

# Rancho Mastatal Updates

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## May 2005

*The rains continue to fall hard, the trees continue to grow tall, we continue to build happily, and the giant toads continue to poop nonchalantly on our floors. We have yet to convince them to use the composting toilets, but then again, Rome was not built in a day, and our work here is far from being done. An amazing group of (bio for non-majors) students from Seattle U has come and gone, but their laughter continues to echo throughout the valley. In a span of ten days, they managed to inject us with a permanent*



*Doors to the hooch (photo by Adam Brandon)*

*chuckle. Thank you to ABI, AMBER, ANDIE, ANGIE, BETH, JERED, JUANITA, MARGARET, NICOLETTE, SHASTI, and SHEFALI for visiting our home and flooding it with cheerfulness. Thank you also to BRENDA and TIBURON for returning and to HEATHER for accompanying the crew... you all added to and often created the good times to be had. The Seattle U Crew also gave us some much-needed help reshaping the schoolyard and bringing it to life with some tough hands-on dirty work, and some even helped in the school itself with the English classes. The community is extremely appreciative. By the way, we're still waiting for our round at the cantina. We did, after all, win Rancho Mastatal's first-ever (and week-long) game of Capture the Flag. We hope the flag itself compliments BRENDA's office nicely (complete with artwork of a fat parrot and a squid in underpants for each team), and we hope everyone is home safely and keeping those smiles shining. After their departure, we went back to cobbing full-force. With the walls shooting up faster than Pico's red rocket (more on Pico later), it's looking more and more like a house every day. ROBIN cannot wait for her favorite spot to return to its peaceful state and be home rather than the worksite. It is becoming a more tangible thought by the minute. Life is still good, and we're all feeling pretty damn great around these parts. Hope all is well in your necks of the woods and hope to see you all around again sooner than later.*

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## **RM Program News: Permaculture Course for the Deaf**

We're currently speaking with Jenny Pell of Permaculture eminence about the possibility of hosting a Permaculture workshop at the Ranch for deaf people. The opportunity to bring this course to Mastatal truly hits home. Tim grew up with two deaf grandparents and spent part of his younger days teletyping to his grandparents, attending deaf mass, and being amazed at his grandmother's ability to know when his sister was trying to sneak out of the house for some late night shenanigans. Her other senses were so heightened. She could feel doors open. The strobe light doorbell in her apartment was pretty cool too. Tim's mother BONNIE grew up signing and she has been an important part of the deaf community in Binghamton, NY for many years. We're hoping to convince her to join us for this workshop if it indeed becomes a reality. We're hopeful to say the least though have quite a few details to yet work out. We're so enthusiastic about the prospect of being a part of bringing the ideas and practices of Permaculture to this sector of the population. If you have any connections to the deaf community, please drop us a line so that we can send you more details. We'll start getting on the word for the scheduled February workshop in the coming weeks.

## **Conservation Update: Water Wars**

Over the past few years, there has been much talk about future wars being fought over water. Many suggest that these "water wars" can and likely will occur at international, national, and local levels due to problems with the quantity and quality of available water. The Worldwatch Institute (State of the World 2005) claims "water is never the single, and hardly ever the major, cause of conflict." It can, however, surface existing tensions and possibly even worsen them. In the small town of Mastatal, we are concerned mostly with the local scale of water usage and politics. There seems to be very little probability of conflict that cannot be resolved.

All of the running water for Mastatal and next two closest towns, San Miguel and La Fila de Aguacate, comes from a natural mountain spring in nearby La Cangreja National Park. Nothing is added to the water and it is tested for cleanliness yearly by Susan and her students from the University of Washington. As long as there are no major climate changes or any other unexpected change to the spring and water system, there is no end currently in sight for the water supply. San Gerardo, a very small town just outside La Fila, is petitioning for access to the water. A recent earthquake shifted their spring (and water source) so that it is no longer usable. Luckily, the town is small enough to not make much of a difference in the supply.

