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Coca Is Not the Enemy

To most Americans, the word *cocaine* evokes images of the illegal white powder and those who abuse it, yet the word has a different meaning to the coca farmers of South America.

Erythroxylum coca, or the tropical coca plant, has been grown in the mountainous regions of Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru since 3000 BC. The coca plant has been valued for centuries by indigenous South American cultures for its ability to alleviate pain and combat fatigue and hunger (Forero, “Bolivia’s Knot”). Just as many Americans drink coffee every day, natives of the Andes Mountains chew coca leaves and drink coca tea for a mild stimulant effect. Easy to grow, not addictive, and offering many medicinal benefits, coca is part of the everyday lives of the people in this region.

Aside from its medicinal and cultural value, coca is also important to Andean farmers economically, as a result of a long history of illegal drug trafficking. Dried coca leaves mixed with lime paste or alkaline ashes produce cocaine—a highly addictive substance that delivers euphoric sensations accompanied by hallucinations (Gibson). Supplying the coca for the illegal drug trade accounts for a tremendous portion of the Bolivian, Peruvian, and Colombian economies. In Bolivia, for example, it has been estimated that coca makes up anywhere from one-third to three-quarters of the country’s total exports (Kurtz-Phelan 108). In 1990 the Bolivian president even asserted that 70% of the Bolivian gross domestic product was due to the coca trade (Kurtz-Phelan 108).

Despite such statistics, for most farmers in the region growing coca is about making a living and supporting their families, not becoming wealthy or furthering the use of cocaine. More than half of Bolivians live in poverty, with a large portion earning less than \$2 a day (U.S. Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Div. 2). In the words of one coca farmer, “‘The U.S. says ‘Coca is cocaine, coca is cocaine,’ but it isn’t,’ says Argote. ‘Coca is the tree of the poor’” (Schultz and Gordon). Can we reduce cocaine trafficking without eliminating coca? Evo Morales, the current president of Bolivia, believes the answer is “yes” and has advocated a “zero cocaine, not zero coca” policy in his country. This policy would allow native Andeans to maintain their cultural practices, boost South American economies, and channel coca into a new market, away from cocaine traffickers. For all of these reasons, the Morales plan should become a model for other coca-growing countries.

Morales gained recognition for his “zero cocaine, not zero coca” program during his 2005 presidential campaign. His policy aims to legalize the coca crop but not the cocaine that is produced from that crop. He also expressed a desire to get the United Nations to rescind its 1961 convention declaring coca an illegal narcotic. In December 2005, Morales won the election with more than 50% of the vote, and he made history as the first indigenous Bolivian president (Forero, “Coca”).

Morales’s plan promotes the best interests of the Andean farmers and offers multiple economic and social benefits. First, South American countries would be able to export non-narcotic coca-based products, such as soaps, toothpaste, tea, alcohol, and candies (Logan). Products like these are already being produced for local use in Bolivia, and manufacturers would like to seek an international market for them. These new coca products would stimulate the Bolivian economy and put money in the pockets of coca growers to support their families, rather

than in the pockets of the drug lords. Second, if the market for legal coca were to increase, farmers would be able to make a legal living from a crop that has long been a mainstay of their culture. With legal coca products, the indigenous people of the Andes would not have to sacrifice their way of life. Finally, an increase in the demand for legal coca products might also result in less cocaine being trafficked illegally around the world, since more of the raw material for cocaine will be used for new legal coca products.

In order to understand the benefits of Morales's plan, we must first investigate the failures of the alternatives. The United States has been waging various "wars on drugs" for decades, spending up to \$1 billion trying to control cocaine trafficking from South America (Forero, "Bolivia's Knot"). In the 1990s the United States shifted its efforts from fighting the trafficking of cocaine to eliminating the source of the drug—the coca plants growing in Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru. Coca eradication has taken two main forms. In Bolivia, bands of soldiers move through the countryside using machetes to hack away coca plants (see Fig. 1). This process is slow and dangerous, and there have been reports of human rights abuses and extreme violence against the peasant farmers who grow coca (Gordon 16). In nearby Colombia, the United States funded aerial fumigation programs to poison the coca fields; native farmers complain that the herbicide used in the fumigation is causing health problems and environmental pollution ("US Weighs Cost"). By destroying coca plants in Colombia, the United States has "left 500 million people poorer" (Padgett 8). It is unclear whether fumigation results in any benefit, since farmers respond by moving farther and farther into the jungle and replanting their crops there (Otis). Such dense areas are harder to see and therefore harder to fumigate effectively.



