

# Pineapple Republic

In Costa Rica, a fed-up rancher takes on a produce giant

**P**ablo Beita, a Costa Rican rancher from Volcán, knows the river he was born near because he used to swim in its clear and enlivening current with pigs. As the eldest son of Marcelino and Caridad Beita, the boy was charged with

watching the family's animals—which included oxen as well as the buoyant swine. The challenge with the pigs was that they tended to become disoriented in the rapids and swirling eddies, so it was hard to get them across to where the rain-forest gave way to fenced pasture. Pablo often had to jump in and drag the animals to safety by their velvety ears.

Much has changed in this southern valley of Costa Rica since then: There is now a sturdy concrete bridge, accommodating cars as well as livestock, across the Río Volcán; Beita is a dairy and cattle rancher with 500 head on 2,400 acres—a man known by most as “Don” Pablo, a term of respect; and there is a lot less water. “The river now seems like an old man who has lost his force,” says the rancher, who has aged alongside it for 74 years.

The Beita family has lived near this river since 1890. In fact, Don Pablo's grandfather named it, and the town of Volcán, after the village in Panama he left in search of a better life. Beitas named the nearby Sonador River as well, because it was so noisy; the turbulent Cacao was named for its color.

With a sixth-grade education and little travel beyond Costa Rica, Don Pablo's understanding of the world is formed from within it, and so his explanations and metaphors are simple, and make no claims beyond what is



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lived. During the two weeks I stayed with him and his wife Doña Mary—at the invitation of their daughter-in-law, my friend Madeline Kiser—I heard him speak of the river as the town's blood; of the air that once swept cool and sweet out of the mountains as the contents of Volcán's lungs.

Some of the land at the higher elevations is owned by Don Pablo. One day while riding horses with him in the hills, I ask how the area has changed since he was young. “There used to be a lot of parrots,” he says. “I'd come up

BY MARILYN BERLIN SNELL

here with a flashlight and shoot them out of the trees at night. My mother made great parrot soup." He pauses for effect, then adds, "I didn't grow up thinking about the environment the way I do now."

We ride through forests dripping with bromeliads, and pastures where grass blades as wide as fingers grow. We pass single file on a swinging bridge and I see a large morphos

butterfly up the tree-shrouded stream, the turquoise circles on its fluttering wings flashing like neon. After five hours on horseback we return to Volcán. I am ready for physical therapy but Don Pablo is ready to talk. (He has been up since 4 A.M., rising as usual to the call of the rooster in the backyard—a heinous creature that, according to family members, has always been out of sync with the natural fact of dawn.) On his office wall hangs a relief map of Costa Rica. The tip of its highest mountain, in the Amistad Biosphere Reserve just to the north of us, has been rubbed smooth by years of touching. It is evening and a tropical rain shower slaps so hard against the broad-leaved philodendrons out the open window that it's sometimes hard to hear as Madeline translates from Spanish. "I loved that river," Don Pablo begins, "but the company has ruined it."

**"T**he company" is the Pineapple Development Corporation, or Pindeco for short. The largest pineapple producer in Costa Rica, Pindeco has been operating in the southern part of the country since 1978. Though it promotes itself as a Costa Rican enterprise, Pindeco sells 100 percent of its fruit to the U.S.-based Del Monte Fresh Produce Company and refers to itself in court documents as "Del Monte's Agricultural Development Corporation."

When I decided to visit Volcán, I wrote to Pindeco's general manager, Rodrigo Jiménez, and asked for an appointment. My request was promptly forwarded to the legal department at Del Monte's headquarters in Coral Gables, Florida, and then on to an officer of communications, who informed me that Del Monte's president had reviewed my letter and denied my request. The next day I received a fax from Mr. Jiménez saying that he would be out of the country during my visit. Once in Costa Rica, I asked to speak with other Pindeco officials or at least see the environmental presentation the company has given to journalists. On all counts, the answer was no.