In the dry season, there has been some concern over the current system's water pressure. Often times, the pressure will be working properly in Mastatal, but San Miguel and La Fila will not have enough pressure to get any running water. People in San Miguel will then complain to the water-works man (Juanico), and his only option is to turn off the water in Mastatal. The Mastatal locals then get upset and start complaining, and the game of alternately shutting off the water in each town ensues. Meanwhile, La Fila simply does not have the numbers or ability to make competing claims, so they may go weeks without running water. This is the closest thing to water conflict that this area deals with, and it has already been resolved. Plans have been passed to tap into another spring in the park and to fix an outdated layout. It is expected that this project will rectify any problems with water pressure and hence its delivery to all of the served communities.

This kind of project is likely to attract some attention from other regions. There is a chance that La Gloria and Parrita may eventually want access to the same source, but officials have stated that this will not be possible within the scale of the new project. The prospect of sharing the water is frightening, but it seems that this will not become a reality for at least another decade.

There is very little small-scale conservation in the area simply because of the lack of education on the matter. Leaky faucets may continue to leak due to the fact that the nearest hardware store is hours away by bus, which would translate to the loss of a full day's work just for a small replacement part. Locals would rather pay a slightly higher water bill for the month (which is already cheap). As long as the water is flowing, it is a resource that seems infinite and may continue to be used accordingly.

Costa Rica, as a whole, is extremely fortunate to have such a steady water supply. There are plenty of springs to provide drinking water. The rivers are used for waste disposal and hydroelectric power (to name a couple of the more common uses). There are constantly plans for new dams. What kind of effect will this have on the areas that use irrigation? Throughout the world, dams are known to have an adverse effect on flow patterns and water quality.

Ultimately, water simply cannot be managed for just one objective. As quality and quantity diminishes, more and more competing claims for the existing sources are bound to surface. For now, Costa Rica and Mastatal in particular seem to be safe from intense water conflicts simply because the resource is so locally abundant as well as being "protected" within the confines of the national park. Most disputes worldwide are actually settled peacefully, and The Worldwatch Institute even suggests that environmental cooperation, especially when dealing with water, is a potential catalyst for peacemaking. I'll toast my glass of non-chlorinated natural mountain spring water to that.

Brian O'Rourke

### **Building Report: Classroom**

With each group that passes through our doors, we realize more and more the need to separate our classroom space from our living spaces. Our intention prior to going back to the States last year was to build the classroom during the 2005 season, but after analyzing our situation during our foray in NY last October and November, we decided that it was more important to build a more private house for ourselves as we began to get concerned about our long-term health and as a result the health of our projects due to our relative lack of privacy. We certainly don't regret our decision to first build the "choza", but the 1-year delay in constructing the classroom has certainly made it glaringly apparent why we will not be able to wait yet another year for a dedicated study space. The new structure, like most others at the Ranch, will serve a multitude of purposes. First and foremost, it will be a comfortable, quiet space where professors and instructors can give lectures and hold class and where yoga enthusiasts can practice their art without the downward slobbery dog drenching their mats. Secondly, it will be a mostly undisturbed spot where students can conduct research, contemplate, and read, away from the bluegrass tunes that belt out of the main house's stereo at all hours of the day. Lastly, it will provide an area where students and others can retreat to at night to either study or partake in late night activities away from our current sleeping quarters.

The latter should appease those of us that need more than 3 hours of sleep to function the following day. The preliminary design incorporates cob, bamboo and wood (imagine that!). It features a large study/classroom, a smaller room for dedicated lab work, a secured area to store equipment, and finally some common hangout space featuring hammocks and nice views off to the forest. The leading site candidate is the old pineapple patch behind the composting toilet at Jeanne's, though we still have some poking around to do before settling there. Robin continues to hone her designing skills and we're looking forward to break ground on this new project, perhaps even before our trip to the States in October.

### **Volunteer/Guest Gossip: Roger and Me**

"Lube me up," he said with a twinkle in his eye, raising eyebrows, and a smirk that makes Jack Nicholson look like a B actor. But maybe I should start the story of our friendship a little earlier...

On April 26th at approximately 5:00PM, I stepped off a bus in Mastatal. After swimming through a sea of students past wave after wave of button-up blue shirts, I found my way across the street to the Ranch. I still didn't feel quite grounded. All of a sudden, a helping hand reached out in the form of an energetic, yet soothing English voice that simply said "hi, I'm Roger." I was basically floating, and Roger was my life-vest.

