

ICWA LETTERS

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William F. Foote is an Institute Fellow examining the economic substructure of Mexico.

Banking on the Border

Can we clean up our mess?

MEXICO CITY, Mexico

July 17, 1997

By William F. Foote

It's 110 degrees on the U.S.-Mexico border. Like a poisonous stew, pea-soup green in texture and color, the New River pours inexorably into the United States. Cooking in the desert sun, its toxic ingredients — agricultural pesticides, industrial chemicals, human waste — are said to corrode sunken cars with amazing swiftness and even dissolve wayward golf balls.

"That part of the course is off limits," says Jerry Santillan, the city manager of Brawley, California, pointing to where the New River passes through the Del Rio Country Club. Located 25 miles north of the border, this agricultural town of 22,000 people lies at the heart of Imperial County, home to some of the world's richest farmland — and one of its more wretched waterways. "Golfers might catch cholera or typhoid if they retrieve their balls," adds Santillan, half jokingly.

The New River is a microcosm of a larger, binational tragedy. Over the past 30 years, the U.S.-Mexico border region has experienced a dramatic surge in population and industrialization. To be sure, this process has brought important economic benefits to both countries. In Mexico last year, the border's 1,500 *maquila* industries — low-wage factories designed to assemble imported parts and export the finished goods to the U.S. virtually duty free — produced a quarter of all Mexico's exports. The 760,000 people employed in the sector were nearly one-third of Mexico's total manufacturing workers. As for the U.S., American investment in the *maquila* sector may be a key to continued global competitiveness of the U.S. economy.

But all this comes at a price: the border is a dump, fast becoming an environmental wasteland. Thanks to hordes of job seekers streaming northward from Mexico's heartland, the region's population has swollen to eleven million. Explosive industrial growth and uncontrolled urban expansion have far outstripped the reach of basic municipal services. Among other things, the border's 14 sister cities lack potable water, sewage and solid-waste treatment facilities, especially on the Mexican side. This poses the ugly question: to what extent, and for how long, can the border economy flourish while its fragile,



Jerry Santillan, the city manager of Brawley, CA, stands beside the New River

neglected environment founders?

"The environmental problem is a time bomb waiting to explode on both sides of the border," says Professor Rosa María Romero, who heads an environmental education program at the *Universidad Pedagógica Nacional* in the border city of Mexicali. "Too few people hear it ticking."

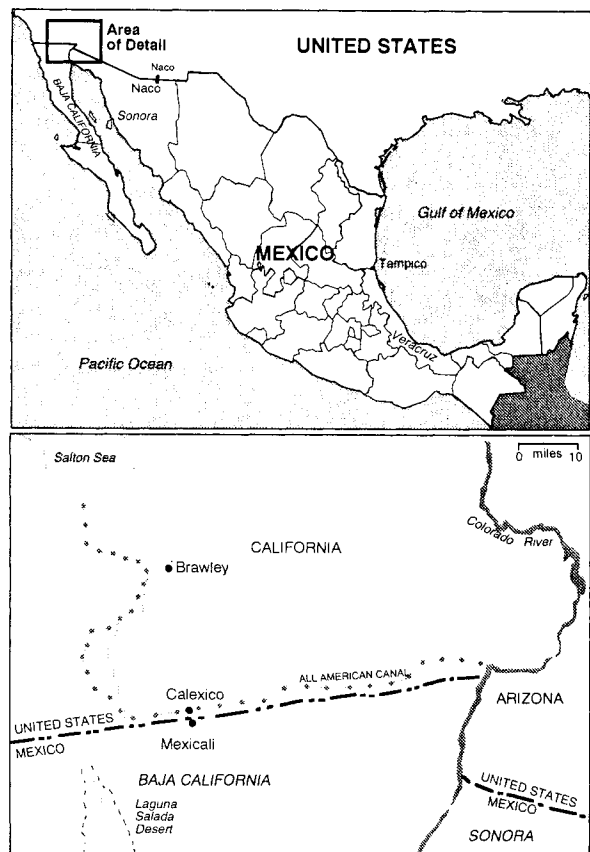
Fortunately, the signatories of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) noted that ticking sound, if only faintly. In the wake of NAFTA, through a side agreement, a binational lending institution was created with joint U.S.-Mexico funding (currently \$450 million, but expected to reach \$3 billion) to help cover the environmental cost of free trade. The North American Development Bank, better known as the NADBank, was empowered to make or guarantee loans to fund infrastructure projects within 100 kilometers (62 miles) of the border.

