

Dear The City Paper

In reference to your March 2015 cover story the ‘Wayúu’s thirst for survival,’ I thought I would let you and your readers know of an initiative our Colombian Foundation, Ferdescol (www.ferdescol.org), has been working on to provide green energy alternatives and clean drinking water - via a solar-powered desalinization plant - to a Wayúu community in La Guajira.

Cale Calemana is an indigenous Wayúu community situated in the Santuario de Fauna y Flora Los Flamencos some 35 kilometers southwest of Rio Hacha, the capital of Colombia's Guajira department. It is a community of fishermen and goat herders living on a peninsula between the salt lake known as the Laguna Grande, where flamingos come to feed, and the Caribbean sea.

The community is a “rancheria” of 25 families which, despite their proximity to Rio Hacha, live in relative isolation with only a not always navigable dirt track leading from the nearest small town of Perico to their territory. Cale Calemana receives no public services from government, has no electricity, and until recently had no reliable source of clean drinking water.

The people of Cale Calemana traditionally obtained their drinking water from jagüeyes, rainwater ponds which fill up during the rainy season. But rainwater ponds shared with livestock and other wild animals (such as caimans) do not provide safe drinking water, especially for the large number of small children in the community who suffer from diarrheal illnesses directly related to unclean water, a primary cause of child morbidity in La Guajira.

The prolonged drought in the Guajira has in any case meant that the jagüeyes can no longer be relied upon. They have been dry for most of the past year. In Cale Calemana, the community was forced to use their one motorcycle to make multiple daily trips to the nearby town of Camarones to beg or purchase whatever water the people there were willing to offer them.

La Fundación de Energías Renovables y Desarrollo Sostenible en Comunidades Colombianas (Ferdescol) was created last year with communities such as Cale Calemana in mind. Our idea is to use sources of renewable energy - solar and wind - to address basic community needs such as reliable sources of energy and safe drinking water. So last October Ferdescol purchased and installed a solar-energy powered water desalinization system in the Laguna Grande. The system pumps water from a sea-water well through a desalinization plant before it arrives – desalinized and purified – in two clean water tanks from which the community draws water twice daily. Although capable of producing up to 850 liters of purified drinking water per day, the community to date has been using less than 700 liters.

Ferdescol's longer-term goal is to work with communities such as Cale Calemana on economic development and poverty reduction projects, particularly in eco-tourism which has experienced explosive growth in other Latin American countries during the past decade. Availability of reliable access to electricity, communications technologies and desalinized drinking water should enable the people of Cale Calemana to develop an eco-tourism project built around the presence of a large flock of flamingos in the area.

The people of Cale Calemana have a reliable source of clean drinking water for the first time in the 75 years or more that they have lived in Laguna Grande. Indeed, their purified sea water is of a much higher quality than that received through the taps by the residents of Rio Hacha, something the community now proudly explains to anyone willing to listen. This is fortunate since the continuing lack of rain in La Guajira has meant that Cale Calemana's jagüeyes remain dry. Many other Wayúu communities in La Guajira have not been so lucky however.

Ferdescol has ambitions to work with many other isolated communities which face similar problems, in La Guajira and in other parts of Colombia. So far we have only managed to raise the funds to provide assistance to one small indigenous community of less than 150 people. But it's a beginning.

Yours faithfully,

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