Fig. 1. Manual eradication of a coca field in Chapare, Bolivia. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Another U.S. effort encouraged farmers to replace coca with other crops, like coffee, bananas, and pineapples. Alternative crop programs seem like a good idea because they will get rid of the coca farms, but they have their own drawbacks. First, as coca grower Leonida Zurita-Vargas noted in her 2003 *New York Times* opinion column, transporting heavy fruits like pineapples from the mountainous coca-growing regions is expensive and difficult. Second, growers are seldom willing to give up coca farming because they can make more money by selling coca than any other crop. Even with government incentives for alternative cropping, coca remains more profitable, a big inducement for poor farmers who can barely support their families and send their children to school. The *Houston Chronicle* reports that even in areas where farmers have planted alternative crops, the farmers are being lured back to the coca plant by larger profits (Otis). One coca farmer asserted that by growing coca, he could “make ten times what he would make by growing pineapples or yucca” (Harman). Ultimately, alternative cropping means less coca production overall, which will drive up coca prices and encourage more farmers to abandon their alternative crops and return to coca.

After decades of legislation and various eradication programs, cocaine trafficking remains

a major problem. The most recent data show that coca cultivation throughout the region remains steady (see Fig. 2). Contrary to dire predictions, there has been no major spike in Bolivian coca production since Morales was elected at the end of 2005. Furthermore, critics argue that cocaine is no less available in the United States than before eradication began, and street prices remain low (Forero, “Colombia’s Coca”). Instead of curbing cocaine trafficking, America’s war on drugs has turned out to be a war against the peasants of Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru.

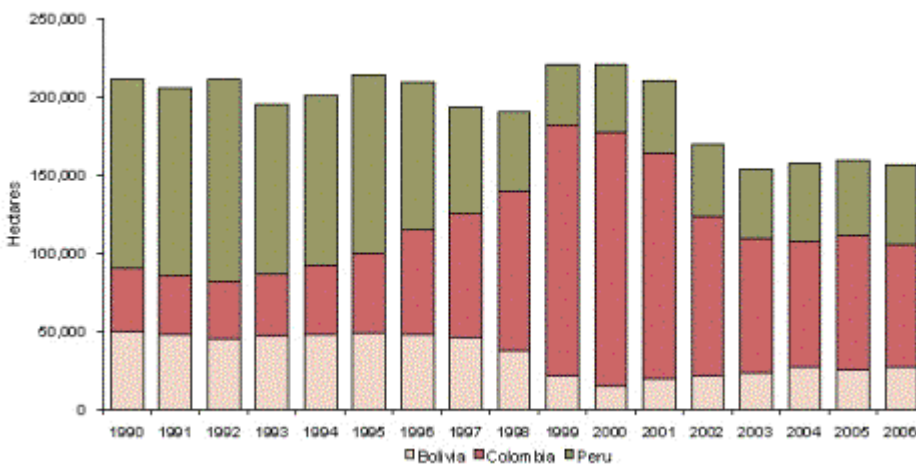


Fig. 2. Coca cultivation in the Andean region, 1990-2006. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Throughout the years, the various wars on drugs have failed to produce effective results for the United States. The programs of alternative cropping and eradication did not succeed due to the legislators’ inability to see life through the eyes of the coca farmers—something Evo Morales is able to do. In 2006, Morales addressed the UN General Assembly and waved a coca leaf in the air: “[This] is a green coca leaf, it is not the white of cocaine. [T]his coca leaf represents Andean culture; it is a coca leaf that represents the environment and the hope of our peoples” (McCausland). Through his bold program of “zero cocaine, not zero coca,” Morales aims to improve the lives of Andean farmers and the economies of South American countries, while still remaining committed to controlling the illegal drug trade. Morales’s example illustrates that it is

time to work *with* coca farmers, rather than against them.

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