

A city facing extinction

Arriving back from Mexico in the teeth of Monday's blizzard, it was tempting to think of Toronto as the ultimate ecological disaster zone. The disappearance of all taxis left me to wade in my beachwear through killer ice ponds and across snowdrifts, warmed by the thought that our dollar was worth even less than when I had left.

Toronto may sometimes resemble Ultima Thule, yet compared with Mexico City it is a Utopia. Mexico's capital is fast becoming a behemoth urban monster whose problems defy solution.

The sprawling metropolis, built on a dry lake bed, lies in a valley at almost 7,000 feet (2,000 m) altitude. Mexico City's population is today a staggering 18 million, up 38% from only five years ago. Another two million commuters pour into the city daily from the suburbs. Eight Torontos could fit into Mexico's capital, the world's largest city.

Smoke and smog billow out of the valley in which the city sits. A vast miasma of pollution hangs over the city and its environs, visible from 60 miles away. At this altitude, the thin mountain air, trapped by surrounding peaks, stays almost motionless.

Struggle for space

In the giant bowl of Mexico City, three million vehicles, most with defective emission systems that belch smoke and fumes, fight a savage struggle for driving space. Crossing the city can take an entire day, so dense are its legendary traffic jams.

Each day, 130,000 factories pour out 10,000 tonnes of chemical wastes into the valley's thin air. Mexico City's air is now estimated to be 97.5% polluted by a poisonous soup of lead, carbon dioxide, sulphur, cement dust, gasoline fumes, garbage, noise — and manure. In the mountains above the city, farmers use manure as fertilizer. Winds pick up great brown clouds of dried manure and deposit it over the city below.

Trucks and buses belch out diesel smoke. Emission controls, even mufflers, seem unknown in chaotic Mexico City. Factories have no air pollution systems and garbage is burned everywhere. All of this effluent rises a few hundred feet and hangs over the city like a shroud.

The result below is an epidemic of health and psychological problems. Air pollution is estimated to kill 100,000 people annually, including 30,000 children. Ten per cent of the city's residents suffer from chronic asthma, caused by sulphur dioxide — 1.8 million victims.

Recent government medical surveys indicate that the combination of noise, smog and transportation problems cause 80% of the population to show symptoms of neurosis, leading to a dangerous increase in social aggression. For example, gun-fights between drivers stuck in traffic jams are now a routine occurrence.

Studies by the United Nations suggest that life in Mexico's capital may become impossible by the year 2000 unless the pollution situation can be reversed. But how this can be done in Mexico's free-wheeling atmosphere remains unclear.

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Each year, Mexico City acquires another 150,000 vehicles and close to a million new inhabitants. The huge inflow of people is frightening testimony to Mexico's other great problem, the rapid exhaustion of water resources.

Throughout Mexico — and particularly in its mountainous spine — the water table is dropping fast. Unable to scratch even hardy corn from the parched soil, farmers are pouring into the overcrowded cities, settling into pestilential slums.

Mexico City itself is running out of water. Each resident uses 76 imperial gallons of water daily, for a total of 1.3 billion gallons each day. In spite of spending \$600 million on new aqueducts, Mexico City simply cannot keep up with the demand for water from residents or industry.

The World Health Organization reports a new problem: Food sold in Mexico City contains extremely high levels of pesticide residue. The agency asserts that 500,000 people in the capital are poisoned each year by these chemicals. The government confirms these grim figures by adding that of 260 agricultural chemicals being used, only five are authorized as safe.

Ecologists' nightmares

In short, Mexico City, one of the world's most sophisticated, vibrant and interesting cities, filled with great restaurants, chic stores and exquisite cultural institutions, may fast be approaching extinction. All of the ecologists' worst nightmares could come true here over the next 15 years; poisonous air, food and water; immobile traffic; unbearable noise and chaos.

Nor is the nation's capital its only problem. Recent studies warn that by the year 2000 all of Mexico's remaining tropical jungles and woodlands — and up to half of its productive agricultural land — will have been destroyed by a combination of construction, poor land and water management, overfarming, pollution and deforestation for lumber and charcoal.

Can this march to extinction be halted? Mexico's present population is 78 million and may reach 100 million in 15 years. The government is hard-pressed to feed its people today. Few resources are available for ecology — particularly when the land is drying up. Even the nation's great oil reserves, once thought to be its panacea, have produced only enormous inflation, economic dislocation and corruption.

Only the most ruthless action will save Mexico City: Banning private cars, armies of pollution police, eviction of poor residents. Otherwise, this great city may vanish as surely as its predecessor, the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan.