

Another World of Water

(e-mail from Peace Corps volunteer Megan Gregory '04 in El Salvador)

Perhaps one of the first things I've realized since arriving here is the preciousness of water. Waiting at the *chorro* (spring) at 4 a.m. for the thin stream of water to fill my *cantaro* (jug) and hauling every drop of water I want to use really makes me appreciate this fundamental resource that I depend on for drinking, bathing, and basic sanitation. I spend, at the very least, an hour waiting for and carrying water every day, and most women in the community probably spend 3-4 hours. Not only do they have to carry water for the entire family while I only carry enough for one person (minus the *cantaros* they insist on bringing to my house), they also wait much longer, since the community insists that whenever I come to the *chorro*, I should fill my *cantaro* without waiting in line. With the dry season (September - April) really setting in and the thin stream of water decreasing to a trickle, water dominates people's thoughts, daily routines, and indeed their very lives. Each home has a number, assigned by lottery, which dictates the order in which families can fill their quota of *cantaros* at the *chorro*. Now that water is scarce, the community is filling *cantaros* strictly by number, which means that you have to be at the *chorro* when the number before you finishes filling if you want to get water, whether that's at 3 a.m. or 11 p.m. All day, women are forced to interrupt their daily work to run to the *chorro* and find out what number is filling, or they send their kids to relay back the message back home. Since it has been taking about 3 days to get through all 108 numbers, families are forced to stretch what should be a minimum daily allotment of water to last longer. Potable water is definitely the most serious need in the community and as such will be a priority for my work here. But for me, who had always enjoyed an apparent abundance of water, the experience of carrying and conserving water is a good wake-up call as to the actual scarcity of water and the necessity of using it well. I only hope that when I return home I remain conscious of and thankful for how precious water really is.

I'm also beginning to appreciate a way of life that emphasizes the value of community, helping, and sharing. Every task, from cutting sorghum or coffee, to washing clothes, offers an opportunity for collaboration and socializing. In the United States, we'd probably consider the Salvadoran way of doing things "inefficient" -- and granted, it definitely takes a lot more time to harvest crops and wash clothes by hand than it does with a machine. But it also takes a lot less of our rapidly decreasing supply of fossil fuel, the burning of which threatens the mild climate (geologically speaking) we have come to depend on. Such manual, communal labor also builds relationships between people in a way that operating a machine alone cannot.