

A Bird in the Cup

GRINDING TOWARD SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN THE COFFEE WORLD

by David Bray

ARTURO JIMÉNEZ looks a little out of place in the fashionable coffee bar in San Cristobal de las Casas in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Surrounded by walls adorned with contemporary paintings, he surveys the frothy organic coffee concoctions on the menu. His stiff, white cowboy hat and deeply lined face make him look at least ten years older than he is, and both identify him as a *campesino*, an Indian peasant, who a few decades ago was not permitted on the sidewalks of San Cristobal. But he is not at all out of place. In fact, he owns the place. Arturo is one of some 1,300 members of the Rainforest Farmers Union

(Union de Ejidos La Selva) of Comitán, Chiapas, who together own not only this coffee bar, but several more in Mexico City, not to mention the franchise deal they have hopes for in Spain.

North of the border, a suburbanite couple sits on a deck in a leafy New England backyard on a serene Sunday morning sipping coffee—a Mexican organic, let's say. A wood thrush flitting through the canopy catches their attention, and they muse over the fact that the coffee, the bird, and the backyard may all be connected. But the suburbanites may not suspect that the connections run all the way to Arturo Jiménez, or that the wood thrush in the New England canopy could have spent part of its winter in Arturo's Chiapas coffee farm. That cup of Mexican organic, in fact, has a constellation of qualities that contemporary consumers covet: it is small-farmer, it is organic, and now—pick your preferred label—it is "shade-tree," "bird-friendly," "songbird," and even the transcendent "sustainable." And all of these labels seem significant to our coffee drinkers, even if they do not grasp exactly what they signify.

The emergence of these labels has made coffee the next frontier of conscious consumerism, following in the footsteps of dolphin-free tuna and child-labor-free clothing. As researcher Jennifer McLean has noted "coffee is the next major test of the potential of informed consumer activism to reshape mainstream markets," forming a new and uneasy alliance of international trade, social justice, and the environment.

LEGEND HAS IT that coffee and human beings discovered each other when goatherds in northern Africa noticed their charges stayed awake all night after eating the leaves and berries of a

certain bush. Evan Eisenberg, in his imaginative rethinking of human ecological history, *The Ecology of Eden*, speaks of "alliances" between grains and humans that allowed humble grasses such as wheat and corn to dominate the plant world. In the same sense, an alliance between *Coffea arabica* and humans has enabled this unassuming understory bush from the forests of Ethiopia to conquer nearly 30 million acres in over 40 tropical countries—the spatial equivalent to a one-mile-wide strip around the equator.

Once there was Maxwell House, Folger's, and Chock Full O' Nuts. Now there is Costa Rican Terrazu, Sumatran Mandhelings, and Guatemalan Antigua, with attributes as baffling to the average consumer as those of wines. "Full body, very rich, with an array of grace notes modulating from nut and smoke tones through hints of wine in the finish," is how one Guatemalan brew was recently described in the trade magazine *Coffee Journal*. And now, the new breed of coffee has been infused by social and environmental themes unimaginable even a decade ago.

The emergence of coffee from the political and environmental dormancy in which most major food commodities rest has been a slow process. First, there was "fair trade" coffee, a primarily European phenomenon. Fair traders, who have captured as much as five percent of the market in some European countries, discovered a socially conscious consumer who was willing to pay a premium for coffee that was purchased directly from small coffee farmer cooperatives, with the premium going into the pockets of the farmers. Fair trade has not fared as well in the United States, with a small Massachusetts-based toaster,

Equal Exchange, having largely cornered this market. Then came organic, first as a component of the solidarity markets in Europe, and later as a new specialty coffee niche in its own right. To be sure, fair trade and organic merged as early as the mid-1980s, when another southern Mexican small farmer organization, the Oaxaca-based Union of Indigenous Communities of the Isthmus Region, started exporting certified organic coffee to the Dutch fair trade organization, Max Havelaar.

Some efforts in the U.S. to promote socially conscious coffee also quickly made the conversion to organic, as they discovered that it increased marketability. For example, the Fort Bragg, California-based Thanksgiving Coffee Company started out selling coffee from Arturo Jiménez's Rainforest Union as "Aztec Harvests" in the early 1990s, using the slogan, "not just a cup, but a just cup." But the just cup sold better as certified organic, and that's what the farmers converted to. Organic coffee began booming in the late 1980s, riding the crest of the organic foods movement, now a nearly 4-billion-dollar-a-year business in the United States and still growing at over 25 percent a year.

