



Winter 1997

Don't Ride Buses in Honduras

David R. Barnhizer

Cleveland State University, d.barnhizer@csuohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/fac_articles

 Part of the [Comparative and Foreign Law Commons](#), and the [Environmental Law Commons](#)

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Original Citation

David R. Barnhizer, Don't Ride Buses in Honduras, Law Notes: 6 Cleveland-Marshall Alumni News 34 (Winter 1997)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Law Faculty Articles and Essays by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact research.services@law.csuohio.edu.

"Don't Ride Buses in Honduras"

by Professor David Barnhizer



Professor Barnhizer (with sunglasses) and colleagues

The first indication my trip to Honduras might be eventful came when our airplane divebombed the mountain-top runway in a landing that left the passengers looking at each other with relief. We stumbled from the American Airlines flight to the customs windows. That was just the beginning of a fascinating week.

I traveled to the Choluteca Forum as the representative of the Natural Resources Defense Council, for which I am a Senior Advisor in the International Program, and as General Counsel for a new group, the Shrimp Tribunal, which despite its amusing name is committed to advocating reforms of shrimping aquaculture and shrimp trawling in developing countries. Latin American environmental organizations were sponsoring a meeting on ecologically positive approaches to coastal zone aquaculture. Greenpeace was the primary sponsor of the Forum.

It was my first trip to Honduras, a beautiful but poor country which has survived a lengthy period of civil strife and is struggling to emerge as a fledgling democracy. The people are still trying to figure out how it works. Tegucigalpa, the capital, is high in the mountains, its climate more moderate than the rest of the country. Tegucigalpa is broken up by hills and cut through with a wide and muddy river that overflowed its banks and washed out roads during the

time I was there. The streets are narrow, traffic heavy and loud, with poorly tuned engines emitting acrid exhaust fumes. Armed security guards are everywhere to protect private businesses against the frequent robberies.

Begging children approach tourists as soon as they leave customs. The children are all around the hotels and obvious places where Norte-Americanos and Europeans are present. They don't spend time with the Latin tourists because they know they are accustomed to such conditions as a part of their own lives. The gringos are the marks for beggars, street merchants, and money changers.

In the early evening of the arrival day, the forty participants gathered together and were piled on to a chartered bus for the trip to the Hotel Qualiquema on the outskirts of the city of Choluteca. This was the rainy season in Honduras. The weather was beautiful each day until 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon, and then the skies rapidly filled with ominous clouds. What started as a light sprinkle became a downpour that turned into a heavy rain followed by a deluge.

The Forum was to be held in the town of Choluteca, about ninety miles from Tegucigalpa and close to the Gulf of Fonseca. In the Gulf area, Honduran environmentalists are fighting the expansion of large industrial shrimp farms that have obtained

governmental permission to fence off lands and water areas that generations of poor Honduran families have relied on for agriculture and fishing. As is the case in many developing countries, wealthy families and military officials have been taking over the common lands upon which artisanal fishing cultures depend.

The bus ride to Choluteca was intriguing. The trip was a race down a dark and curving mountain road through a driving rain that obscured vision. How the driver could see through his streaked windshield is still not well understood. Of the forty people, only five or six spoke English, in part because Greenpeace tends to work with grassroots people rather than with those who have been educated in the U.S. or traveled extensively outside Latin America. There were two interpreters assigned to help me, and I had great fun using my "pidgin" Spanish to communicate, although there were times some of the other participants looked at me as if I'd said something quite odd. During the ride a video of the movie "Alive" was started. The movie is about a plane crash in the Andes in which people survive by eating the flesh of those who had died. We started making jokes as the bus raced

downward through the dark and had just finished seeing the plane crash and break apart with bodies sucked out into thin air when our bus blew a tire. Luckily the driver kept control. They stopped the movie while we limped the final fifteen or twenty miles to the hotel.

Sometimes we fail to realize how good we have it. We possess ingrained attitudes about freedom and the limits of government power as our natural right, while people from other countries, particularly those from the Third World, are legitimately concerned about how authority is going to treat them.

The meeting itself was informative and productive. One of the highlights was a trip about twenty of us made to the Gulf to meet with the fisher people and see the destructive social and environmental changes the big farms brought. The pictures reflect some of what was seen at the Gulf of Fonseca.

What can't be seen is the beauty the farms replaced. Much of the area was covered with mangrove forests which are integral to the ecological health of the region. As can be seen in one picture, other areas are natural salt marshes that support fish, shrimp, herons, and other wildlife. The picture shows an area that was saved by CODDEFFGOLF, an Honduran environmental group dedicated to the protection of the region's coastal resources. But resource preservation is the exception. In too much of the Gulf, the big farms have come in and restructured the land and water flow, built stone dividers for the lagoons in which they grow the shrimp, cut the mangroves completely so the landscape is barren and treeless, and built fences and guard towers to keep the people of the area away from their traditional lands and waterways.

There is an uneasy peace at this point but the big companies use their power to intimidate the people. Some of the fisher people work in the shrimp factories handling the harvest. If anyone in their own families protests what the companies are doing, they can be fired and blacklisted. Several years ago, after a confrontation with a company as it moved on to land used by the fisher people for generations, two children of one of the protesters were kidnapped. The body—the torso actually—of only one child was found. The father still clings to the hope the other child is alive.