In a recent interview, Victor Miramontes, the NADBank's current director, stressed the private-sector focus of the binational institution. "We're principally a lender of last resort," said Miramontes, who grew up in El Paso, Texas, and holds an MBA from Stanford University. In stark contrast to the European Union, which requires rich member nations to subsidize their poorer trading partners with billions of dollars in infrastructure financing, NAFTA incorporates no contingency provision — no special funds and no special taxes. "Our big job is to find the money elsewhere," says Miramontes, "from private investors, government grants from both nations, and then, as a last resort, our own capital."

Sounds nice, but what has the NADBank achieved? "Not a darn thing," says Antonio Saldivar, head of project financing at the National Bank of Mexico (BANAMEX), the country's largest private commercial bank. "Four years come and gone and the border has nary an infrastructure project to show for it. It's scandalous!"

Saldivar, who specializes in municipal water projects, believes the NADBank is overly bullish about private investment for environmental infrastructure at the border. Noting that over the next decade the region will need at least \$8 billion just to bring drinking water, sewage treatment and garbage collection to all its residents, he is highly skeptical that private money alone will suffice. At the same time, he says the NADBank suffers from bureaucratic constraints that render it incapable of grappling with, as he put it, "the dizzying complexities of our fiscally-strapped municipalities."

Such views reflect one side of an ongoing debate over the performance and future of the NADBank. As the U.S. Congress conducts its first mandatory three-year review of NAFTA this summer, the Bank's story raises broader concerns regarding free-trade policy. The Clinton administration, keen to win "fast track" authority to begin negotiating treaties with countries such as Chile, intends to apply the NAFTA prescription across the Americas. But is that model necessarily in working order? Some think



changes are in order, like forcing U.S. companies to raise the living standards of their non-U.S. employees; like compelling foreign trade partners to enforce labor laws and prevent negative environmental consequences; like scrapping supra-national lending institutions that fail to perform.

Responding to criticism, NADBank officials claim they have been misunderstood. Blaming their lack of track record on the Bank's delayed commencement of activities because of Mexico's financial crisis, they say the Bank has nevertheless made up for lost time. In just two years of operation, 79 project proposals have been received with an estimated cost of \$930 million. Of those, four have been approved for NADBank financing, with a dozen more expected to follow suit shortly, having already been "certified" by the Border Environmental Cooperation Commission (BECC), NADBank's sister organization in charge of project screening and technical assistance.

"Politicians in Washington D.C. are too far away from the border to know what we've achieved," states one BECC official at a conference on border infrastructure held recently in Mexicali, the capital of Baja California. "But when they learn of our results," she adds quickly, "they will see that the appropriate institutions needed to resolve environmental problems along the border are in place."

Mr. Santillan would agree. Waving to putters at the Del Rio Country Club, Brawley's city manager was all smiles

as our conversation turned to the NADBank. This is because the binational lender recently shepherded his city through a successful public bond offering to finance its \$25 million water-treatment plant expansion.

Actually, as we drove through town, I wouldn't have guessed that Brawley has water troubles, the New River notwithstanding. Thanks to cleaner water provided by canal from the Colorado River, lush lawns carpet the desert community, gushing with sprinkler water; it's the same abundant irrigation that made this agricultural region one of the most fertile in the U.S. Being frost free, the area also enjoys uninterrupted and constant growing seasons. Despite the booming rural economy, however, Brawley has a whopping 25 percent unemployment, according to Santillan. This results in large measure from the highly mechanized nature of U.S. agribusiness, which needs few related service industries.

"We just don't have many jobs to offer," lamented Santillan, steering his car onto Brawley's sleepy main street. Judging by the pedestrians, we might still have been south of the border: 72 percent of local residents are of Mexican descent, 50 of whom are Santillan's cousins! Brawley's poverty is apparent. Towering above Thrifties and an empty Pizza Hut, a grand yet dilapidated hotel with boarded-up doors and windows dominates the central square. "We want to attract *maquila* suppliers here," said Santillan, "but we haven't had any luck yet."

Until recently, Brawley's water facilities matched the dismal state of its economy. In 1991 when the State of California served the town with a water-quality noncompliance order, its treatment facilities were 70 years old. With no long-term financial planning or maintenance, and no increase in water rates for 12 years, Brawley was in violation of clean-water codes and about to get sued. Santillan makes no apologies: "Our city fathers were pretty clueless when it came to urban planning," he admitted. "Growing up in the boon-docks, we never got any guidance."

Never, that is, until the NADBank came along. "Brawley needed our help," said Miramontes. "Small towns don't get the same type of advice that big cities do. We help fill that void."

