

A natural refuge in the urban jungle

By Deborah Sullivan Brennan | 3:16 p.m. Oct. 30, 2015 | Updated, 3:19 p.m.



SAN DIEGO, CA-OCTOBER 15, 2015: | Tijuana environmental organizer Anibal Mendez. | (Howard Lipin / San Diego Union-Tribune) *San Diego Union-Tribune*

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In the middle of Tijuana is an accidental oasis, where residents find solace from the urban bustle under streamside trees, amid the sound of songbirds. That's where Alamar Creek, a tributary of the Tijuana River, flows in a rare swath of green amid the cityscape.

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The majority of the creek, however, was lined with concrete channels as part of a federal flood control project. But nearly 2 miles of the eastern portion of the 10-mile-long waterway will be preserved in its natural state. One of the environmental organizers who helped assure its protection is Anibal Mendez, of the Chilpancingo Collective, the Mexican affiliate of the San Diego-based Environmental Health Coalition.

Mendez, 33, grew up in Tijuana and now lives in Imperial Beach with his wife and daughter. The son of Mexican journalists, he earned his bachelor's degree in psychology at Universidad Autonoma de Baja California, but gravitated toward environmental activism through his love of nature and interest in social justice.

In 2008, he began working with work with the coalition as youth organizer in its "Border Environmental Justice Campaign" youth group, based in Tijuana, and later became a community organizer. He talks about efforts to preserve one of the city's last natural spaces.

Q: Please describe how you became interested in environmental issues.

A: Nature has always been a part of my life. When I was young and still living in Michoacan, my favorite activity was going on mountain hikes — to see the trees, rivers and feel the clean air. Years later, when I saw the work that the Environmental Health Coalition does and learned of its focus on environmental justice — combining my interest in the environment, but focused on people's rights — it felt just right.

Q: How did you get involved with the Arroyo Alamar?

A: Before I moved to San Diego, I lived about 12 years in a neighborhood that is next to Arroyo Alamar. I knew of its riparian forest, but I didn't know of its importance back then. Since I began working with the Environmental Health Coalition, the Arroyo was always a reference that identified the community we worked with. But it wasn't until 2011 that we decided to take on this issue in Tijuana, because the concrete channeling project had started and we needed to find a sustainable alternative.

Q: What are the unique ecological characteristics of Alamar?

A: We find cottonwood, willows and oak trees, as well as medicinal plants among other flora thriving there. We find woodpeckers, Canadian geese, owls, prawns, different types of herons, snakes, opossums and other animals. The area is bustling with wildlife.

Q: Why is it important to protect this creek?

A: Other than being one of the last natural ecosystems in Tijuana, it is valuable because it represents the possibility for mitigating residents' health impacts from pollution and industrial activities in the area. We know that what happens on this stream directly affects the Tijuana River Estuary, which in turn has a huge environmental value for the whole region.

Q: How did you and your colleagues guarantee the preservation of part of the creek?

A: For years, we worked hand-in-hand with community and nonprofit organizations to change CONAGUA's (Mexico's National Water Commission) vision of channeling the Alamar completely with concrete. We successfully turned the last phase of the project, about 3 kilometers, into a sustainable channel. Our present challenge is to ensure that the forest area serves its surrounding community as site for recreation,

education and conservation.

Q: What are the challenges of dealing with bi-national environmental issues?

A: The challenges range from coordinating agendas with government agencies and organizations on both sides and the time investment of commuting across the border. In addition, we dedicate a lot of time to understanding and learning the characteristics of the environmental laws of both countries — their agreements, the different institutions and their procedures.

Q: What are the other environmental issues that you are involved in?

A: The neighborhood we work with in Tijuana is located between the Otay Industrial Park and the Arroyo Alamar. As a result, any pollution from industrial activity and traffic in the neighborhood may result in an environmental justice issue we have to address.

Q: Please tell us about your music.

A: In addition to being a community organizer, I am also a songwriter in my spare time. I have a project called “Elrio” (The River). Last year, we recorded the album “Por el Bulevar,” it is difficult to pin it down to one specific genre, so half-joking we just use the term “mixed musical arts” with influences of alternative rock, cumbia regiomontana, folk and world music. Right now we’re very excited because we’re recording another album that we hope to finish in February. We are also working on a third music video. You can find our music at elriosuena.com

Q: What environmental changes do you hope to see when your 4-year-old daughter is grown?

A: I would like to see a large shift in public and environmental policy, where health matters at least just as much as economic development. In the long run, the poor health of people and whole communities has a very high economic cost for cities.

Q: What is the best advice you ever received?

A: Never doubt yourself, but even when you do, try. A times, we gain more by the experience of failing than by achieving victory.

Q: What is one thing that people would be surprised to know about you?

A: In addition to being a musician and a community organizer, I’m also a psychologist.

Q: Please describe your ideal weekend in San Diego.

A walk through Balboa Park museums or a visit to the aquarium, maybe a walk in the park with my daughter and wife and dinner downtown. The Imperial Beach pier and estuary are also perfect places to relax and enjoy time together.

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