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Worms and Politics

Just when we thought our trip would be full of hikes and beautiful vistas, today was a day full of work (our first of several). For part of the group, Monday was the first day of farm work at the organic farm cooperative, Las Lajitas. Those of us who were assigned to this site got a firsthand glimpse at Las Lajitas' innovative vermiculture project (*lombricultura* in Spanish). The idea is that the waste material from the coffee harvest as well as the manure from nearby goat and cow herds is combined into a delicious mixture and then fed to thousands of earthworms housed in huge concrete and cement block containers. The dozen or so cement bins are located under a tin roof to protect the worms and compost from the elements and keep the temperature nice and cool. These helpful little guys chow down on the organic materials for a week or two and then are moved to a fresh container to start working on a new batch of compost. What is left behind is a highly nutritious finished compost, which is sold locally in small amounts, and otherwise spread across the fields of Las Lajitas. In addition, any excess liquid which comes out of the containers is channeled into a small reservoir under the floorboards in the worm house and later collected. This worm juice, extremely beneficial for plants as a foliar spray, is bottled and sold as an organic fertilizer. As far as innovation in the field of organic agriculture, vermiculture is pretty advanced, and even managed to impress our local experts, Matt and Jenn. The vermiculture composting method both breaks down the compost matter quicker and injects the soil with more nutrients than the traditional composting methods. Additionally, the byproduct of the vermiculture process, worm juice, has been found to aid in curing animals from different types of sicknesses when incorporated into their diet. As Polilla mentioned, perhaps worm juice holds the properties to cure human diseases. Maybe soon we'll see an operational worm compost system at the Dickinson College Farm!





Meanwhile, down in Monte Carmelo ... a privileged group of Dickinsonians got to see exactly where their morning cup of coffee came from at Gabriel and Titila's house, host to Professor Rose's family during their last stay in Venezuela. Coffee plants and lemon, mandarin orange, and banana trees formed part of their bio-intensive *conuco*, or front yard garden. We set to work pulling the yellow, red, and green coffee berries off the plants and into burlap bags that would then be sent off for processing by a local coffee cooperative. During a morning break, Gabriel shared his *cambores* (bananas) with us and his political perspective on the current situation in Venezuela. President Hugo Chavez has had a noticeable and positive impact on this area, from providing free health care and

schooling to supporting local farmers and Las Lajitas in their sustainable agriculture endeavors. Titila, in turn, showed us her medicinal herb garden and expressed the importance of preserving the practice of traditional medicine in Venezuela. At the end of the morning, we took home a bag of coffee and some bananas and headed back up the mountain to Casa Campesina.





Polilla's Talk on Worm Compost

After a brief siesta, a chocolate *torta* and cup of coffee, one of the associates of Las Lajitas in charge of the vermiculture program, Polilla, invited us to the farm to meet the worms. He explained how the entire project evolved – including recent government funding – and the daily maintenance of the worm compost. Part of the daily care involves irrigating the worm bins and controlling the temperature of them. If the bins overheat and watering does not help in reducing the temperature, Polilla has to resort to manually turning the compost so that the worms do not die. It was incredible to walk around the huge bins filled with hundreds of thousands of worms, knowing that the project originally started with only a ½ kilo of them. Interestingly, this half kilo of California worms was donated to the cooperative by a Frenchman who took a course on vermiculture; since he was unable to take the worms back to Europe with him, he donated them to the farm and that half kilo has reproduced enough (hundreds of thousands) so that Polilla has not needed to purchase any more. The application of the worm compost on the fields of Las Lajitas makes it unnecessary to spray with chemicals and has therefore converted the farm into one of the only organic food producers in the area.





Overall, our first day of work treated us all kindly. Many of us were able to make good headway in their topics of research, and certainly everyone had a chance to try something for the first time. Coming back to Casa Campesina after a long morning's work helped to make this place feel more like home. It was great being able to contribute to the community of Monte Carmelo, and we're all looking forward to our next several days here.