The first and biggest challenge was

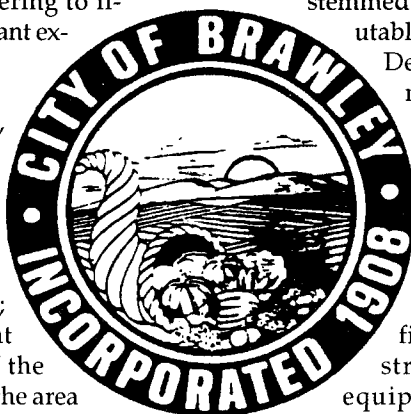
to raise water rates. To do that, the people and politicians of Brawley had to be convinced that their troubles stemmed from insufficient water revenues attributable to years of undercharging for service. Despite fierce political opposition, the city managed to increase user fees by 120 percent over four years. "They nearly ran us out of town for that one," recalled Santillan.

Then came the bidding process. Hoping to build Brawley's new treatment facilities, a reputable engineering firm from San Diego submitted a construction proposal. Brawley was ill equipped to analyze the bid. With the NADBank's help, they determined the budget to be 30 percent overpriced. So the city rejected the proposal and restructured the concession, splitting the master project into smaller components — all on the NADBank's advice. This enabled small, local concerns to compete for business, generating employment and cutting costs dramatically. Considered together, these developments help explain why Brawley successfully overcame its unrated (*i.e.* "junk") credit status.

"It's a heck of a story in terms of a local, inexperienced community learning by fire and then taking the reins and making it work," concluded Miramontes.

That is good news to be sure...for the American side. The question is, will similar stories ever be told in Mexico? Put another way, is the NADBank capable of dealing with the dogged obstacles that exist south of the border, not the least of which are Mexico's historically and ridiculously cheap water rates? "Just imagine if one of our cities raised monthly user fees from \$12 to \$38 like Brawley did," says Adolfo Gonzalez, head of environmental affairs for the Mexican state of Baja California. "That would incite bloody riots here!"

Just as worrisome, Mexico has no municipal-bond market. Neither do its cities or towns enjoy EPA-subsidized state revolving-loan funds for environmental infrastructure development. With no financial autonomy, municipalities must ask state or federal authorities for permission to build a school, say, or lay a water line. Treated like children for so many years, Mexico's local governments predictably lack the resources, institutions and management skills needed to plan and



Jerry Santillan at the construction site of Brawley's new water treatment plant facilities

develop infrastructure projects.

Finally, adding insult to injury, the Mexican Constitution prohibits municipalities from incurring debt in foreign currencies or borrowing from foreign entities. But does that apply to the NADBank too? "Absolutely not," replied Miramontes. "The Bank is developing partnerships with financial intermediaries in Mexico, like the Finance Ministry and Banobras [a state development bank], to clear this hurdle." Asked whether there weren't many other obstacles to overcome, the banker agreed — yet still insisted that there are an equal number of solutions.

Consider small, poor communities in Mexico. Soon after launching operations, the NADBank realized that these towns need partners to help develop projects to a point where they can be certified by the BECC and qualify for credit from the NADBank. Consequently, the Institutional Development Cooperation Program (IDCP) was established last December to assist public utilities in the areas of institutional strengthening and financial development. This, presumably, will help ensure that infrastructure projects are well-run and self-sustaining through user fees. "We've already committed IDCP funds to eight cities," Miramontes informed, "and will be working with 32 more by year's end."

Regarding the lack of a municipal-bond market in Mexico, the banker offered a simple solution: "We will



The New River

become that market." Just as it would on the U.S. side, the NADBank plans to sign loan agreements with Mexican border communities with all the normal terms and conditions: minimum reserves, excess debt coverage, etc. The Bank will then go to the U.S. marketplace, borrow money and re-lend at a lower rate than any other source of funds available in Mexico. Asked what happens when Mexican utilities charge in pesos and service that debt in dollars, Miramontes explained that a hedging mechanism had already been set up with Banobras to cover exchange-rate risks.

As for Mexico's dirt-cheap water fees, Miramontes acknowledged that, given the socioeconomic conditions of the border, many infrastructure projects will never be viable without some kind of grant component. As luck would have it, just last April the EPA and the NADBank forged a partnership through the so-called Border Environmental Infrastructure Fund, which will funnel \$170 million of EPA grant resources through the Bank. This money will be available for construction as well as "transition assistance," which refers to resources meant to ease communities' adjustment to higher water rates that are necessary to ensure that infrastructure is self-sustaining.

"This is our baby," said Miramontes, who quickly downplayed the grant quotient of the EPA-NADBank partnership. In keeping with the Bank's free market focus, he explained, the new fund will actually help the NADBank avoid taking the "paternalistic" approach of simply handing out money. Credit will always play the dominant role, even if it is the smallest part of a transaction. Municipal borrowers must agree to come up with the most they can reasonably afford before the NADBank seeks complementary funding. "That commitment," he stressed, "ensures that local communities have a stake in their project."

The Mexican town of Naco offers a case in point. Located in the state of Sonora, the community sits just across the border and uphill from Naco, Arizona. Current wastewater treatment plants in Naco, Mexico, are fine —if it's not raining. When it does, the sewage plant overflows into the Arizona town, filling the streets with sewage.

To pay for a new \$830,000 sewage plant, the NADBank helped Naco conduct an affordability analysis. The Mexican town decided it could sustain a loan of \$180,000 to \$250,000 from the Bank. Subsequently, Miramontes managed to convince Mexico's National Water Commission and the EPA to put up an additional \$750,000. "What's important here," he said, "is that local citizens took responsibility into their own hands. The Bank also demonstrated that it can mobilize local, federal, and international organizations to assist small border communities."

These points deserve praise, no doubt. Yet symbolic loans aside, Naco's success story is overwhelmingly grant-dependent, which brings us back to the nagging question: how will the border region cover the \$8 billion

cost of bringing drinking water, sewage treatment and garbage collection to its people over the next decade? How can the NADBANK, which now has only \$450 million in capital — and may or may not have \$3 billion when fully capitalized — make up the difference?

Perhaps other border resources are available? Pondering that possibility, I toured the city of Mexicali, passing cacti and bare-bones squatter settlements that stretch across the barren Laguna Salada desert in Northwest Mexico. Near the rim of an endless hodgepodge of one-story, cinder-block houses, I located a potential source of alternative infrastructure funding: the multinational *maquiladoras*: Sony, Daewoo Electronics, Ace Inc. and Black & Decker.

Exiting the latter's ultramodern factory, well-dressed workers on lunch break fanned out onto Industrial Avenue. Women mostly, they all seemed to be smiling, perhaps at their relative good fortune. Making 5\$ a day (compared with 5\$ an hour in the U.S.), they nevertheless earn an average of 30 to 50 percent higher than Mexico's \$3 daily minimum wage. *Maquiladoras* also increasingly provide services like child day care, benefits which are unheard of in most Mexican factories.

"Sure I like it here," says María Gonzalez, a giggly 26-year-old from the southern state of Veracruz who has worked the Black & Decker assembly line for a year. "It's a big step up from my job in Tampico."

Cheap labor is not Mexico's only draw for global industry. Powerful incentives to move south are also created by the country's lax environmental record, which underscores the difference in environmental compliance costs between Mexico and the U.S. Exploring that topic, one academic attempted to quantify the number of companies that fled the U.S. for Mexicali to escape stringent



The Black & Decker *maquiladora* in Mexicali

environmental regulations. Wrote Professor Roberto Sanchez in 1991:

"Ten percent of the *maquiladoras* in Mexicali considered environmental regulations to be among the main factors in the decision to leave the U.S., and 17 percent considered it a factor of importance. On the selection of Mexicali, almost 13 percent of the *maquiladoras* considered weaker environmental legislation in Mexico a main factor for relocation, and another 13 percent considered it a factor of importance."¹

Tax breaks offer another lucrative window of opportunity for global multinationals in the border region. The problem is, because *maquiladoras* bear such a light tax burden, their contribution to the local infrastructure and environment is scant. Not that the impact of industrial pollution compares with that of discharges of human waste into the region's overcrowded urban sprawl. Yet for years, the *maquila* sector has served as the main migratory magnet pulling Mexican workers northward. Wouldn't it therefore be justifiable to push the multinationals toward assuming greater responsibilities?

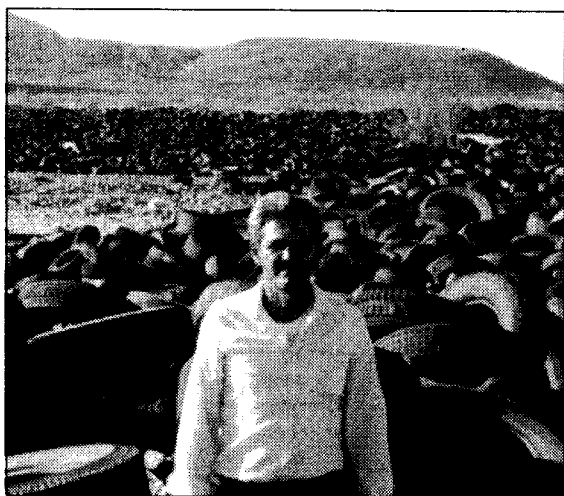
"Don't expect them to take a lead on these issues," cautioned Miramontes, who categorically rejects placing more burden on the *maquiladoras*. "It's not realistic; neither are 'green taxes.'"