ARTURO AND ADVISORS to the Rainforest Union began traveling to European organic agriculture conferences in 1990, and then to the annual meetings of the Specialty Coffee Association in the United States. They quickly learned that the highest profits in the business were at the retail end, and developed a vision of selling by the cup to the final consumer, both in the U.S., in Mexico, and in Europe. This was a revelation, since until that time most southern Mexican small coffee gatherers, largely indigenous peoples, had been derided as mere coffee "collectors" rather than actual farmers. With little technical assistance or credit, they ventured out to their fields once a year to strip coffee beans, the red ripe ones and the hard green ones alike. But many of these farmers, with financial support from the Inter-American Foundation (IAF), a U.S. government foreign assistance agency, began to learn how to become coffee farmers, receiving instruction mostly from fellow farmers who had been previously trained by the Rainforest Union's technical staff. They learned how to make compost, how to terrace their fields, and how to select only the reddest, ripest beans, saving the green ones for second and third passes through the farm. Together with their advisors, they mastered the intricacies of exporting and of international trade. At the beginning the farmers didn't know the meaning of the word "to export," but in a very short time, they were exporters themselves.

They learned how to be not only coffee farmers, but also coffee processors, coffee exporters, and finally coffee toasters



Top: Rainforest Union members meet visitors in their San Cristobal coffeehouse (Arturo Jiménez is in the cowboy hat); Middle: Selecting only the red, ripe beans; Bottom: Rainforest Union workers sorting beans on a conveyor belt in the *beneficio seco* (dry processing plant).



Top: Full-sun coffee is planted on the hillside in the foreground; **Middle:** Baltimore orioles are among the many migratory birds that winter on rustic, shaded coffee farms; **Bottom:** Traditional coffee farm with shade-grown coffee planted in the understory.

and tasters. The Rainforest Union, with help from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, established a tasting laboratory in their coffee processing plant, and began looking for that "array of grace notes" in their product. With further support from the IAF and a Mexican computer consulting firm, they established a bar-code system to track coffee from the farm to the factory and beyond, assuring quality control and fair prices to producers. They learned how to sell coffee, and to sell the environment, even if some of the farmers may not see the connection in all its ramifications. Crucial to the process was the vision of advisors like José Juárez, an agronomist who grasped the potential of organic coffee as a catalyst for organizing small farmers, and had the patience and skills to make it happen.

Juárez and his team have created a uniquely Mexican model of grassroots sustainable development. The Rainforest Union emerged from a sprawling confederation that encompassed much of the Lacandon Rainforest. The confederation was born in the 1970s in response to the land and human rights struggles of indigenous peoples. By the late 1980s, when some of the land tenure struggles had been won, the organization began focusing on how to make the land more productive. Years of patient training and organizing started paying off, and by the late 1990s over 1,000 members of the Rainforest Union had made the transition to organic. For them, organic offered a glimmer of hope that life on the land could be lived with dignity and some modest measure of comfort, by Mexican rural standards. But then the marketing situation got complicated again, when ornithologists rediscovered a little-known attribute of small coffee farms: birds, both migrants and residents, like them just about as much as natural forests.

AS EARLY AS 1932, Ludlow Griscom of the American Museum of Natural History had noted that the density and diversity of bird populations in traditional coffee farms did not seem to vary much from virgin mountain tropical forests. In the 1970s, Mexican biologist Arturo Gómez-Pompa led a team of researchers who confirmed that heavily shaded traditional coffee farms had almost the same number of bird species as neighboring cloud forests, and went on to discover very high rates of diversity in epiphytes and mosses as well. A closer look at these small coffee farms clarified why. Coffee is traditionally grown in the shade of taller trees. At one extreme of rusticity in coffee cultivation, the virgin forest stood as what Gómez-Pompa called "the recipient structure" for coffee bushes that were simply slipped into the understory. There are then successive grada-

tions of shade removal culminating in modern hybrid "full sun" varieties, which have very high yields but also require very high inputs of fertilizers and water, not to mention the fact that they create biological deserts.

The ecological advantages of traditional small farmer "shade tree" coffee were more recently rediscovered by a team of researchers led by entomologist Ivette Perfecto of the University of Michigan and ornithologist Russell Greenberg of the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center (SMBC). Greenberg demonstrated that not only did small coffee farms have high bird diversity, but that many of the birds were seasonal migrants. Beyond birds, Perfecto has found very high rates of biodiversity in ants as well, noting that "the traditional coffee farm resembles a forest more than a field."

