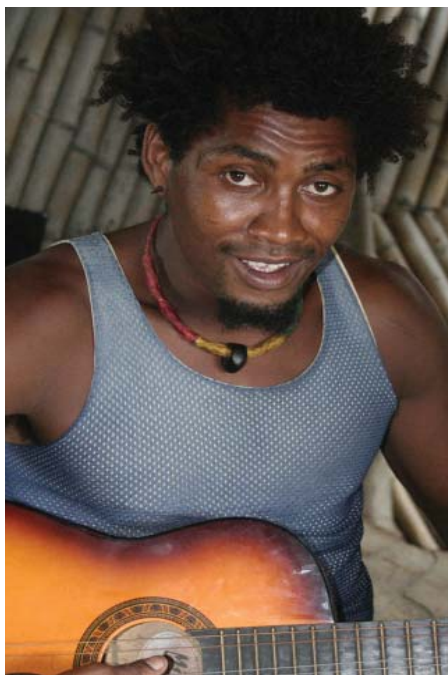


No More Trash Never Ever...

“¡No más basura nunca jamás!” is the catch-cry of a small volunteer organization in Muisne, *Grupo Activista Contra la Contaminación* (GACC), headed by Alex Quiñónez Medina, a born and bred Muisneño dynamo who is currently heading up a project to resolve the massive garbage problem plaguing the small coastal fishing town.



Alex Quiñónez Medina, President of GACC.

Situated just off the coast of Esmeraldas, Muisne (pronounced: moo-iz-neh) is an island with a population of 8511 and a tourism potential of millions of dollars. A long white sandy beach stretches over twenty kilometers along the coastline. Deserted apart from a few local visitors on weekends, the beachfront hosts just a few restaurants and a couple of fairly basic hotels. Between June and September, it's possible to have lunch in one of the restaurants and watch humpback whales frolicking in the sea. From December to February the surf is up, and local surfers regularly come to the island to ride the curls. At any time of year, you can hang out on the beach to swim and tan, or take a guided tour through the mangroves and learn a great deal about its unusual ecosystem.

The most obvious problem in Muisne is the garbage. Activists Against Contamination Group (GACC)

have been lobbying the Ecuadorian government for months to help them help themselves. The project is not simply about picking up the garbage that litters the otherwise pristine stretch of beach. Tons of garbage is also piled up around the houses and along the streets. It's floating in the water separating the island from the mainland. It's clogging the mangroves, affecting the delicate ecosystem. It's killing precious marine creatures such as baby humpback whales and Pacific green turtles that migrate past the Ecuadorian coast on the Humbolt current each season.

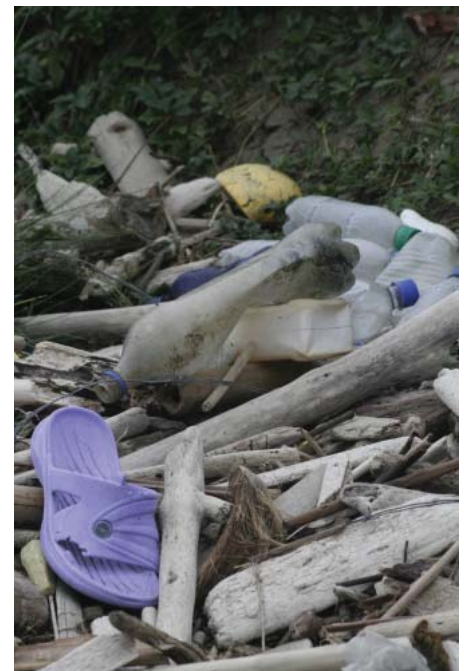
The aims of GACC include developing a workable recycling system, creating a sustainable garbage collection program and educating both locals and visitors about eco-friendly disposal of garbage and recycling. By cleaning up Muisne, GACC also hopes to increase eco-tourism to the area, which will benefit the whole community economically. GACC volunteers have built rubbish bins and installed them on the beach. They have hand-painted signs and put them all over Muisne asking – no, begging – people not to litter.



“Please don't litter our beautiful island.”

“Just picking up the rubbish isn't enough,” says Alex, President of GACC. “We need to educate people so they don't throw their trash in the streets. We also need to recycle whatever we can, and we need to

dispose of the rest properly so that it doesn't make us sick. And we need help.”



Muisne Beach - littered by people and tides.

