo to raise the rusted out metal goalposts up from the ground, this time to official height. In this process, discussion often struck on the great potential of the Mastatal plaza. Perhaps the momentum will arrive soon to realize it.

Oh yeah, it rained on Saturday and La Fila postponed for two weeks. More time to get the horses down there, I suppose. In the meantime, stay tuned for the annual La Gloria festival in May, and be sure to keep up with the Champions League action. So far it's Manchester United a leg up on AC Milan while Liverpool is a home goal behind Chelsea. Play is looking ripe for an all-English final...

Golazos to you and yours,

Brujita

Inspirational Impressions: Warning to Humanity and Being Free

"Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course ... No more than one or a few decades remain before the chance to avert the threats we now confront will be lost and the prospects for humanity immeasurably diminished".

--- 1600 Senior Scientists from 71 countries, including half of all Nobel Prize winners, November 18, 1992

"If you want to be free, learn to live simply. Use what you have and be content where you are."

--- J. Heider

Abrazos,

The Ranch Crew