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Troubled Waters: the Matanza-Riachuelo river basin

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As you stroll along El Caminito in La Boca, you may not realise that only a few metres away from the tourist attractions, lies one of the most ecologically damaged places in the world.

Floating throughout the muddy Matanza-Riachuelo are obvious signs of neglect: mounds of plastic trash, bubbling methane gas, toxic chemical residue and the wafting smell of sewage. The last eight kilometres of the 64km Matanza River, known as the Riachuelo, push the pollution into Río de la Plata.

But the majority of tourists, albeit for the smell, never realise the neighbourhood they're passing through is home to a chemically infused river.

Tourist Oscar Soo, 35, from Malaysia, said that his curiosity was momentary. "It's not that comfortable to experience the smell, but after you walk through the streets you forget about it," Soo said. "The colourful buildings take your mind off of it."

Such is the dichotomy between the river and its neighbouring town. The cobblestone streets, tango dancers and mate shops belie the severity of La Boca's environmental degradation. The majority of residents live away from vibrant Caminito, near factories pumping smoke into the air and waste into the river. For many of them, the contamination is the reality behind La Boca's jovial facade.

A Polluted History

The Riachuelo, which separates the south of Buenos Aires from the province, has been treated as a dumping ground by 65 neighbouring factories and local residents for years. Approximately 3.5m people inhabit the 2,240km² river basin. In 2007, The Blacksmith Institute, a New York-based environmental NGO, declared the Matanza-Riachuelo one of the most polluted places in the world.

Along with the Ganges in India and Chernobyl in the Ukraine, the river was added to the Blacksmith Institutes' 'Dirty Thirty' – a listing of polluted areas awaiting attention.

For almost 200 years, the government has struggled to clean the river. As a former port of entry for foreign commerce, the area still generates 25% of the country's Gross Domestic Product. Despite such prosperity, an average of 82,000 cubic meters of untreated industrial waste enters the river daily, according to a report from the executive committee for the

environmental management plan and administration of the Matanza-Riachuelo basin.

Large petroleum terminals spill an estimated 8.3 tonnes of oil per day into the water and 29 large factories have illegal dumpsites located on or near the basin's tributaries, according to the report.

Sewage pipes also illegally dump lead, mercury, zinc, cadmium, copper, magnesium, nickel, unprocessed solid urban waste and pesticides into the river.

"Part of the reason the water is such a dark colour is because factories dump the skin and the blood from animal carcasses into the water," said ministry of tourism official Rubén Forace. Which is how the river got its name – Matanza-Riachuelo literally translates to slaughter-brook. "If someone has a dead dog, they throw the body into the river." Much of the contamination is due to a lack of education, Forace said. "People use the river as a dumping ground for the same reasons they ignore rubbish bins in Buenos Aires – keeping the environment clean is not a priority."

"There are garbage collectors and there have been for a long time, but people are lazy," Forace said. "If they forget to put their garbage out they think, 'okay I'll throw it in the river'."

The Government Steps In

Despite pervasive pollution the Argentine Environmental Ministry has been pledging since 1811 to solve the problem. Three years ago Environmental Minister Maria Julia Alsogaray vowed 'in 1,000 days we are going to be able to drink the water and I am going to be the first to drink it'. But by the time the thousand days were up, nothing happened with the river or Alsogaray's promise. "She told everyone she would drink the water," Forace recalled. "She never did."

In 2006 Argentina's Supreme Court ordered the government to remedy the situation and create a proposal 30 days from the ruling. The Court also required 44 polluting factories to present environmental impact assessments on the effluents discharged into the river. Since then various measures have been taken to improve the river. In January of this year Environmental Minister Romina Picolotti closed down two factories due to illegal dumping activity. Natural By-Products and Galvafer have been closed down indefinitely – the former was caught dumping animals' guts into the river. The Natural By-Products plant was cited as not meeting the 'minimum requirements of hygiene, cleaning and security', as required by the Environmental Ministry.

