

There is no planet B

'Our job is to guard over the mangroves in order to protect them from the criminal hand of man'

Alvaro Orellana Crespo

Alvaro and the Istaten Association have managed to stave off threats from developers, preventing further deforestation of the mangroves.



El Salvador is one of the countries in the world most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Our partners there report rising temperatures and sea levels, an increasing number and intensity of hurricanes, and rainfall becoming ever more erratic.

Natural storm buffers such as mangroves have been heavily deforested in the country, which has the second-highest rate of deforestation in Latin America. This process affects wildlife and ecosystems, and makes the country susceptible to landslides and flooding during heavy storms.

In November, we wrote to you about Lidia Guardado, who lost her home and means of earning a living to the waves triggered by storms that hit her community in San Francisco Menéndez. Her story and those of others like her serve to show how climate change can compound an already acute state of poverty.

With your support, however, our partner UNES is working with people like Lidia to fight back.

Protecting the mangroves

The Istaten Association guards and protects the local mangrove reserve in San Francisco Menéndez, near the border with Guatemala. Founded in 2012, this small volunteer-run group has now flourished into a network of 35 individuals, working across a number of local communities.

Headed up by Alvaro Orellana Crespo, the association has worked with UNES to stave off the threats of developers and deforestation. They've successfully taken on the local mayor to prevent 70 *manzanas* (a *manzana* is the same as 0.7 hectares) of forest being cut down to turn into sugar-cane fields. Volunteer-run and social media savvy, the members of UNES are a testament to the strength of grassroots activists who, collectively, can make huge changes for all of us.

The impact of deforestation

Mangrove trees grow in tropical coastal regions, as they have the ability to survive in both salt and freshwater. Mangrove swamps provide a home for marine life, while offering protection from storms, and preventing coastal erosion and flooding from the sea and rivers.

Alvaro told us: 'The mangrove...allows us to survive. We find reptiles, crabs and fish. It's a very important place for fishermen – 80 per cent of the population in this region survive from fishing. The mangroves are really important, too, because they're a protective barrier. They lessen the impact of flooding...and provide a refuge for so many animals.'

Fighting back

The Istaten Association started a forest ranger committee to protect the mangrove forest and its ecosystem, and raise local awareness of the situation in 2012.

The first deforestation threat that Alvaro and his team faced down was from a local farm about to cut down 86.5 *manzanas* of mangrove forest to grow sugar cane. With support and training from UNES, the association helped the community lobby for the protection of the mangroves.

Alvaro explained the vital role UNES – with your support – plays in making this happen: '[UNES'] support is very important. They give us everything. They give us food and legal advice. They cover transportation costs when we have to mobilise. In all the different areas, UNES has been fundamental.'

A message to campaigners around the world

Alvaro and his team demonstrate the power of community action. The impact of their advocacy work is not only being felt in their local community, but on a national level. Alvaro is keen that their work inspires people further afield to protect the environment.

'I urge you, as our friends from around the world, to make an effort to defend and protect nature. We started as a committee and now we've grown into an association that has had successes in the environmental realm. We're not just defending some ecosystems, we're defending nature as a whole.'

UNES could not continue its work without your support. Giving as an individual or a church congregation helps people in El Salvador to adapt to the challenges of a changing climate.

£320 could pay for a Climate Change Awareness Day in 10 communities, raising awareness of climate change and its impact among young people and women.

£32 could provide a series of weather bulletins on conditions across the region to help a community prepare for storms.

£23 could pay for the fuel to take 35 community leaders to a leadership workshop.



Deforestation of mangroves in San Francisco Menéndez.