The Culture of Water and the Environment in an Indigenous Region of Mexico


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INTRODUCTION

The Meseta Purépecha is an indigenous region located in central-western Mexico, an area where certain peculiar geological and topographical conditions impede the formation of plentiful springs and waterholes. In stark contrast to this, the region is characterized by abundant precipitation and is covered by extensive forests, two factors that facilitate filtration and the recharging of aquifers. Thus, it is a water-producing zone that benefits the surrounding area, where springs, rivers and lakes are plentiful.

In spite of the limited natural availability of water, however, most human settlements in the Meseta date from pre-Hispanic times and have therefore proven capable of sustaining populations of considerable size for a long period of time. This apparent contradiction can be explained by the fact that the people there have developed sociocultural strategies for water management based on the following elements:

a) The emergence of what we may call a “culture of water scarcity”, that utilizes modest volumes of water due to the lack of adequate sources of supply.

b) A form of social organization that permits “the community control of water”, in which this resource is seen as a collective good to which the entire population must be assured access. In addition, all members of the community share the responsibility of conserving and maintaining the sources of supply and for capturing, transporting and distributing water.

c) The emergence of a “culture of ecological water use and management” associated with the Purépecha people’s cosmovision (worldview), in which water is highly-valued and must be cared for because it is a “fruit” bestowed by “mother nature” (Cherauchperi). This attitude is reflected in the practices of water use and management, whose basic ecological principles are: low consumption patterns (little waste), the diversification of sources of supply (utilization of rainwater, springs, watering holes), multiple applications (productive and domestic uses) and recycling (minimal discharge).

Historically, the conditions of life that the indigenous people of the Meseta have experienced have been very harsh: walking long distances for water, waiting all day and night for small amounts of water and even consuming water contaminated with dirt and organic material. However, certain sociocultural strategies have decreased the inhabitants’ vulnerability in the face of water scarcity. In the most critical months (March to May), for example, water is rationed by community agreement in order to guarantee each family the minimum volume necessary, while from July to September supplies are complemented by the exploitation of rainwater that is captured as it runs off the roofs of the peoples’ houses.

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I would like to thank Paul C. Kersey (Jalisco, Mexico) for the English translation of this paper.
THE REGION OF STUDY: THE MESETA PURÉPECHA

Biophysical conditions

The geographical location of the region known as the Meseta Purépecha is within the transversal neo-volcanic axis of central-western Mexico. The mean elevation of the plateau areas is 2300 meters above sea level, while the mountainous parts can reach altitudes as high as 3300 meters. The climate is temperate with summer rains, and the vegetation is classified as temperate forest, where pine, oak, and spruce trees predominate. In hydrological terms, the region contains seven zones: Charapan, Paracho, Arantepacua, Tanaco, La Mejonerita, Pichátaro, and Zinzir, all of which are characterized by "runoff" unrelated to any apparent surface drainage system, and that lack a permanent, organized fluvial network, flowing as underground streams.

Despite the region's high level of precipitation —mean annual rainfall of 1274 millimeters (50.15 in.), 95% of which falls in the months from June to October— neither hydrological networks with superficial currents (rivers) nor permanent bodies of water (lakes) exist there. It is only during periods of intense rains that one observes water currents that run down from the higher elevations, but even these disappear after just a few hundred yards due to the high permeability of the subsoil. As a result, there are only a few springs and waterholes, characterized by modest flows and an extreme sensitivity to variations in the amount of precipitation. Flow rates are below 5 liters per second and tend to diminish even more as each rainy season recedes (November to May), with no recovery until the new rainy season and the process of recharge of the aquifers begins once again.

In contrast to this reality, the Meseta is of tremendous hydrological importance for surrounding regions, due to its biophysical and climatic conditions (abundant precipitation, high soil permeability, elevated topography, predominantly forest vegetation) that aid in recharging the aquifers. Numerous springs, rivers and bodies of water exist all around the Meseta and there are innumerable deep wells in the surrounding areas (Uruapan, Los Reyes, Patzcuaro, Zamora).