The discovery of an agricultural method that generates income for small indigenous farmers while sustaining migratory bird habitat was a major finding.

Suddenly, hundreds of thousands of U.S. birdwatchers had a major stake in rustic small coffee farms. As the SMBC has pointed out, migratory bird censuses over the past several decades are showing alarming declines, with the numbers of birds crossing the Gulf of Mexico each year diminished by half in a 20-year span. Thus, the discovery of an agricultural method that generates income for small indigenous farmers while sustaining migratory bird habitat was a major finding. This habitat "eureka" has led to a sudden and intense interest in small coffee farmers on the part of ornithologists and conservationists.

Terms like "bird-friendly" and "shade tree" coffee entered the lexicon at the First Sustainable Coffee Congress sponsored by the SMBC at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., in September, 1996. It was an interesting gathering, bringing together biologists, foundation representatives, Starbuck's officials, and representatives of small coffee farmer organizations from Latin America. The conference sought to publicize the migrant bird-small farmer-shade tree link and has had a measure of success in doing so. Ornithological campaigns have sprung up, such as the Northwest Shade Coffee Campaign undertaken by the Seattle Audubon Society. The National Audubon Society, in association with SMBC, even tried launching a bird-friendly "Café Audubon," which was later discontinued. But Thanksgiving Coffee has persevered with its own label, marketing several varieties of "Song Bird Coffee" in association with the American Birding Association (ABA).

The marketing campaign for these various coffees was given added urgency by the fact that, in some areas of Latin America,

small farmer coffee was becoming an endangered habitat under assault from the full-sun varieties. As researchers Robert Rice of the SMBC and Justin Ward of the Natural Resources Defense Council have reported, of the 6.9 million acres planted to coffee in northern Latin America, about 40 percent has been converted to the capital-intensive, full-sun coffee.

But the emergence of conservationists on the coffee scene has created tension in the ranks of coffee certifiers and producers. The fair trade and organic movements had developed elaborate self-policing certification measures to build consumer confidence in their products. The shade-tree concept seemed to dramatically lower the entry barriers to market premiums. Producers like Arturo Jiménez had worked very hard, spending both time and money, to become certified organic. They had

learned new skills. They had made the transition from producing a low-value mass-agricultural commodity to specializing in a high-value niche-market product. But suddenly, any grown-over coffee gatherer's farm could apparently benefit from a market premium for shade-tree coffee. In fact, the less well tended the farm, the more attractive it was to the conservationists.

The small farmer representatives at the Smithsonian conference were understandably miffed by all the attention to birds. It seemed like yet another elite conservationist effort that placed wildlife over the needs of human beings. In practice however, a shade-tree marketing threat has not materialized. The bird-friendly forces have tended to adopt organic certification as a close proxy, not wanting to antagonize small farmers who had advanced in terms of better environmental management. Further, most roasters and importers recognized that the complexities of establishing a third certifying procedure that was not necessarily either fair trade or organic would run the risk of confusing consumers and creating splits among producers.

SMBC has gone ahead and developed a "Bird-Friendly™" seal of approval, which is already being used by a handful of coffee importers and about ten roasters, whose beans have been inspected by an independent, third-party certifier to verify that they meet organic standards as well as the SMBC's bird habitat requirements for shade coffee. According to Robert Rice, a geographer and policy researcher with SMBC, "a lot of coffees that say they're shade grown don't necessarily meet the criteria. They're based on a 'trust me' certification by those with a vested interest in sales. The coffee industry desperately needs

to adopt its own mechanism for third-party verification based on sound scientific criteria." The Rainforest Alliance's "Eco-OK" program has also begun certifying shade coffees using their own criteria, which address similar concerns, but fall short of encompassing organic certification.

However, one of the pioneers in both organic and social consciousness, the marketer of "the just cup," has tried to create a third course. Paul Katzeff, CEO of Thanksgiving Coffee, has been the social and environmental conscience of the specialty coffee industry for years. Katzeff has jumped with both feet onto the bird-friendly bandwagon, marketing Song Bird Coffee with the ABA. But Katzeff has reawakened the fears of the organic farmers by declaring in a manifesto to his customers that "shade is inclusive—organic is exclusive." He went on to argue that shade-grown coffee will "save what is left of the forest habitat," that organic is expensive for small producers who are not sophisticated, and that "sustainable issues are much broader than organic, including water pollution, ground cover, soil protection, community cooperation, and social well-being."

