

SCIENCE / ENVIRONMENT

Praying for time

While travelling, one man observes the debilitating problem of pollution in Mexico's largest city.

BY PASCAL LANGUILLON

We are all aware that the world's levels of pollution increase year after year, but in Canada it usually doesn't affect us on an everyday basis. The air is so cold that it seems pollution is quickly dispersed anyway.

But in other places, it's nearly impossible to avoid seeing, breathing or drinking the products of pollution.

Mexico City is one of those places. It can be described as the source of the world's worst polluted air.

Severe pollution from high traffic and neglectful industries produce extremely high levels of pollution that cause respiratory and eye problems, sore throats and headaches. As well, the lack of oxygen due to the high altitude evokes feelings of dizziness.

The mountains surrounding the *valle de Mexico* prevent the

pollution from dispersing. As if this isn't enough, the air is sometimes filled with ashes spurted by the nearby volcano, Popocatepetl. Even on a bright, sunny day, Mexico City's sky remains a dour and hazy grey.

Exotic remedies such as using helicopters to sweep smog away or exploding a hole in the ring of mountains around the city have been proposed.

What are the daily effects of such pollution on the 20 million people living in one of the largest cities in the world? The four million cars in the city are not allowed to operate all of the time: every car is banned from the street on one day each week. On this day, determined for each person by the end of their car's plate number, people have to

take public transportation or a taxi.

When the air quality is especially bad, the authorities double the numbers of cars being prohibited from circulating, and in the worst cases, only emergency traffic is permitted. In those critical conditions, children can't practice outdoor activities at school and industries are stopped for the day. Elderly people are

advised to stay at home.

I had the misfortune to get to Mexico City when the pollution was at its peak. Breathing was not really a pleasurable experience, so I had to cover my mouth as much as possible. After an exhausting day trying to make my way through the cars and the crowds of people, I returned to my hotel with a sore throat that I tried to relieve by drinking purified water.

My very first impression of this fascinating city was a bad one, and I wanted to leave as soon as possible — but I stayed for a week.

Because of the conditions endured by citizens, Mexico's government is trying hard to find solutions for the problem. Exotic remedies such as using fleets of helicopters to sweep the smog away, or exploding a hole in the ring of mountains around the city, have been proposed.

But more realistic options are now being tried. Taxis using a new battery-operated engine are being tested, and they will hopefully help reduce the traffic pollution in Mexico City — and in other cities in the world.

The air pollution is unfortunately not the only source of concern in Mexico. The water is highly contaminated in the whole country, giving bad intestinal problems to careless visitors who drink it. Typhoid, Hepatitis and more dangerous infections are also carried by the water. As a result, food can be contaminated as well when it is handled, washed or prepared. Therefore, you always



A BREATH OF BAD AIR: Mexico City is killing its citizens.

have to be careful about what you eat and drink — upsetting when you think that in the ancient times you could swallow water directly from the rivers and eat whatever seemed appealing to you.

Mexico is full of unexpected places. Once, I was walking on a beautiful path overlooking some scenery, when I saw smoke several meters ahead. I thought it could be a new hot spring; the area is famous for its natural swimming pools. When I arrived at the source of the smoke, I found out, with great disgust, that the "hot spring" was actually garbage being consumed by the heat of the sun.

Sanitary problems are definitely an issue in this country.

The preservation of the environment does not seem to be the primary concern of the average Mexican, who is struggling to get

some pesos to feed a family. Meanwhile, the wonderful nature that makes Mexico a very beautiful country slowly perishes. New international beach resorts are coming up, destroying the magnificent coast for the enjoyment of avid tourists.

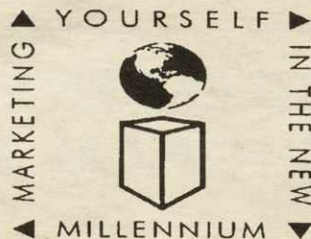
All these environmental problems are worsening, not only in Mexico, but almost everywhere in the world. We should not forget that we all share the same air, that all the waters in the different oceans are connected, and that we have just one planet — just one chance.

Should we wait to reach the levels of pollution of Mexico city to start thinking about solutions, or should we plan in advance and begin to consider things in a different way, now?

I certainly hope so. Otherwise, we should all be praying for time.

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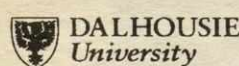
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