In increments, Pindeco has bought nearly 20,000 acres in the valley around Volcán. The company is now the region's largest employer and landowner, and has built schools,



Sediment has waxed and water has waned in Volcán's streams.

in the region. At first there were the small changes, noticed because people have lived in Volcán for generations, or sometimes because the margin between sustenance and hunger is tenuous—a fact that fosters vigilance. Don Pablo's good friend and neighbor, Eladio Castro, for instance, began to notice that his sole dairy cow had stopped drinking from the stream that runs along his 20-acre farm. Castro concluded that it was because of a chemical smell. Don Pablo's son Oscar first began to notice the thinning number of fat brown *abejones de mayo* bugs and then the disappearance of the frogs that ate them. He noticed the quieting evenings.

There were more obvious changes as well: plagues of flies, drawn at the end of each agricultural cycle to the thousands of rotting pineapple plants; then the massive burnings by the company, after farmers complained that the flies were driving their cattle mad. There was increased sedimentation in the rivers—erosion caused when plants were ripped out, the soil tilled, and the crop replanted every two years. There was the plowing under of springs, the pushing of boulders from cleared fields into streams, and deforestation that left the earth looking raw, red, skinned alive. There was less water and river life: otters, turtles, and fish.

Don Pablo observed and worried but was not moved to act until the day in 1998 he saw a man drive a huge bulldozer into the Río Volcán, destroying the local swimming hole and diverting water away from one of the channels that feed his son Alfonso's small dairy operation and sugarcane field. "The incident was like someone pulling on my sleeve," says Don Pablo, who had noticed several days before that large trees had been taken out next to the river—a violation of Costa Rican environmental law. "I'd been asleep but that bulldozer forced me to wake up." He stopped the driver midstream, took his name and the company he worked for, and went with his son to the local office of the ministry of environment to file a formal complaint.

Instead of acting on the complaint, the ministry called Pindeco, and the next day three company officials—including the pastor of Alfonso's church, who is also Pindeco's head of research—showed up at Alfonso's door. According

bridges, and health clinics in several towns. Its Del Monte Gold pineapple has been bred to flourish in this climate and to produce sweet, aesthetically pleasing fruit. Last year, Pindeco exported \$85 million worth of Golds—60 percent to the United States and 40 percent to Europe. It is the best-selling pineapple in the world.

But as Pindeco's fortunes have grown, so have environmental problems

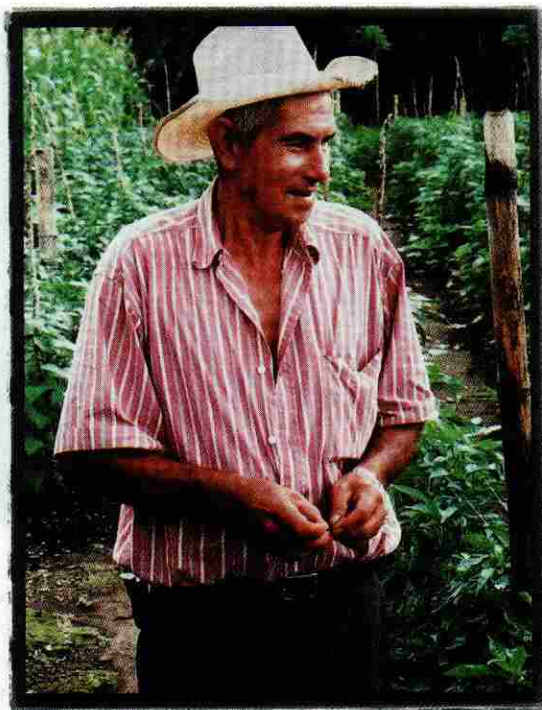
to Don Pablo, the officials were upset that the men hadn't come directly to Pindeco, adding that if the company were causing problems it would find a solution—but that management didn't like it when people went to the government and complained.

And Don Pablo didn't like it when the government deferred to the parties causing the problems. "You believe in the government and then it doesn't do anything," he says. "What's worse is that you then see how close it is with the company, and you nearly lose heart."

**C**arlos Beita, Don Pablo's 42-year-old nephew, had also watched the destruction. With 100 acres of farm and pasture, and 40 cows he knows by name, Carlos didn't like the company's growing power either—especially when it began cutting trees near rivers and clearing fields on the mountainsides where many springs are located. "When the company started planting up high, they closed a circle around the town, like a stranglehold," he tells me when I meet him at his farm one day.