Did you know?

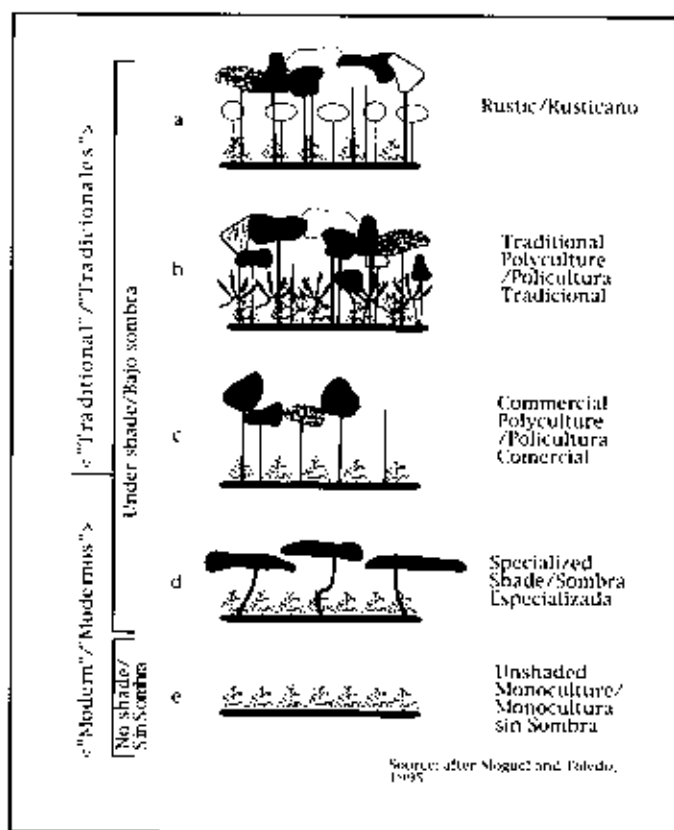
If only 10% of U.S. coffee drinkers demanded bird-friendly coffee, about 135,000 hectares of plantation land could be converted back to shade.

Katzeff is reaching for the next market niche "beyond organic," but all the issues he mentions are associated with either fair trade or organic or both. Still, going "song bird" does allow him to broaden his network of small farm suppliers, and Thanksgiving does offer customers certified organic coffees, which are marketed as being shade grown as well.

BEYOND BIRDS, there are other issues of concern in the world from which coffee emerges.

It's not easy being a small farmer trying to make a living the hard way producing a commodity also produced in 43 other countries. Arturo Jiménez and his colleagues are descendants of Tojolobal Mayan Indians. Most of them were essentially serfs on coffee fincas on the steep forested hillsides of Chiapas in a remote, rugged region known as "the Canyons," a series of narrow, deep valleys that stretches from the highlands of Chiapas to the lowlands of the Lacandon Rainforest. After the Mexican Revolution, they were able to escape bondage and head off into the mountain forest. In more recent decades, they have been joined by waves of land-poor migrants from the highlands of Chiapas and elsewhere in Mexico. These were pioneer farmers who urgently hacked out a hole in the forest to plant their *milpas*, or corn fields, to feed their families, and then began sticking coffee seedlings into the "recipient structure" of the forest as their cash crop. After waiting three to five years for these coffee bushes to begin maturing, they would still only earn \$1,400 a year at best from their coffee, representing most of their total annual cash income. In Arturo's organization, 44 percent of its members have never attended school. They live in hovels with beaten earth floors and are almost totally bereft of government services. Many live hours from the nearest passable roads, far from stores and health care.

It was out of this deprivation that the Zapatista Army of National Liberation burst onto the world stage on January first, 1994, plunging many areas of Chiapas into ungovernable anarchy, where they have remained ever since. The Zapatistas, now largely forgotten outside of Mexico, are still a significant thorn in the side of the Mexican government, and have continued to huddle deep in the Canyons, surrounded by the Mexican Army, and issuing defiant communiqués. What is little known about the Zapatistas is that they essentially chose armed rebellion over organic coffee. Arturo Jiménez's Rainforest Farmers Union lost about half its membership to the Zapatistas, organic coffee not maturing as an option quite fast enough to head off the choice of the rifle instead of the mug.



The shade gradient in coffee production ranges from unshaded, or "full-sun," to the rustic, traditional coffee farms.