At present, garbage collection is random in Muisne. No one ever knows when or from where their trash will be collected. Garbage put on the streets for collection can remain there for days or even weeks. Dogs get into it, ripping the bags apart and spreading trash all over the town. Rats and pigs worsen the problem. The wind takes it, plastering plastic bags and bottles all over the beach, the trees, the streets. Then, there are people who think it's okay to throw their waste on the ground. Many residents simply fling their garbage out the windows of their houses, knowing it wouldn't be collected even if they did take the effort to package it correctly. In many streets, trash is piled high outside houses, left to the dogs, rats, pigs and wind to distribute all over the island. Over 65% of the garbage on the island has never been collected.

“I was born here and I grew up here,” says Alex. “I don't want to live in a trash heap. No one here does. The whole community is willing to put the time in, but we need the equipment.”

Approximately 94% of the water on the island contains faeces. Some families are so poor they are forced to drink this water. Everyone cooks

with it and washes in it. Obviously this creates health problems, mostly among children who play in and around the garbage, who swim in the filthy water and who drink it. From time to time, environmental groups turn up on the beach with big bags and shovels to clean up the garbage. Local school children and youths frequently organize themselves into groups and pick up rubbish around the town on a regular basis, but it is not enough. Once it's collected, there is nowhere to put it. The island needs a sustainable garbage collection and recycling system. Local people and visitors need to be educated on how to manage waste.



Alex and his friends have been very busy this year lobbying various federal government departments, making numerous presentations in order to obtain funds to initiate their project. They need around \$400,000USD worth of equipment to begin the project and maintain it. Passed along from minister to minister, from department to department, with no result pending as yet, Alex is feeling frustrated, but remains optimistic. Navigating the labyrinth of bureaucracy has been challenging. Everyone with whom GACC speaks praises the concept; it's a great idea – of course! But no one is yet offering a solution.

Earlier this year GACC made a DVD about the garbage in Musine, including

photos and interviews with local residents and medical professionals, all of whom have the same goal and hopes for the island of Muisne; “¡No más basura nunca jamás!” The informative and upsetting DVD has now been seen in countless government offices, but as yet, nothing has been done. So far, local government has been just as unhelpful. Unfortunately, Muisne's local government authority is so corrupt that it can't see past its own greed and is blind to the future benefits of contributing to such an important local project; potentially millions of tourism dollars generated from a magnificent beach equal in beauty to many of the world's best beaches – if it wasn't covered in trash. Naturally, federal government bodies are reluctant to send funds to Muisne's local government authority. Friends at GACC have even discussed the possibility of storming the local government offices, calling Correa, the President of Ecuador, and running the Mayor out of town – again.

“We did it once before, a few years ago,” Alex says with a grin. “We rushed the offices and demanded to be heard. Instead of listening, the Mayor escaped Muisne in the middle of the night dressed in women's clothes.”

Muisne is still a bit like the wild west; the lack of regulations, the lack of government interest and the lack of infrastructure are major obstacles GACC currently faces. Infrastructure is a big issue on the island; electricity is a sporadic commodity, running water almost non-existent (and hot water unheard of!), roads are mostly graded sand; some streets no more than muddy goat tracks. In the wet season, the garbage problem is magnified as flooding distributes trash all over the island and washes it into the sea. The resulting quagmire is a public health nightmare threatening the quality of life of every man, woman and child in Muisne with illnesses such as epidermis, pancreatic cancer and cholera. One would think this would be considered a public health emergency requiring immediate attention, but no, apparently not in Ecuador.



Meanwhile, despite having to tackle numerous other obstacles such as poor mobile telephone reception and limited internet access, Alex and his friends trudge on. GACC is very organized, very focused, and their mission is clear. They continue to clean up large stretches of the beach, and coordinate with environmental groups, youths and school children to pick up rubbish from the streets, from the waters surrounding the island, and from the mangroves. A three-day music festival to kick off the beginning of the project is currently in the planning stages; GACC has their own music group and they hope to attract other Ecuadorian and international bands to support the anti-contamination campaign.

“Ultimately we'd like to install large containers where people can put their trash, separated into different compartments for glass and metal, plastic, paper and organic waste and then implement a system where it can all be regularly collected and recycled,” says Alex.

But what they want most of all in Muisne is; “¡NO MÁS BASURA NUNCA JAMÁS!”

For more information or to support or help GACC contact Alex at: alexanpoderoso1@yahoo.es (Spanish only, he doesn't speak any English!)

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