Carlos is an unconventional farmer: He keeps part of his small plot wild—so thick with growth that El Pintado and his other cows won't venture there. A few of his neighbors think he's wasting good land, but he likes the quiet. "Sometimes I spend the whole day in here," he says. As he talks he machetes a path through the lush and canopied greenery, which contains the fecund magic of bobo birds, earthy odors, and wildly twisting vines. I have to step carefully to avoid the long lines of shimmering leaf bits, carried aloft by ants, which crisscross the forest floor. "It's a place of peace for me," Carlos says as a black snake slithers by.

Pindeco's bulldozing of the river was the last straw for Carlos, whose character seems as much a product of this land as the local flora. "I had to fight," he says. "They were taking away the water source for my cows!" He told



Eladio Castro wants to farm but is willing to fight.

Don Pablo about a local, small-scale farmers' organization called Unaproa—a Spanish acronym for "the Union of Friends for the Protection of the Environment"—and suggested they ask the group for help.

Formed in 1995, Unaproa promotes organic agriculture, environmental awareness, and workers' rights. Don Pablo and Carlos called one of its founders, Beltrán Vega, told him about the bulldozer incident, and invited him to come see for himself. Although Carlos and Vega later became friends, that first meeting did not go well.

"This guy shows up looking like some kind of explorer," says Carlos of Vega. "He has binoculars, two cameras, a compass, and an altimeter hanging around his neck. He's weighted down with all this stuff. We give him a tour of the damage, and his altimeter keeps getting stuck. He's tapping it and then shouting, 'Here we are at four hundred meters. Write that down.' We know he's just trying to help, collecting evidence we can use with the company, but we didn't think he was that smart. It was like he thought he was in a spy movie."

Vega laughs when reminded of that first encounter, then adds, "As farmers, we don't have a lot of resources so we

do what we can with what we have." The point of this kind of documentation, he says, is to hold the company accountable for its actions. "We've never wanted Pindeco to go," says Vega. "But it needs to respect the land and the national laws."

Concerns about Pindeco's practices had inspired Unaproa to cosponsor a forum with the company in 1997 to talk about how they could work together to protect the environment. "There are always two extremes," Pindeco's then-director of operations, Felix González, stated at the forum's opening. "One side does not want to kill a bird or cut a tree. The other side has a vision that is so short it doesn't even know what the environment is. We are trying to reach a consensus here, between small

farmers and large companies like Pindeco." Vega heard the encouraging words, but told me that González's speech occurred at the same time Pindeco was expanding to the higher elevations. Words and deeds weren't matching up.

Unaproa members, the Volcán farmers, and others began to strategize. At first the gatherings were large—up to 50 farmers and Pindeco workers. There were complaints about water and air contamination from Pindeco's pesticide use, soil erosion, deforestation, labor and health violations, and water depletion. They wrote letters to the company, asking for a meeting to lay out their concerns. The company responded by sending letters to Don Pablo at his home, rather than to the group as a whole—now called Frente de Lucha Contra la Contaminación de Pindeco (The Front in the Struggle Against Pollution From Pindeco). These letters insisted that any disagreement be handled one-on-one between the company and Don Pablo, who was viewed by all as a kind of elder statesman. "But I wasn't a lawyer," Don Pablo says. "I was someone who could see and understand the facts of cows and pigs. I knew it would have been a bad idea to negotiate on my own."

When Don Pablo refused to be lone negotiator, the company simply stopped responding to the group's letters. And then attendance at Frente meetings began to drop off. Don Pablo's son Alfonso left the group because his life was the church, and as it met in a gated residential compound owned by Pindeco, he didn't want to jeopardize his membership. Others were frustrated by the group's lack of

organization and resources. The Frente didn't even have enough money to feed people who came to the long meetings. Still others, who worked for Pindeco or had family members who did, began to worry about their jobs.