Within a week, I was floating down the Rio Negro with an artificial life-vest keeping me from drowning in actual water beneath the Jesus Christ lizards running across the surface-water above. Meanwhile, the rapids kept Roger at pace until we reached the river's end at a majestic waterfall. Our arrival at the waterfall meant lunch. Lunch meant hard-boiled eggs and river waterlogged chocolate cake. I don't care much for eggs, so I was naturally the first to dive into the cake and ate more than my share. Roger took a nibble at the cake, but passed on it in favor of the eggs. We were picking up each other's slack from the start. We fit better than a hermit crab and his new shell.

A couple weeks later, as the UDub students went off on an educational excursion, the rest of us scuttled away to Manuel Antonio. There were only two beds for Timo, Robin, Niko, Michael, Roger, and me, but Roger quickly discovered the joys of sleeping on the outside balcony and shared the idea with me. Every morning, large groups of white-faced capuchins crashed through the trees above in an attempt to witness the rare pearl that is our friendship. The morning tide would then carry us down to the beach where Roger would give me a look, hand me a bottle of sunscreen, and say "Sparky, lube me up." The evening tide would carry us back inland where we would split a brownie sundae, share an Imperial forty, and Rog would teach me how to breathe fire.

The flame of camaraderie could have been easily extinguished as a nasty stomach bug, known locally as a pega, capsized me. Luckily, my life-vest would not fail as it has been guaranteed with a lifetime warranty. Roger sat at my side, nursing me back to good health. One day when I returned from the composting toilet, I noticed a giant plastic wang resting on my windowsill. It was labeled "lube" and had a note attached from Roger to cheer me up. He once again managed to keep my head above the murky waters below.

I know it sounds too good to be true. All relationships have their rough waters. Well, ours is no different. The night that I chose my favorite Costa Rican soccer club, the undertow was almost too

much to overcome. Roger's favorite team is Saprissa, and I chose La Liga. When the choice was made, he just glared at me and said, "Our friendship has just taken a very dark turn."

It was nothing that we couldn't overcome; we just had to ride it out. I'm not saying that we are undertow jockeys just barely managing to escape the underlying current that attempts to sweep our friendship out to sea. In fact, we have been sailing on crystal-clear and tranquil waters for weeks now. The horizon looks amazing, and I cannot wait to see what treasures lay ahead.

Brian O'Rourke

### **Community Facts/Stories: New Soccer Coach**

The Mastatal soccer team's oldest player, Gilbert Vindas, has recently hung up his player's jersey once and for all in favor of the coaching whistle. The veteran becomes the town's first coach in many years and now faces the challenge of training and disciplining a young and sometimes unruly club.

In goal, he must choose between two keepers that are only semi-reliable at best. Randall is the preference as the more stable of the two. He doesn't make many mistakes, but is also rarely seen performing the spectacular. Marcos can also do the job and is slightly more agile, but has streaks of recklessness and poor decision-making. The team is relatively safe with either goalie as long as the rest of the players do their job (sigh).

Just ahead of the goalie stands the team's core and only reliably constant squad: the defense. There are no decisions for Vindas to make here. The sides are guarded by a strongman with an eighties rocker hairstyle and a brilliant Englishman with flashy golden boots, Pichi and Roger. Holding down the fort in the middle is a solid wall made up of Alex and Timo, complete with canon-leg and battering-ram-head respectively.

Perhaps the most challenging task for the new coach will be finding one solid line-up of midfielders. The player positioning here varies from game to game based on attendance and behavior (both on and off the field). Sparky represents the attack-and-recover, steadier defensive portion of an oftentimes out-of-position crew. Greivin is an extremely skilled attacking mid with full-field eyes that compliments the front line perfectly. Caraca is highly skilled and talented, but also the team's most undisciplined and out-of-position player, the Randy Moss of Mastatal. That leaves Seco, Jorge, Vinny, Jesus, and whoever is not wearing the goalie jersey between Randall and Marcos to fill the last spot. They all know how to play the game, but are not likely to be the difference-makers in any given match.

