



STAR file photo

of Christopher Colum-
 asting of the Spanish.
 Plaza de Colón, is easy

to put into a timeline. But many historic occurrences
 have less defined beginnings and ends, writes Fernan-
 do Picó, author of a general history of Puerto Rico.

aking of history

when can we say that at last equality
 has been achieved?

As everyone knows, it's not enough to
 have the proper laws and judicial
 decrees. The mentalities have to change
 so that a real difference in living and
 working conditions can be achieved.
 And that change in mentalities doesn't
 occur overnight. It's a long and complex
 process, which may become reversible
 or dead-ended if it's not conscientiously
 fostered.

Thus, the most significant changes in
 a society are those which take place
 over a long period of time and affect
 the largest number of people. Such
 processes are not inevitable, but they
 cannot be controlled by a single person
 or agency.

One of the most interesting aspects of
 Puerto Rican history which I got a
 chance to look into was the hard time
 the state had in taking control of the
 territory of Puerto Rico. Naturally, by
 this I don't mean the usual partisan
 electoral history, but a history of the
 process by which the impersonal state
 developed and acquired jurisdiction
 over many aspects of social life.

This process seems to have been
 extremely halting. The state had to
 contend with other forces: the Catholic
 Church, family and local loyalties,
 foreign enclaves, smugglers, fugitives,
 private interests and the political
 parties, which have even wedged

themselves into the Commonwealth
 Constitution.

This halting and by all means
 incomplete development of the state
 may explain some frustrating aspects
 of modern life in Puerto Rico, but it also
 may be responsible for the development
 of solidarities which enrich our lives.

For instance, for a long time the
 government took no responsibility for
 the care of orphans; godparents or
 relatives usually did. It's only when the
 family, on account of its crisis at the
 beginning of this century, was unable to
 assume its traditional responsibilities
 that the state had to adopt the task of
 providing help for abandoned children,
 the handicapped and the elderly.

The weakening of social bonds has
 forced the forging of new political ones.

Precisely because the state in Puerto
 Rico has been weak and vulnerable to
 the pressures from outside and from
 ruling elites, the masses have had to
 resort to their own devices and
 solutions.

The history of this interplay between
 the masses and their political and
 economic conditionings is not a
 chronicle of passive acquiescence.

*Fernando Picó is a Jesuit priest who
 has written several books about Puerto
 Rico, and previously wrote a newspaper
 column. This one originally appeared in
 1985. It has been slightly edited for
 reprinting.*



MELANIE LENART

EcoLogic

Recycling companies going hungry

Puerto Rico's recycling effort is
 failing to sustain the industry that
 depends on it.

That's the consensus from some of the
 industrial recipients of San Juan's stalled
 effort and the Solid Waste Management
 Authority's fledgling program.

"Our machine here can chew 1,000
 pounds of plastic an hour. They deliver in
 one month what is enough for 3½ hours,"
 complains Antonio Aponte, vice president
 and technical director of Environmental
 Plastics of Puerto Rico, talking about the
 San Juan recycling program.

"We are getting about one-fourth of
 what we need," says Alan Martin,
 president of Global Fibers, Inc., which
 recycles newspapers. "We can use a
 semi(truck)-full a day."

"We could probably buy about five
 times that amount if there were an
 infrastructure in place in the public
 sector," explained Luis Caro-Caro, the
 marketing director of Owens-Illinois of
 Puerto Rico, about the glass the company
 receives from recycling efforts.

As an employee of one of the island's
 top manufacturers when measured by
 energy use, Caro can afford to take an
 optimistic tone when he describes how
 far the island has come in bottle
 recycling: Owens-Illinois had received
 10,000 tons of glass for recycling by
 October, compared to 5,000 tons for all of
 1992. (Also, he is trying to convince
 policy-makers that the current effort is
 so successful that a bottle fee law under
 consideration would be unnecessary.)

But the other two hail from small
 businesses that have gambled on Puerto
 Rico's ability to adopt a recycling
 program in a timely fashion. Global
 Fibers set up shop 18 months ago;
 Environmental Plastics was inaugurated
 in July. Managers of both envisioned a
 pace suggested by the Puerto Rican law
 requiring that municipalities recycle 35
 percent of their garbage by mid-
 September 1995.