At the grassroots level in the developing world, environmentalism and social action are not clean and theoretical. There is a direct opposition to powerful



Fisherman and families protesting against destruction of traditional way of life

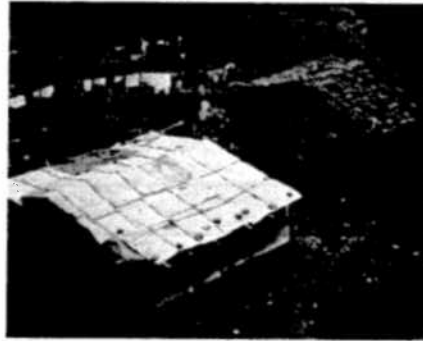
interests at that level, and such powerful people accustomed to having their own way are too often willing to use governmental power or private force to eliminate the most troublesome obstacles. Many of the Latin American grassroots environmental leaders leave each other, not with the traditional "adios" but with "take care" or "be careful." They know they live on the edge because so much of what they do involves the direct mobilization of political force and does not reflect the abstract debates that characterize so much of environmentalism.

The trip to the Gulf of Fonseca progressed almost predictably. We were traveling on an old low-slung yellow school bus about thirty miles from the nearest paved road. The day was quite hot and sunny although it later rained more than any day since we arrived. On the way to the first stop the bus blew a tire so we were two for two. I wasn't surprised when this happened because I had looked at the tires before we left the hotel. Unlike my colleagues, I knew there were large chunks of retread pieces that had already come off, leaving the bare tire exposed. Since we were traveling rutted and stony dirt roads, the surprising part was that only one tire blew out. Nonetheless, we limped onward.

After about six hours of seeing the conditions and talking with many of the people who were local fishers and their families about how the big farms had devastated their way of life and were destroying their independence and dignity, we set out for the return trip to the hotel. Within five miles or so we came to a bridge on the far side of which was a military post, barred metal gate, and a group of stern-faced men holding automatic weapons. The only point in their being there was to protect the interests of the companies.

On the way across the bridge, our driver was going too fast and bot-tomed out the bus on a rock, cracking his oil pan so badly that the oil streamed out as if a spigot had been turned on. The soldiers found this amusing, but of course they could sit in their shaded building with fans

blowing while we stood around in 100 degree tropical sun. They didn't have a telephone, or at least wouldn't admit to it, and neither did anyone else. We sat for an hour or so wonder-



Shanty town, homes for the poor

ing what to do while the driver shrugged his shoulders. The solution is one which a woman from Human Rights Watch and I reached. She spoke Spanish, so I stepped out in front of a large dump truck that was

carrying material to one of the farms. Fortunately the driver listened to my "Alto, por favor" ("stop, please") and didn't turn me into road-kill on a Honduran backroad. We negotiated a price of \$60 for him to dump his load and come back to pick us up and take the twenty of us back to the hotel. Payment on delivery. We all climbed up into the back of this huge dump truck and rode standing back to Choluteca. Later I learned this particular driver was also the personal bodyguard of the owner of one of the biggest shrimp companies.

When the meeting was finished, we traveled back to the capital, and for the first time our tires remained intact. The next day, two of my new friends, Anders from Sweden and Claudio from Brazil, and I, went out to the airport and boarded our plane to Miami. Claudio actually had the unexpected pleasure of being the first person on the plane because U.S. immigration had decided he was



The Eliza Jennings Group

The Eliza Jennings Group has provided quality retirement living and long-term care for over 108 years in the Cleveland area. We offer a wide range of living opportunities, care and services for older adults, including:

- ◆ **The Eliza Jennings Home**
A residential nursing home
- ◆ **Jennings Place**
A residential assisted living and Alzheimer's care facility
- ◆ **The Renaissance**
An award-winning, CCAC-accredited Continuing Care Retirement Community

For more information about any of our facilities, please call **(216) 226-5000** and speak with a member of our Marketing Department.

The Eliza Jennings Group
14650 Detroit Avenue, Suite 710
Lakewood, Ohio 44107
(216) 226-5000 • FAX: (216) 226-5899

planning to sneak into the U.S. when changing planes in Miami. After spending a week with him, I knew he was going back to his wife, children, and job in Portaleza, Brazil. One thing I found out again is that the world does tend to treat people of non-U.S. backgrounds differently. Sometimes we fail to realize how good we have it. We possess ingrained attitudes about freedom and the limits of government power as our natural right, while people from other countries, particularly those from the Third World, are legitimately concerned about how authority is going to treat them.

We sat back in our seats and were forced to wait well over an hour for the takeoff. Halfway through, the pilot came on the cabin intercom and told us, "I'm sorry for the delay but we can only take off in one direction at this airport. The winds are too high

and they are a tailwind even though we're supposed to take off into the wind. There are some mountains we need to miss not too far from the end of the runway so I need to let the



Fisher family's home on salt marsh

winds die down a little and then make a try." Two hundred people suddenly bonded in fear and I told Anders not to forget "Alive". In another thirty minutes the pilot was ready for his unorthodox takeoff

from a short mountain runway.

I have made probably three hundred flights, but this one rates at the top of my list as one of the most intriguing. It brought back some fond memories. I have a favorite uncle who used to take me to watch drag racing. This pilot obviously has some of that sport in his background. We began the takeoff by sitting on the runway with the plane's brakes fully engaged and the engines being raced at high speed. The plane surged against the brakes as the engine rpm's were moving toward their peak. The plane rocked and vibrated and the engines roared as the jet strained to be released. When the pilot finally decided to let the brakes go we went from 0 to 90 in about two seconds, leaving the runway as if shot from a gun. It felt like just the right ending for my visit to Honduras. ■

Word *perfect*

For over 50 years we've adhered to the exacting

pursuit of perfection. One word at a time.

MEHLER  HAGSTROM



Court Reporters. You can take our word.

1750 Midland Building Cleveland, Ohio 44115 216.621.4984 800.822.0650 fax 216.621.0050
 1015 Key Building Akron, Ohio 44308 330.535.7300 800.562.7100 fax 330.535.0050