Population

This region is located in the central area of the state of Michoacán and includes some 43 localities, divided among eleven municipalities. Most of the communities (28) are located in the municipalities of Charapan (6), Cherán (3), Nahuatzen (10) and Paracho (9), while the other 15 pertain to the municipalities of Tanjeñalhuaro (1), Los Reyes (3), Uruapan (4), Tingambato (1), Patzcuaro (2), Eruongaricuaro (2) and Chilchota (2). The total population is perhaps 120,000, the majority of whom are indigenous. Though official indicators of the number of indigenous Purépecha-speakers do not reflect this magnitude, their figure of 35-40% certainly suffices to indicate the significance of this population in the region. Among the main productive activities undertaken we find temporal agriculture (corn), forest exploitation (timber, pine resin), the elaboration of semi-finished products (furniture, packing crates for fruits and vegetables) and a wide range of artisanal items. This region is considered one of the poorest in the state of Michoacán, as the indicators of

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2 Ávila, Patricia, Escasez de agua en una región indígena de Michoacán: el caso de la Meseta Purépecha, El Colegio de Michoacán, México, 1996.

the population's material conditions of existence (such as income, employment, housing, health and education) are well below state and national averages.

**Water scarcity**

The scarcity of water in the Meseta dates back many centuries, as reflected by Purépecha mythology, early settlement patterns and even the chronicles of the first Spanish travelers in the region. The origin of water scarcity can be attributed to the area's peculiar biophysical conditions, which permit neither the formation of rivers and bodies of water nor of bountiful springs and watering holes. The traditional sources of supply have been rainwater and small, intermittent springs and waterholes (called 'ojos de agua') that tend to dry up quickly as soon as the rainy season ends (the dry season runs from November to May). This has generated a situation of great hardship for the population, especially during the months from March to May.

[in Nahuatzen]... the areas of service around sources of water are zealously guarded during the months of scarcity, when women get up at two o'clock in the morning to stand in line if they want to obtain enough water for the day. Even as late as ten at night the row of empty pails waiting to be filled reflects the town's great tragedy. 4

In spite of this, the region has been home to significant population nuclei, whose origins can be traced back to the pre-Hispanic era, though many of the original town sites have been abandoned and the population relocated as a function of the proximity of water, and some localities were established as a function of factors such as the availability of arable land and forests. 3

**THE INDIGENOUS COSMOVISION OF WATER**

In Purépecha mythology 5 there is a legend concerning the origin of the world that reveals the divine character of nature. This myth says that the god of eternal fire, Curicaeri, created the sun (Tatá Jurita) and the moon (Naná Kutsi), and that it was from their union that nature —Cueraudáhperi— was born, representing harmony and the mother of all that exists on earth: mountains, water, plants, animals and mankind.

Water is related specifically to the five gods of rain (called the Tiripemencha), who were brothers of the God of Celestial Fire, Curicaeri. In the Purépecha language, this name means "divine or precious water". It is believed that the Tiripemencha live in five houses in the sky and they are represented as clouds located in different positions and associated with certain colors: Ocipi-Tiripeme or Chupí Tiripeme, the blue god, is in the center and has his seat on the island of La Pucanada in Lake Patzcuaro; to the east (in Curpiánguro) sits Tiripeme-quererca, the red god; to the west (in Iramuco) is Tiripeme-tutupten, the white god; to the north (in Pichático) we find Tiripeme-xungápeti, the yellow god; and, finally, to the south (in Pareo) sits Tiripeme-caheri, the black god.

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3 Avila, Eneas, op. cit.
6 Corona, José, Mitología laraza, ed., SEP-Mich., Colección Cultural no. 4, Mexico, 1986.
Like Ocupi-Tiripeme, the goddess Cueraudelperi also has four offspring, though hers are all daughters—the clouds—who surround and accompany her. This leads us to believe that both deities have a similar significance or meaning that implies that the sacred character of water is comparable to that of nature itself. By the same token, the human sacrifices that were carried out in the ceremonial centers located near various springs and waterholes, as in Zinapécuaro, begin to make sense once we understand the people’s belief that “death” propitiated the rebirth of water. In addition, we should note that according to mythology, it was there that the goddess who created all springs, Cueraudelperi, dwelled.

And they sacrificed those slaves and upon removing their hearts held their ceremonies with them, and while still hot they were taken from the town of Zinapécuaro to the hot springs of the town of Araró, [where] they were thrown into a small hot spring and were tied to planks, and they dropped blood in all the sources of water in the town, which were dedicated to other gods. And from those sources of water there arose vapors and they said that from there the clouds emerged for rain to fall, and that the goddess Cueraudelperi who sent them from the west was there. And it was out of their respect for her that they cast that blood into those sources of water.¹

Therefore, we can see that it was through this cosmovision that water obtained its divine origin, based on a close, ongoing relationship with the celestial god of creation, the god of rain and the goddess of the earth. The origin of human beings, in contrast, is not portrayed as divine, but is attributed to a level quite different from that of the gods. The associations that mankind forges with the deities are based on a relationship of respect and harmony and, in the particular case of water, the population looks to “procure (look after) it” so that it will never fail them and they will be able to survive.²

Myths related to water

In the Meseta, myths related to the origin of water are an expression of the need to find sources of supply for a population that confronts severe conditions of scarcity. Among several myths that mention water, we find several that associate it with orphan children who discover sources of water thanks to signs from a bird, while others relate the act of sexual intercourse with the emergence of water. One of these myths is told as follows:

She was an orphan girl, and no one liked her. She lived in Old Paracho, but at there was no water there they had to bring it from Aranza. María was always very dirty and never combed her hair. People sent her to fetch water because they considered her a servant. She carried water in a clay vessel (cántaro) and had to make two trips every day... one in the morning and another in the afternoon. People always scolded María, because she arrived too soon or too late. This was because no one cared for orphans.

On one occasion when María was going for water, a small bird appeared and sprayed her hand with water. But María paid no attention and continued on her way to Aranza. But then it happened again... and then again. The third time, María peered about to see where the little bird that sprayed her with water had come from and saw that near the place from which it emerged there was a waterhole. So María no longer had to walk all the way to Aranza for water, she just took it from that place. And from that time on she made three trips for water every day instead of just two.

¹ Alestá, Jerónimo de, Relación de las ceremonias y ritos y población y gobierno de los indios de la provincia de Michoacán (1541), Eds. Balsal, Mexico, 1977, p. 30.
² Ávila, Escobar, op. cit.
Then the townsfolk began to notice that she brought water more times every day and that it didn’t take her as long as it had before, so they followed her and discovered where she was getting the water. Then they went and told the priest what was going on, and he said they should clean Maria up, comb her hair and bathe her and then take her to the waterhole, throw her in and leave her there to die. And that was what they did, and after that there was always water for them to carry to Paracho. There is the belief that if you throw a soul into a place where water emerges, it will never dry up.\(^9\)

In two variants of this myth, the principle figure is sacrificed in order to obtain more water, because while he or she is alive it is scarce. Their death is not seen as a kind of suffering, but as a divine act that assures the renovation of the source of water. It is for this reason that the personages are associated with the god of water; the only force capable of making the vital liquid come forth. In a second version, however, it is a couple’s sexual intercourse that symbolizes the act of creating and reproducing water from the recesses of the earth (mother nature).

Many years ago, there was a young girl named Maria Lapis, who had a lover who she always met when she went to get water. No one knew of their encounters, much less that Maria had found water in a place close to the town of Paracho. Then some people began to notice that it didn’t take her very long to come back with the water and, to satisfy their curiosity, they decided to follow her. In a certain place they found the couple consummating their love and in that very place there was a waterhole. The people decided to drown her there so that water would never cease to flow. And so it was that a spring emerged that even today quenches the people’s thirst.\(^10\)

**Festivals and Rituals Related to Water**

In the *Meseta Purépecha* festivals and traditions related to water are many and varied. For example, on Tuesday of Carnival week in Pichátaro, a festival is held in honor of water: it is celebrated at a different watering hole each year and everyone (cattle ranchers, people from certain neighborhoods or from the entire town) who uses water from that particular source is invited to participate in the *faena* (collective preparations). Though the purpose of this festival is to demonstrate just how greatly water is appreciated and valued, the collective work involved also tends to solidify a spirit of cooperation and participation among the people. Envies seem to be forgotten and all the tasks are carried out with joy and solidarity. Women, men and children all work side-by-side to clean the spring and to hew troughs by hollowing out tree trunks with their machetes, in which they will store and transport the water.

This festival is the responsibility of a man called “the collector”, the *carguero* of the god-child, though everyone cooperates with adornments, food and other details. Music is played the whole time to raise the spirits of those who work in the *faena*. Later, the women and children arrive, bringing food, soft drinks, beer, cigarettes and liquor. The men distribute the drinks, while the women make sure that everyone is fed. Men eat first, followed by the children and then the women. It is a day of partying and sharing, and everyone participates in the dancing and playing, while the sky echoes with the explosion of fireworks. Women wear their most beautiful aprons and put multi-colored ribbons and scarves in their hair. During the festival everyone dances and throws confetti and people

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play jokes upon one another. Children paint their faces and run around trying to break eggshells filled with confetti on the heads of their friends, or throw handfuls of flour at them. No one gets away, though great care is taken to assure that the water is never befouled. As evening falls, they return to the community with live music and along the way they play and dance to the rhythm of the torito.\(^{11}\) Upon arriving at the central square (plaza) a great party is held that includes a presentation in which a rancher pretends to rob a cow and is chased by everyone in town until he is finally caught. At the same time, the carnival torito dances while children and young people play with him, pretending to be bullfighters.\(^{12}\)

**Sociocultural strategies for ecological water use and management**

The unusual biophysical conditions (limited availability of water) and the relatively dense indigenous population of the Meseta Purépecha have influenced the development of sociocultural strategies for ecological water use and management as means of confronting scarcity. These strategies are based upon an efficient, multivalent and diversified system of water exploitation, and on forms of social and community control that make it possible to regulate the population's access to water and so conserve this valuable resource.\(^{13}\) Strategies vary from one community to another and, above all, are more deeply engrained in those towns where scarcity is more extreme; but it is thanks to these strategies that it has been possible to maintain a substantial human and animal population, not to mention the wide variety of flowers and plants that are found in the patios of the houses.

**Social control of water**

The predominant form of water exploitation in the Meseta can be termed 'collective usufruct', whose guiding principle is that water is considered a vital element of the community’s patrimony. This means that it is seen as a resource that belongs to the collectivity and that the entire community is responsible for preserving it and assuring its availability today and in the future. Decisions concerning the access, use, management and distribution of water are made in communal meetings and assemblies. Access to sources of supply is free for all members of the community, though during the months of greatest scarcity restrictions are applied in an effort to make sure there will be enough to go around.

The volume of water destined for each family is also defined collectively and, though the amount may be quite modest, all families are guaranteed a minimum quantity to satisfy their basic necessities. This internal organization prevents some people from using more water than others, as individuals are named to monitor the sources of water and to ensure an equitable distribution. In addition, communal agreements have been reached that allow certain sources of supply to be shared between neighboring towns, which come together to ‘pool their resources’ in order to combat the problem of scarcity (for example, Pichátaro shares water with Erongaricuaro, Nahuitzen with Cherán, etc.). Such agreements also reflect the conservation of certain bonds of solidarity that are characteristic of the culture of the Meseta.

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\(^{11}\) During carnaval, musicians are commonly accompanied by a dancer bearing an outfit representing a young bull, a tradition that is widely diffused in many localities of Michoacán.

\(^{12}\) Information provided by several people from Pichátaro, and based on my own observations and participation in the festival on March 3, 1992. See also, Medina, 1986:76.

\(^{13}\) Ávila, *Etnografía*, op. cit.
Another regulating mechanism that restricts the volume of water people receive is designed to assure that there is enough water available for animals (cattle) as well. People voluntarily concede part of their own water supply so that everyone can keep a few heads of cattle (normally 1 to 4), which are important for certain agricultural tasks, for transporting firewood and timber and as a kind of alimentary reserve for the family during periods of great economic hardship.

In some communities, the same sources of supply are used by both people and animals, but at different times of the day: for example, families may have access to water in the mornings and afternoons, while the evening hours are reserved for their animals. There are also cases in which two lines are formed, one for the population and the other for animals, while in other towns certain watering holes are reserved exclusively for the use of animals. On occasions, however, when scarcity reaches extreme proportions, the amount of water available is insufficient to satisfy even the basic necessities of the cattle and some animals “die of thirst” or are simply sold for butchering before they die.

With respect to collective water management, these communities have also developed cultural practices designed to conserve and rehabilitate the sources of supply and have implemented projects designed to capture, transport and store this vital liquid. Among these practices we find collective work projects involving labors undertaken in the collective interest of the community that do not imply any form of economic remuneration. At the root of these practices is the idea that because water is a collectively-held resource everyone must collaborate in improving the means of exploiting, conserving and maintaining the sources of supply.

The communal authorities call people together for such tasks as dredging and cutting away the undergrowth to protect their springs and waterholes, to do maintenance work on existing infrastructure, or to undertake new constructions. Men are organized by *barrio* (neighborhood) to participate in these activities, while the women and children prepare food and carry it out to the work site. Generally speaking, these projects are organized on Sundays — when people generally rest from their normal economic activities — and there is often almost a festive atmosphere as the people set to their tasks with great enthusiasm. It should be mentioned that people who do not participate in these *faenas* are looked upon very negatively in the community and on occasions may be fined or even punished by being put in jail.

Sociocultural practices of this nature are fundamentally important in assuring and maintaining adequate supplies of water, because with the passing of time the structures designed to capture and transport water deteriorate or begin to get clogged with sediments. Thus, constant maintenance is needed to avoid reductions in the flow. Moreover, the work of cleaning the holding tanks and cisterns requires the participation of the entire town. For example, just before the onset of the rainy season in Cheranatzicurin, residents undertake the work of cleaning the cisterns in which they will store rainwater for later use.

Finally, in some localities these responsibilities are delegated to neighborhoods or to certain productive sectors that must maintain and monitor the exploitation of specific sources of supply, while others may be open to the entire populace. In both cases, the *faena* continues to be both an elemental practice and a pre-condition of conserving one’s right of access to existing sources of water.

**Efficient water use and management**

Patterns of water consumption in the communities in the Meseta are associated with a culture that attempts to ‘optimize’ use and exploit water ‘up to the very last drop’. The
volume of water destined for the range of domestic-productive uses is very small indeed, as it is calculated on the basis of a rationality that stresses efficient and rational use. In fact, most houses have no running water, drainage systems or sanitary installations (faucets, flush toilets, showers, etc.) that would require high levels of consumption. According to my own calculations made in 1995, the average amount of water per inhabitant in the Meseta Purépecha was just 12 liters per person per day (L/p/d), a figure that is very close to the minimum necessary for satisfying basic necessities of 8 L/p/d. The reasons for this, of course, are scarcity and the large amount of time and energy that people must invest in obtaining and transporting water. Inside the towns we also find mechanisms designed to prevent people from wasting water: when someone is seen making wasteful use of water they are likely to be reported immediately to the communal authorities who will reprimand them and, in cases of repeated offenses, fine them or even jail them.

**Diversified water use and management**

One way of satisfying the demand for water throughout the year and of achieving greater self-sufficiency in terms of supplies for the population has centered on strategies designed to diversify water use and management. Basically, the idea is to combine and exploit the different sources of supply that exist during the year (rainwater, springs, waterholes, runoffs). Water exploitation is closely related to the hydrological cycle: during the months of extreme scarcity (November to May) the flow from the usual sources of supply tends to diminish and, especially from March to May, people implement a variety of mechanisms designed to combat the lack of water. During the following four months (June to October) existing supplies are complemented by the rainwater that falls and increased flows at the springs and waterholes, which tend to expand one or two months after the rains begin.

With a view to maximizing water supplies, measures are taken to increase diversification as far as possible by exploiting all available sources. This means that the people use water from various sources at the same time, be they springs, waterholes or rainwater. As part of this effort, some sources may be reserved for specific uses (according to the quality and quantity of water they contain), such as drinking, washing or bathing, for example; or may be assigned to a certain neighborhood or locality. In Picháaro, for instance, in some cases the maintenance and exploitation of the springs is the responsibility of individual neighborhoods, while in others it is shared with nearby communities that have access to common sources (Comachué, Erongaricuaru, Huiramangaro). All of these means of exploiting diverse sources of water allow the people to decrease their vulnerability in the face of scarcity. Given that in the most difficult months of the dry season the flow of water from most springs and waterholes tends to diminish quite markedly, the people’s ability to respond is increased if they can turn to alternative sources of supply. If they were to depend on only one source of water and had no secondary sources, in contrast, their situation would become even more difficult.

With respect to rainwater, it must be remembered that the mean annual precipitation in the region is very high, especially during the summer months. The onset of the rainy season, then, represents for the people the end of a long period of scarcity. The first rains have hardly begun to fall when people begin to appear with their clay vessels, buckets, tubs and other recipients to trap the maximum quantity of water they can as it runs off the roofs of their houses and is carried in wooden troughs to be stored in wooden

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14 Avila, *Esperez, op cit.*
cisterns (canaas). Once deposited, this rainwater is used for drinking, cooking, washing clothes and bathing.

We can see, then, that the Meseta is characterized by a culture of water use and administration that has allowed the population to confront the conditions of extreme scarcity that last for one third of the year. However, the problem of storing rainwater has constituted one of the main limitations that prevent people from maximizing their exploitation of this particular source of water. Most houses do not have large holding tanks or cisterns, but only a very modest storage capacity, sufficient to hold enough water for just a few days (perhaps 1 to 3). For this reason, when there is a break in precipitation during the rainy season (what the people call a veranito, or ‘little summer’), then the towns immediately begin to suffer from scarcity once again, due to the absence of installations capable of storing large volumes of water.

Related to this matter is the fact that the Meseta has been the scene of interesting experiences in the development of technologies designed to increase the efficiency of rainwater exploitation. For example, at least two families in the town of Capacuarco now have large cisterns in their houses, so that the amount of water they can store during the rainy season is more than sufficient to satisfy their total annual requirement. In this way, these families achieved self-sufficiency and no longer have to purchase water or carry it from the communal holding tanks.

In synthesis, the strategies for diversifying water use and management have made the population less vulnerable to scarcity through the development of an efficient and rational system of exploitation.

**Multivalent water use and management**

The multivalent use and management of water is a strategy that consists in re-utilizing (recycling) and exploiting water for productive and domestic applications. The logic of this approach is based on an ecological form of water management that looks to minimize the volume of run-off generated in the domestic sphere by optimizing water use, re-utilizing ‘gray water’ (dirty, used water), and attempts to maximize this resource by using the same water for different purposes. For example, the water used in such domestic activities as washing dishes, washing clothes, rinsing the cooked corn dough used to make tortillas (nixtamal) and for personal care is normally carried out to the patio or yard of the houses, because —as mentioned above— most dwellings have no sanitary installations or drains. Part of this runoff water is absorbed directly by the subsoil and reincorporated into the hydrological cycle (a fact that may contribute to the contamination of local sources of supply, such as waterholes and springs), while another part is collected in buckets, pails or tubs to be reused for other purposes, according to its quality: water from the nixtamal and water that contains no soap residues (detergent, chlorine) can be used to irrigate plants and gardens or can be consumed by animals, while soapy water is used to wet down the patio or the street before sweeping and cleaning.