The unspoken implication was that *maquiladoras* are too powerful to be confronted. Truth is, the fate of Mexico's *maquila* economy could move on a dime. With seven or eight developing countries waiting in the wings, global investors might leave overnight if Mexico made the wrong move. The *right* move,



The Sony factory in Mexicali

¹ Roberto Sanchez, *Natural Resources Journal*, 30: pp.163, 185.



Mexicali cabby Castulo Angulo

according to Miramontes, is to focus rather on the role of *maquiladoras* not as culprits but customers. Because when water- or sewer-treatment plants are built, multinational factories will be the most reliable clients around, assuming the appropriate structures are in place. "That's where we come in," said Miramontes, "to help local communities package their projects so as to be palatable to industrial concerns."

Continuing the tour of Mexicali, I flagged a cab and conversed with the driver about his city's environmental problems: the New River, suspended dust pollution, his smelly *barrio*. After discussing these topics, the cabby insisted on taking me somewhere "special" yet refused to reveal what or where it was. Visibly skeptical, I declined and directed him to my hotel. "Trust me," he said with a mischievous grin.

Castulo Angulo, the cab driver, was born in Mexicali, which he jokingly calls "*la ciudad de los huevos frios*," roughly translated as "city of the cold crotches." (Due to the intense heat, he explained, motorists always have ice-cold drinks between their legs.) Laughing raucously at a series of his own jokes, Castulo steered us out of town: past the shanty towns, into the flat desert, alongside junk yards brimming with rusty cars, bicycles, refrigerators, scrap metal.

"It all comes from the U.S.," said Castulo, aware of my growing curiosity. "Cheap second-hand merchandise, that's what we live on here. Most of the stuff falls apart quickly and ends up here."

Sand dunes rippled across the plateau. In the distance, at the foot of the mountains, a dark horizontal line separated the Laguna Salada desert from the rising Sierra Madre. Calling my attention to it, Castulo ordered me to keep my eyes peeled

on what appeared to be a sedimentary layer of rock. Thoroughly enjoying the suspense, he revved his engine and the cab swerved onto an unpaved road, trundling across the dunes. Soon the mysterious divide came into focus, revealing itself to be a seven-foot high, mile-long pile of... "Tires!" shouted Castulo, "eight million of them or more!"

Manufactured in the U.S., countless tons of rubber rimmed the hills, rotting in the scorching sun. Tire Mountain, as the locals call it, was built by informal *llanteros* (Spanish for tire vendors) who turn big profits importing old tires from the U.S. and selling them for about 10 dollars a piece in Mexico. This is considered a good deal, even when the purchase disintegrates in two or three months.

Junk markets manifest themselves across the border region. Local authorities are hesitant to clamp down for fear of political backlash from cash-strapped consumers. At least one official, however, sees fiscal opportunity in the junk — another source of border infrastructure financing perhaps? Adolfo Gonzalez, head of environmental affairs for Baja California, is lobbying for a tire-tax swap with U.S. border states. His reasoning: the State of California taxes new tire purchases to cover final disposal and recycling costs. Millions of these tires end up in Mexico, so part of that tax revenue should, too.

"Your country will never allow that," says Castulo, perched high on Tire Mountain. Maybe not, but it is nevertheless an encouraging idea, as are all other attempts at resolving environmental problems on the U.S.-Mexico border. Looking back across the desert — at Mexicali, the New River, the town of Brawley far beyond — I contemplated the future. Cleaning up won't be easy, binational coordination never was. Funding will remain tight. But the NADBank is making progress. If nothing else, after decades of neglect, banking on the border has finally helped turn the attention of North America toward this region's ecological disasters. Of course, there are other ways...

Said Castu: "Let's burn Tire Mountain!" I hope he was kidding. □



Atop of Tire Mountain

Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. [THE AMERICAS]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Marc Michaelson. A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARA]

Randi Movich. The current John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, Randi is spending two years in Guinea, West Africa, studying and writing about the ways in which indigenous women use forest resources for reproductive health. With a B.A. in biology from the University of California at Santa Cruz and a Master of Science degree in Forest Resources from the University of Idaho, Randi is building on two years' experience as a Peace Corps agroforestry extension agent in the same region of Guinea where she will be living as a Fellow with her husband, Jeff Fields — also the holder of an Idaho Master's in Forest Resources. [sub-SAHARA]

John B. Robinson. A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an English teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

Daniel B. Wright. A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andreae, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. [East Asia]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a juris doctor from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]

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