The frontline consists of two explosive playmakers, Frankie and Junior, and there is no need to reposition either player. Frankie is skilled and fast enough to finish his fair share of offensive opportunities and occasionally set them up. Junior is possibly the most talented athlete on the field in most games and is easily the team's best finisher. He would be a great set-up man if he lifted his eyes more often, but does much more good than bad as it is already.

The bench consists of more players with knowledge of the game that does not necessarily translate

into high-quality performance. They generally enter the game sometime in the second half and occasionally provide needed support, although they have also been known to assist in blowing hard-fought leads.

With the starters on the field for a full ninety minutes, Mastatal could beat just about any other town in the region. As it happens, other players do show up to play. Everyone gets their chance for some minutes before the game's end, and unfortunately that often leads to many more lost offensive opportunities and defensive mistakes. Still, Vindas will continue to run the team as a family where everyone gets a chance, mirroring that small-town community feeling that Mastatal epitomizes. Victories have not been too difficult to come by without a coach, so everyone will be watching with cautious eyes. Whatever the outcome may be, Mastatal will pride itself on at least attempting to represent a more disciplined and cooperative team. It's either that or mutiny.

Brian O'Rourke

### **Comida Corner: Oat (or Granola) and Brown Sugar Coffee Cake**

This bad boy of desserts just rode in on a Harley from Deborah Madison's *Vegetarian Cooking for Everyone*. It will slap your taste buds, and you'll come back drooling for more.

#### Ingredients:

1 cup rolled oats, preferably non-instant (feel free to substitute granola)  
¼ pound (1/2 cup) butter  
1-cup light brown sugar, packed  
2 eggs at room temperature  
1 ½ teaspoons vanilla  
1-teaspoon ground cinnamon  
1-teaspoon baking powder  
½ teaspoon baking soda  
½ teaspoon salt  
1-½ cups flour  
1 cup Pecan Streusel (see below)

#### Pecan Streusel:

Mix the following ingredients together in a small bowl with your fingers or in a food processor until crumbly...

½ cup packed brown sugar  
2 teaspoons flour  
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon  
¼ teaspoon grated nutmeg  
3 tablespoons cold butter  
2/3 cup chopped pecans

When you're ready to get down and dirty with this bad boy:

1. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.
2. Butter and flour a 9 x 13-inch baking pan.

3. Pour 1-½ cups boiling water over the oats and set them aside.
4. Cream the butter and sugar until light and fluffy, and then add the eggs one at a time.
5. Scrape down the bowl and continue beating until the mixture is smooth, then add the vanilla, cinnamon, and oats.
6. Combine the dry ingredients and stir them in with a rubber scraper or wooden spoon.
7. Pour into the prepared baking dish.
8. Cover with streusel.
9. Bake until a skewer comes out clean (about 35 minutes).

Buen provecho!

### **Inspirational Impressions: The Mark of a Man**

“The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature is that he wants to live humbly for one.”

-Wilhelm Stekel (as quoted in *The Catcher in the Rye*)

I'd like to take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude to Brian O'Rourke's for his contributions to this month's newsletter. Brian wrote the introduction, the Conservation Update, the Volunteer Gossip and the Community Story. He also added this month's Inspirational Impression. Brian loves to write. You will be hearing from him again in future updates. Aside from his love of the written word, Brian has never lost an egg toss, ever. He kept this streak alive at the 4th of July party where with my help he took the crown once again. The locals couldn't quite figure out why we were smashing all of our eggs in the middle of the road. Locos Gringos. Brian is working to convince us to keep the monthly format of the newsletter. He argues that it's imperative to keep the Ranch community up to speed with our news more than 6 times a year. So far he's succeeding. He will be with us for a few more months before returning to the States to attend a few weddings, including ours. He's threatening to return to Mastatal towards the end of this year for another stint. We certainly hope that this is true. He's been an amazing addition to our community. Thanks again Brian. Go 'Cuse and Mark Your Face.

Abrazos,

Tim, Robin, Roger, Brian and the Crew