Instead, they've found an initial flush
 of interest, and corresponding influx of
 material, followed by long dry spells
 while the San Juan program falters and
 the commonwealth program remains
 mostly in the planning stages.

The commonwealth Solid Waste

Please see RECYCLING, Page 32

Six steps to a better environment

By TERRY F. YOSIE
Scripps Howard News Service

At its core, the debate over remedies for Mexico's environmental problems centers largely on the relevance of U.S. environmental policies and programs as the model for Mexico to follow.

That is, what elements of the U.S. approach should Mexico, or any developing nation, adopt in developing its environmental programs?

Countries like Mexico should

evaluate U.S. policies both to avoid our mistakes as well as review the ways that our successes can help them achieve their environmental objectives more rapidly. On balance, the U.S. environmental experience, while containing some important building blocks, does not furnish an exact model to guide the people of Mexico in solving their own unique problems.

This is because the United States does not have a coherent approach to environmental policy and management. Rather, U.S. environmental programs

have evolved in an ad hoc and sometimes contradictory fashion across statutes and programs.

Thus, in measuring Mexico's environmental performance, the United States must necessarily examine its own.

Both the United States and Mexico have a number of changes to make in achieving sustainable environmental policies that advance environmental quality and economic growth. The measuring stick for sustainable environmental policies consists of adopting the following six

principles:

■ Pick the low-hanging fruit: Unless there is a situation requiring action in the short term, countries should target their initial pollution reduction efforts on the problems where success is most attainable with the least effort and cost.

The many opportunities to apply this principle in the U.S. include a commitment to greater manufacturing efficiency, reduction of lead and mercury levels in motor fuels and investment in primary

From Page 31

Recycling

Management Authority's program is so far limited to a drop-off program. It has been gaining steam, with close to 29 tons of recyclables collected from 15 different sites on the second Saturday of every month:

A visit to the Plaza Las Américas location on Saturday involved inching in parking lot-traffic for 20 minutes, but ended on a high note. SWMA had clearly responded to growing participation by providing huge bins to contain recyclables. And, as of last month, it had begun to accept newspapers.

This is the kind of initiative that can keep the momentum going. Still, it's only once a month, and the 29 tons collected for recycling this month compares to 7,600 tons of garbage generated daily on the island.

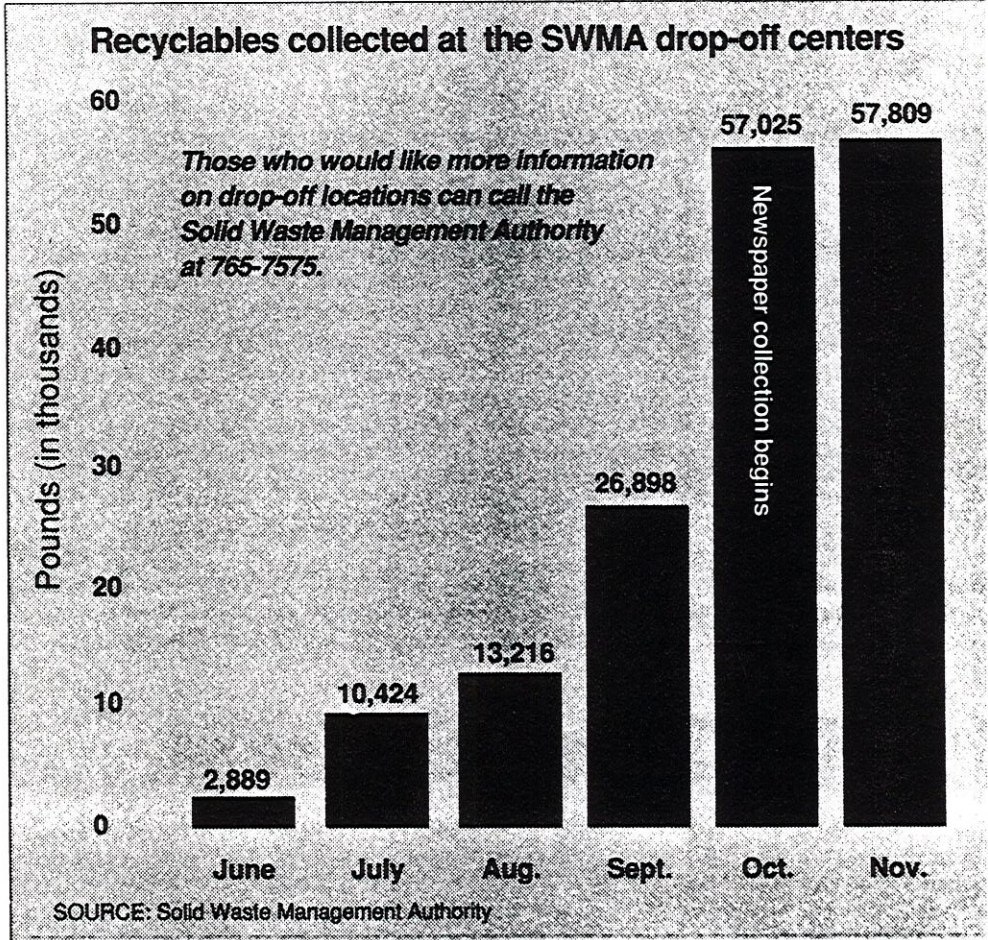
Meanwhile, the city program, which focuses on pilot projects involving curbside pick-up of recyclables, has stalled over technical details. The San Juan Environmental Control Department program is yielding about 98.6 tons of recyclables a month, a mere three-hundredths of 1 percent of the garbage generated by the city, according to statistics from department associate director Ileana Orlandi.