Since the Supreme Court ruling two years ago, a total of 72 factory have been closed by the Undersecretary's Office of Control from the Riachuelo Authority (ACUMAR)

Just two weeks ago, on 5th May, Picolotti, renewed her vow to clean the river. "There is an aspect of extreme importance that has much to do with the health of the affected population," Picolotti said in a press release. "We have the obligation to take care of this."

Millions Set Aside for Clean-up

Though the river has seen minimal improvement, millions of dollars have been allocated to fix the situation. Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) loaned US\$250m to Argentina with the country matching that amount for a total of US\$500m in 2004. The loan was accompanied by a 45-page summary by the executive committee for the environmental management plan and administration of the Matanza-Riachuelo basin. The report was commissioned by The IADB in 1997 to address the environmental and health issues caused by 2,000 industries such as tanneries, meat processing, petrochemicals, and textiles that pollute the river. The plan addressed industrial pollution control, flood control, solid waste management, and urban rehabilitation. One of the most ambitious goals, to 'construct and manage a hazardous industrial waste facility in the basin' remains unrealised.

Only US\$90m is left of the of the IADB's US\$250m set aside during 1993 to clean up the contaminated river. And only one million has actually been used to clean the river. The rest has been put to use elsewhere: six million dollars were lost in fines for not using the money, seven million dollars were spent in foreign consulting imposed by the IADB and US\$150m was diverted for social initiatives after the 2001 crisis, according to Alfredo Alberti, president of the Neighbourhood Association of La Boca.

In 2006, Alberti told newspaper *Página 12* that the situation is 'a true genocide on which people live in the margins. There are 500,000 affected people: 30% lack potable water and 55% do not have sewers'.

"The water, which people remove for drinking, is clear but is contaminated," Alberti said. "Also the food that they obtain from their orchards is contaminated, and the air that they breathe is contaminated by the toxicity that bubbles from the river," Alberti said. "The *villas* on the edges of Buenos Aires are not urbanised, and do not have sewers either. Because of the bad quality of the water people become ill with diarrhoea and since the ambulances have difficulty entering many end up dying."

Nicolás Baron, a resident of *barrio* Dock Sud close to the river, attested to the effects of the contamination. "The people in my neighbourhood suffer from allergies," the 27-year-old said. "Many people don't get enough oxygen, they can't breathe and have respiratory problems. The majority of the people living by the water have lots of problems resulting from the land, air and water – everything."

Damages Abound

Despite widespread pollution, the executive committee's report states: 'There are no epidemiological studies that could be used to make health projections'. Environmental minister Picotti also said no disease-related study has connected the polluted environment to residents' current health problems.

But Josefa Gomez, 44, tells a different story. Gomez has four children and has lived in Barracas next to the river since 1990. "I have too many problems related to the river," the kiosk-owner said. "I can't sleep at night because of the smell and my health has gotten worse since I moved here." Gomez moved to the villa when her husband got a job working for meat-exporter Frigorífico.

As a resident of El Centro, Gomez said she had few problems, but when she moved to the villa to be with her husband, everything changed.

“My health got worse – it’s difficult to breathe and we can’t drink the water even,” Gomez said. In the last eight months Gomez’s asthma and bronchitis have intensified.

Of her four children, Orozen, 16, has had the most problems, Gomez said. Last year she was in the hospital for three days because she had respiratory problems and couldn’t breathe. She also suffers from a skin disease that has gone undiagnosed since the family cannot afford to pay for treatment.

When asked about her mental well-being, the mother of four said she worried more about her children and their exposure to the harsh environment.

“I have lived in other places so I know not all the world is like this,” Gomez said. “For most of my children, this is all they know.”

Aside from the health problems, there is the shock of watching what actually floats along the river. Gomez said that earlier this month on 8th May, she looked over her back patio, which borders the river and saw a dead body floating close to the shoreline. The man was floating facedown in the river for a few hours before police officials came to remove the body.