The organic coffee farmers of Chiapas have had to struggle with other, scarcely imaginable, afflictions as well. Now, to the fires of political and social struggle have been added real fire, and torrents of water. The Mexican forest fires that burned eyes in the southern United States in the spring of 1998 also destroyed thousands of acres of coffee bushes. More recently, antediluvian rains, one-quarter of the average rainfall for the year, fell in five days, killing hundreds of people, leaving 15,000 homeless, and destroying 90,000 hectares of coffee, including 80 percent of the plantings of the organic coffee organization, Indigenous Peoples of the Sierra Madre of Motozintla.

But for those farmers who have been able to escape armed uprisings, fires, and floods, organic coffee has presented a promising option. In the first years as they made the transition to organic, the farmers of the Rainforest Union earned as much as 43 percent more than their nonorganic neighbors. In more recent years, as the price of regular coffee rose, that premium has more commonly ranged from 5 to 20 percent, a good percentage of which goes toward the higher labor demands of implementing the initial phase of switching to organic production: compost piles must be established and maintained, terracing may be carried out to impede erosion, more attention is given to the fields in general. Further, these new labor demands occur at the time of year when family members also need to be tending the corn fields. But once the transition phase is over, these former coffee gatherers will reap the benefits of having positioned themselves to attract the higher prices the market offers for high-quality, organic, gourmet coffee.

And then there are the coffeehouses in San Cristobal and Mexico City, where poverty-blasted small farmers have a piece of a new chain. It took years of step-by-step advances, and some Mexican government financing, to realize this dream, but the coffee shops are a reality. They haven't seen much benefit yet, and it's not clear if it's really going to work, but they have realized their vision of selling cups of coffee directly to the consumer, where the highest profits are concentrated.

Despite the precarious economic benefits of organic coffee, the members of the Rainforest Union are happy with their decision to adopt organic practices. While not necessarily appreciating all of the conservation benefits, they note the richer, greener foliage and the richer soil of their farms as compared to those of nonorganic neighbors. They are no longer dependent on agrochemicals manufactured far away, but gather the necessary nutrients from natural materials around them. And if the fact that their farms provide winter homes for migrating songbirds means that people will pay them more for their coffee, they count that as a plus too.

Interviews carried out by Mexican researcher José Luis Plaza

show that the farmers understand that their most important benefit comes not from being organic coffee farmers, but from being organized. The Rainforest Union brings them education, relief supplies, activities for their children, as well as the possibility of growing and marketing organic coffee. Organic is just one of what they think of as a "basket of benefits" they receive from being organized. And indeed, almost all of the organic coffee coming out of Mexico comes from organized small farmers, not from individual entrepreneurs. If these farmers have learned how to position and sell themselves in the world market, they have done so by taking some of the traditional elements of indigenous solidarity and recasting them as a source of competitiveness. Thus, Arturo Jiménez and the deck-dwelling suburbanites come together around a pot of coffee and a migratory bird, and their mutual search for a social habitat where an "array of grace notes" is found not only in the cup. ☺

David Bray is chair and associate professor in the Department of Environmental Studies at Florida International University in Miami. He is currently initiating, with two Mexican institutions, a Ford Foundation-supported research-action project on community tropical ecosystem management in Quintana Roo, Mexico.

Eco-OK Program

The Rainforest Alliance
65 Bleeker Street
New York, NY 10012
212/677-1900
eco-ok@ra.org
www.rainforest-alliance.org

Equal Exchange, Inc.

251 Revere Street
Canton, MA 02021
781/830-0303
ecrowell@equalexchange.com
www.equalexchange.com

Rainforest Farmers Union/ Union de Ejidos La Selva

Cafes Organicos de
Chiapas
Carretera Panamericana
Km. 1261.5
AP 10, CP 30,000
Comitán, Chiapas
Mexico
9632-18-87
uncafesur@laneta.apc.org

Seattle Audubon Society

8050 35th Ave. NE
Seattle, WA 98115
206/523-4483
coffee@seattleaudubon.org
www.seattleaudubon.org

Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center

National Zoological Park
Washington, DC 20008
202/673-4908
www.si.edu/smbc

The Songbird Foundation

P.O. Box 13439
Burton, WA 98103
888/607-BIRD
info@songbird.org
www.songbird.org

Thanksgiving Coffee Company

P.O. Box 1918
Fort Bragg, CA 95437
800/462-1999
www.songbirdcoffee.com