Plans to expand the curbside pick-up programs have been put on hold while the city decides whether to continue employing reusable plastic bins or switch to disposable plastic bags for collection, Orlandi explained during an office visit Wednesday with her and the department's executive director, Juan Ramón Acevedo. Using "blue bags" makes it easier for residents, and is compatible with city equipment, unlike the bins used in the pilot program.

A plan to enfold Old San Juan merchants, particularly bar owners, into the city recycling program by last summer failed to materialize, despite the enthusiasm of the merchants. Orlandi blamed lack of storage space for preventing the city from following through on this plan.

In the meantime, we can only hope that merchants will soothe their consciences by at least separating their cans for those who collect them nightly to eke out a living. There's always a market for cans.

To top it off, the city hasn't bothered to let people in the curbside pick-up program know that they're now accepting virtually all types of plastic,



Islanders have responded in growing numbers to the opportunity to recycle their plastic, glass, aluminum cans and, as of October, newspapers. The lack of increase in November probably reflects a distraction about the plebiscite held the next day, believes drop-off program director Ada Hernández. October's figure reflected a 65 percent increase in glass and a 51 percent increase in plastic over the previous month. October also ushered in 13,625 pounds of newspaper, which went on to be topped by November's total of 18,750 pounds

instead of just the bottles and plastic containers specified when the program began (before the opening of Environmental Plastics).

"We wanted to check their financial stability before we do that," said Orlandi, alluding to Environmental Plastics. She worries that education efforts could be followed by the company going out of business, leaving the city with the job of educating the public to change its plastic recycling habits yet again.

Yet the city's lack of effort in encouraging the full extent of recycling would seem to jeopardize the company's stability. It's a circular argument.

Aponte said his company has resorted to purchasing new plastic to feed its machine, which he maintained actually saves money by saving time otherwise spent sorting materials. The company has eyes on marketing railroad ties,

ideally out of recycled plastic. If this practice becomes accepted — and he was expecting to test it in the Dominican Republic this week — it could alleviate the demand for wood while providing a way to recycle plastics.

Aponte said he would like to set up a facility at a garbage dump to sort for recyclables, particularly the plastic that comprises more than two-fifths of the volume of our disposables.

San Juan is considering setting up such a facility as part of its plan, and Acevedo lent me several promotional videos from companies showing what they can do. There's a lot of promise; a CRInc. Mobile Recycling Vehicle with moving belts cut the time it took to sort about 3½ tons of glass from six hours to 1½ hours, and Automated Recycling Technologies, Inc., set up a system to serve 1 million people on a three-acre site.