Pressure to ease up on the company was intense. Friendship alone held together the core group from Volcán, which now numbered three: Don Pablo, Carlos Beita, and Eladio Castro. "We were like little ants," says Carlos. "We couldn't bite the train but we sure could bite the train driver and give him an allergy." The men, now in alliance with Unaproa and another environmental group based in San José, continued to be an irritant.

While local concerns went unanswered, Del Monte Fresh Produce initiated a campaign that would eventually gain Pindeco environmental certification from the International Organization for Standardization, or ISO, in Geneva, Switzerland. Gaining an ISO 14001 series certificate is seen by some as a green seal of approval. In fact, there are companies in the United States that won't do business with suppliers that aren't ISO 14001 certified. The problem with the program is that it is voluntary, with standards established by ISO's industry membership. To gain certification, Pindeco, for example, set its own goals and did its own environmental self-evaluation, then hired its own auditor to check its compliance. No independent analysis was required.

Nikki Thanos, a journalist who studied Pindeco's operations during research for her upcoming book *Trouble in Paradise: Globalization and the*

*Environment in Latin America*, says that Pindeco made some positive changes. "ISO has been a powerful management tool for some companies. In Pindeco's case, it helped them implement useful environmental education for workers, and improved health and safety standards." But, she adds, "ISO is green the way an apple is: on the

### **Pressure to ease up on the company was intense. Friendship alone held the group together.**

outside. It does not address fundamental environmental issues, like mono-agriculture. If you drive down the Inter-American Highway all you see for miles and miles are pineapples. That is simply not a sustainable agricultural practice." Nevertheless, Pindeco was awarded ISO 14001 certification in 1999.

"Who the heck gives out this ISO?" asks Carlos Beita. "If we knew we'd write them a letter and tell them what we see here." We are walking his land again, and he's getting worked up. He's watched too much of what he loves, especially in the hills above Volcán, which house the river's sources, plowed under for pineapple plantations. When I ask him whether Pindeco can ever be a good neighbor, he has a fast response. "I don't think so. The Gold pineapple has had an incredible success in the market, so Pindeco is caught in a tunnel. It has to move forward and produce and produce."

Eladio Castro isn't quite so quick to judge. "I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't say, 'Look at the Maura,'" he replies, referring to a local river. "It's been damaged and deforested, sometimes by us. But we have learned. Maybe the company can, too." Costa Rica's environmental court has helped with remedial education. While the Volcán farmers continued to agitate, the environmental ministry continued to investigate, sending forest engineers and biologists to check for damage to the area around Volcán. Last year, the court reached an agreement with the company. While refusing to admit fault, Pindeco agreed to "restore the environment affected, and to pay compensation for the envi-

ronmental damage of protected areas near creeks." It would reforest land around several streams, restore three damaged springs, and use alternative techniques to control erosion. "Given the need to reduce soil erosion, and given the effects that deforestation has had on the water supply in the region," the document says, "the restoration . . . should start immediately."

Don Pablo is happy with the court ruling. "But so far," he says, "I haven't seen any real changes." One thing has changed, however. Don Pablo is ready to speak to the company on behalf of Volcán. He has been in endless meetings and workshops with farmers and environmentalists; he's learned about stewardship and the rights of his community. "I'm ready," he says. "I have a little schooling. I'm no longer mute." The problem now may not be one of will but of language. The two sides use utterly different metaphors to describe what's most important to them: One side speaks of seasons and the next generation, the other of quarterly reports; one side of the lungs and blood of a village, the other of efficient quality-management systems and bottom lines. "The company doesn't think about the future," says Don Pablo. "It has worked by picking what is good from the broth and leaving the bones. If reforestation starts now, in twenty-five years my grandsons will begin to see results. If something isn't done about water depletion, and especially the plantings in the mountains above us, in twenty years the Volcán River will be dry."

Before I left for Costa Rica, I bought a Del Monte Gold, skinned its prickly bark, cored its hard center, and ate it with my fingers. Like most Americans, I have become accustomed to enjoying exotic fruits and vegetables grown year-round in places like Volcán. The sweetness of the pineapple stung my lips and tongue; it was the best I'd ever had. ■

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