



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Raúl Montenegro (Argentina)

(2004)



for his outstanding work with local communities and indigenous people to protect the environment and natural resources.

Photo: Wolfgang Schmidt

Raúl Montenegro was born in 1949. Since 1985 he has been Professor of Evolutionary Biology at the National University of Cordoba. In 1982 he was the principal founder of FUNAM (Environment Defence Foundation), and has been its President since 1995.

Since 1980 Montenegro has been involved, normally in an initiating role, in an astonishing range and number of environmental activities, which include:

Anti-nuclear: this has been probably Montenegro's single largest field of activities, which have included: a six-year successful campaign to close Los Gigantes uranium mine; campaigns against plans for nuclear waste dumps, nuclear waste shipments and nuclear releases; a successful campaign to stop the construction of a reprocessing/MOX plant and a Cobalt 60 irradiation plant; a successful campaign to stop nuclear prospecting in the Traslasierra Valley; promotion, with substantial take-up, of the concept of municipal nuclear-free zones; campaigns against the privatisation of Argentina's two nuclear plants (third under construction), against the construction of a fourth plant, and against the import of Canadian CANDU reactors, into both Argentina and Guatemala. All these campaigns have been successful so far. Montenegro was also chairman of the campaign against Argentina's nuclear plan, with many demonstrations, meetings and articles, and exposure of nuclear leaks and accidents and illegal nuclear testing.

National parks: Montenegro has been instrumental in the establishment of six national parks or nature reserves. He has prevented car rallies through one, and received death threats for campaigning against the building of a golf course in another.

Disposal of toxic waste: Montenegro has fought many successful campaigns against plans to build toxic waste incinerators, exposed, and forced the clean-up of, a number of toxic waste dumps.

Pollution by chemicals and high-voltage power lines: Montenegro has exposed polluting releases by factories and successfully fought to have high-voltage lines located away from population settlements.

Forests, wildlife and biodiversity: he has stopped the deforestation of at least 500,000 hectares, campaigned to prevent forest fires, run campaigns to protect endangered ecosystems, and acted to tighten up the protection, and national trade rules affecting the export, of several endangered species.

Water environment: he has run several campaigns against dams and for the provision of clean water and for ecologically sensitive water management. In June 2000, action by FUNAM led to cancellation of the Canal Federal project to move water from two of the poorest provinces to another which would benefit properties of the rich. FUNAM challenged the government on legal and environmental grounds and eventually Montenegro was informed that the project had been dropped.

Environmental legislation: for 4 years Montenegro was Cordoba's Under-Secretary of the Environment, an independent and non-political member of the Cabinet, promulgating many environmental laws and initiatives, including Argentina's first requirement for Environmental Impact Assessment for both private and public projects. He formed an Environment Council and launched the Environment Defence Brigade of conservation volunteers. Out of office he contributed to the drafting of a number of environmental laws and has launched more than 40 prosecutions for environmental destruction in the courts.

Environmental education: for five years Montenegro wrote a column on ecology in one of the main weekend newspapers. He was Chairman of FUNAM's Children's Campaign for Peace and Life, which worked with 350,000 children in Argentina, and coordinated the Voice of the Children International Campaign at the time of the Earth Summit, which involved more than 600,000 children in 42 countries. For 20 years he has been a familiar figure on Argentine TV and radio. He was Project Director of FUNAM's 'Only One Environment' project, which produced 36 videos on ecological subjects for distribution throughout Argentina and neighbouring countries.

International representation: Montenegro has been a member of the Executive Committee of the Environment Liaison Center International in Nairobi (ELCI, 1988-91), a Vice-President of Greenpeace (1987-89). He is now Director of the international Biomass Users Network and FUNAM's main representative of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

In addition to all this Montenegro has had a full academic life, publishing in journals and keeping abreast of (and sometimes contributing to) advances in ecological science, which he then tries to implement.

In 2003 Montenegro joined indigenous groups in their struggle against logging and mining companies. In the case of the Mby'a Guarain, the threat is that logging will reduce the land available to them from 4,000 ha to 300 ha. Living with the Mby'a Montenegro helped them map their land and biodiversity needs. Having documented their customary use of the land, he is now helping them to fight for their rights in the courts. His approach is spreading to other tribes. With regard to mining, Montenegro is helping to convene an historic and unprecedented meeting of 140 indigenous leaders to fight for their land rights.

Other work in the last two years has been with a number of citizens' groups to fight off environmental menaces. In one case Montenegro's scientific analysis of the drinking water, which seemed inexplicably to be making residents ill, revealed a toxic build up of arsenic and heavy metals in domestic water tanks, many of which had not been replaced or cleaned for 10-30 years. This simple discovery, with a new government campaign to ensure that all household water tanks are drained and cleaned, could save thousands of people from debilitating illness and death. More recently he contributed to stop the provision of polluted water in a 50,000 people area, and presented a judicial claim against governmental responsible and private companies. Two top governmental leaders resigned and 13 neighbourhoods are currently provided with clean water.

In all his activities Montenegro combines an expert use of science with community-based campaigning, and an ability to generate enormous media coverage.

Montenegro received University of Buenos Aires Prize to Scientific Research when he was a student (1971) and the national 'Argentina has examples' prize in 1996. FUNAM received a Global 500 Award from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 1987, and Montenegro received the same Award personally in 1989. In 1998 Montenegro was in Salzburg as one of four recipients to be accorded the Nuclear-Free Future Award.

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