Gomez said this has happened before. Just two months ago another man was seen floating underneath the newly constructed bridge running from the north to the south side of Barracas.

“It’s been two times in two months, but nothing surprises me,” Gomez said. “It’s my family that I worry about. They may end up working and living here, I just hope their life will be better.”

A few doors down from Josefa Gomez and her home-run kiosco live Ricardo Hoyas and his wife and five children. For ten years, Hoya has lived at the end of a long cement hallway that opens up to a back patio facing the river. The dirt patio is barely three metres square and includes a rusting oven, two bicycles, a shopping cart, scraps of plywood and two covered toilets. The toilets are built like outhouses with a long white pipe travelling about five metres to dump the waste into the river.

The family’s bedroom opens onto the patio, separated only by a thin bed sheet serving as a door. Hoyas reiterated Gomez’s concern for her children and said he also witnessed the body floating along the river. “I was surprised because I’ve seen animals before but never people. The body was removed along with mounds of garbage. It’s not normal and I wasn’t scared, only scared that my children, especially Abby, would see it or fall into the water,” Hoyas said.

Though a handmade wood fence encloses most of the patio, the shopping cart serves as an extension of the fence closing off the patio completely. Without the shopping cart a gaping hole would lead straight down to the river which sits less than two metres from the family’s

backyard.

Hoyas said he built his one bedroom home by hand after paying \$150 for scrap wood. He says the family lives off the money his wife makes since he can't work. His cloudy right eye attests to his partial vision and a long rugged scar on his right arm prevents a full range of motion. Hoyas watches his family while his wife Ines, 39, cleans for a family earning \$20-30 a day.

"I want a job, but because of my eye and my scar it's very difficult to find work. I wish I could buy things for my family, but 30 pesos for seven people is very little."

Like Josefa Gomez and her family, the Hoyas have also experienced health problems. Hoyas said the smell of the water constricts his throat and has given him respiratory trouble. Abigail, 3, has a skin irritation, which has never been diagnosed or treated.

"Living by the river, of course is bad for your health, your skin, your throat, everything. And it's dangerous living here."

Hoyas' story contrasts greatly with doctors at La Boca's Argerich Hospital who agreed that health issues can't be directly traced to the dirty river.

"It's not just a matter of the Riachuelo," said dermatologist Nigelia Vicenta. "It's about the sun and the climate that affect patients. Everyone has a relationship with the place where they live but it's never been scientifically proven that certain health effects are related to the river. You also have to take genetics into account."

Allergist Silvia Jakimczuk admitted that poor environmental conditions increase allergic symptoms but may not be the sole cause. "It's possible that people's systems would improve if they don't live near the water," Jakimczuk said. "If someone has asthma or allergies obviously their situation will get worse if they live close to the river. They can't adapt so there's a manifestation of their problems."

Despite such problems the government is hesitant to make formal statements about future clean-up projects. Picolotti told Reuters, "the Riachuelo has not only swallowed boats, it has swallowed programmes and government officials. People are tired of empty promises." The Environmental Minister said that it would be 'scientific insanity' to give a timeline for the eventual clean-up.

However, members of the Neighbourhood Association of La Boca believed the situation would improve. Neighbourhood member Olga Acosta-Pino, 56, said renovation would eventually occur as land near the river is bought for real estate development. "It will get better, but not because people or the government are worried about the residents," Acosta-Pino said.

Like Puerto Madero or San Telmo, La Boca may receive a facelift powered in part by foreign investment. As demand grows for loft apartments and upscale restaurants, the interest that started in Puerto Madero may drift south toward La Boca.

Neighbourhood member Sergio Morales, 36, was quick to point out that new construction won't necessarily mean a cleaner river. "It's possible that new buildings will pop up and that the river will get cleaned, though this is a different thing," Morales said. "People who live in a thirty-foot high rise will not worry about the dirty river. And Puerto Madero has a beautiful neighbourhood but the water is just as dirty as the Riachuelo. We'll see, the buildings yes – the river, who knows."

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