

EMBARGOED UNTIL APRIL 18, 2005 EMBARGOED

2005 Goldman Environmental Prize Recipient for North America

Isidro Baldenegro López
Chihuahua, Mexico

“I am not aware of any other environmental defender of the same stature and courage in Mexico.” - Folabi Olagbaju, Amnesty International

Indigenous Leader Defends Forests in Mexico

Isidro Baldenegro López, 38, is a subsistence farmer and community leader of Mexico’s indigenous Tarahumara people in the country’s Sierra Madre mountain region. He has spent much of his life defending old growth forests from devastating logging in a region torn by violence, corruption and drug-trafficking.

Ninety-Nine percent of the Old-Growth Forest Is Gone

The spectacular Western Sierra Madre mountain range hosts one of the most diverse ecosystems in the world, ranging from snow-covered peaks to four separate canyons, each deeper than the Grand Canyon in the United States. In addition to the 120 species of neo-tropical migratory birds which winter in the region, it is also home to 26 threatened or endangered species including thick-billed parrots, spotted owl, northern goshawk, military macaw, as well as a number of native fish, reptiles and amphibians.

The region is also home to the Tarahumara, one of the largest indigenous groups in North America. But the region’s long history of resource extraction, violence and corruption threatens both the forest and the indigenous communities. Ever since the Spanish invaded Mexico in search of precious metals, the Tarahumara and other native peoples have sought refuge in the remote mountain valleys. Today, loggers and ranchers seek lumber and land at any cost, forcing many people to flee and destroying the vast majority of old-growth forest. In fact, 99 percent of the region’s old-growth forests have been logged.

In the Name of His Father

According to local and international non-governmental organizations, the area is controlled informally by violent local crime bosses who gained power in the last 30 years by laundering drug money through logging and ranching operations. The government has been largely unresponsive to the violence, resulting in regional impunity. Tragically, Baldenegro is acutely aware of the grave risks involved in defending the forest. As a boy, he witnessed firsthand the assassination of his father who was killed because he opposed logging. In the face of these serious risks and repeated threats against his life, Baldenegro has chosen to remain and defend the forest and ancestral lands his community has inhabited for hundreds of years.

In 1993, Baldenegro developed a non-violent grassroots resistance movement to fight the logging, gaining support from local and international NGOs. In 2002, he organized non-violent sit-ins and marches, prompting the government to temporarily suspend logging in the area. The following year he mobilized a massive human blockade of mostly women whose husbands had been murdered, resulting in a special court order outlawing logging in the area.

False Arrest

Following the 2003 blockade, Baldenegro suddenly was jailed on what would later prove to be false charges of arms and drug possession. His arrest generated international solidarity from important environmental and human rights NGOs, and Amnesty International declared Baldenegro a prisoner of conscience. Released in June 2004 after 15 months of prison, he emerged even more determined, encouraged by the immense international support. Soon after, he and his supporters won two more government logging suspensions. Motivated by his success, he established an environmental justice organization, which currently has cases pending in the federal courts.

Defending a Way of Life

Baldenegro's courageous efforts have made him a national and international hero. He has brought world attention to the beautiful, ecologically crucial old-growth forests of the Sierra Madre as well as the survival of the Tarahumara.

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Recipient Quote:

Name in print: Isidro Baldenegro López

“Buscar un mejor futuro par las comunidades y las generaciones que están por venir, denunciar las injusticias hacia el pueblo indígena y buscar la protección del bosque y los recursos naturales de la sierra tarahumara.”

English translation: “To seek a better future for the communities and the coming generations, to denounce the injustices committed against the indigenous people and to protect the forest and natural resources of the Tarahumara Sierra.”

About the Goldman Environmental Prize

The Goldman Environmental Prize allows individuals to continue winning environmental victories against the odds and inspire ordinary people to take extraordinary actions to protect the world. The Goldman Environmental Prize was created in 1990 by civic leaders and philanthropists Richard N. Goldman and his late wife, Rhoda H. Goldman.

The Goldman Environmental Prize winners are selected by an international jury from confidential nominations submitted by a worldwide network of environmental organizations and individuals. Prize winners participate in a 10-day tour of San Francisco and Washington, D.C., for an awards

ceremony and presentation, news conferences, media briefings and meetings with political, public policy, financial and environmental leaders.