Secondly, local sources of supply may have specific applications, as some are used for drinking water or water used in cooking, while others provide water for washing clothes and bathing, and there may also be tanks for cattle or for industrial uses. Other sources, however, may have multiple uses.

Cherán provides us with an interesting case, as the people there have defined a specific type of exploitation for each source and have clearly delimited each site according to type of use. Though most of the springs are exploited for domestic use, they may also have troughs that channel off water for consumption by animals. There are also places used
exclusively by men or women for bathing; men use a spring near Uekuaru, while women bathe a few hundred meters away in a ravine where there is a modest flow of water. Further downstream, women go to wash clothes and men and boys lead their animals to drink. At another point, water is siphoned off towards a resin plant, where it is used in the processing of tar and turpentine. Finally, the remaining runoff filters into the subsoil. Standing water or the fluid that slowly runs off through this ravine tends to disappear a few meters beyond the community’s borders, due to evaporation and high soil porosity.

This multivalent use and management of water has made it possible for various localities in the Meseta to keep fairly sizeable herds of cattle, as the people are willing to share their sources of supply or even to cede them to their animals. Thus, the development of cattle-raising has been due, in large part, to the people’s strategies of managing both water and pasturelands in collective fashion. By the same token, the existence of flowers and plants inside people’s homes during the entire year despite the scarcity of water (as in Cherenatzicurin, Ocumicho and Pichataro), can only be explained by their reutilization of runoff water from domestic activities for watering.

**FINAL REFLECTIONS**

Over the centuries, the indigenous population of the Meseta Purépecha has had to develop a variety of strategies for water use and management that have allowed it to confront the problem of scarcity. Their strategies are based on sound ecological principles and programs of social regulation that include: a) the social, community-based control of water that assures access to the entire population and the conservation of this resource; b) efficient water use and management that has given rise to rational forms of exploitation; c) diversified water use and management that has optimized the exploitation of all available sources of supply, including rainwater; and, d) multivalent water use and management that has permitted the development of a range of productive and domestic activities and maximized exploitation through recycling.

However, scarcity, in and of itself, cannot explain the high value that people attribute to water, the high esteem in which it is held, nor the logic upon which the strategies of water use and management are based. In order to understand this, it is necessary to enter the sociocultural dimension and comprehend that for the Purépecha people (the indigenous people of the region), water has a sacred and divine character that is revealed in their myths, rituals and cultural practices.

In the cosmovision of the Purépechas, human beings are seen as a ‘fruit of nature’ and the relationship established between humankind and nature is, therefore, based on principles of respect and harmony. This is because the goddess of creation, Cueraudhperi, and the god of water, Ocapi Tiripehie, have very similar meanings and humans cannot act upon a level of superiority, but only through a relationship of respect, mediated by the technology and knowledge they generate.

It is in this sense that the sociocultural practices associated with water use and management are reflections of this cosmovision: water is part of a highly-valued patrimony that must be cared for and conserved in order to assure its availability both today and for future generations. Its exploitation is based on ecological principles that include not only forms of use and management that are efficient, multivalent and diversified, but also measures designed to conserve this valuable resource. Thus, it is the binomial ‘water culture/environment’ that explains the continuous existence of large population nuclei in the Meseta since pre-Hispanic times, in spite of the severely limited availability of hydrological resources that has characterized the area since time immemorial.
En espera del agua, Cheranatzicuin, Mèxh.
Foto: Patricia Avila.