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## FEATURE-Mexico struggles to preserve ancient ruins

22 Oct 2004 12:00:53 GMT  
Source: Reuters

By Anahi Rama

MONTE ALBAN, Mexico, Oct 22 (Reuters) - The majestic pyramids and temples of the ancient Zapotec kingdom of Monte Alban sit spectacularly atop a hill in Mexico's southern state of Oaxaca.

More than 1,000 years ago, Monte Alban was the bustling capital of a pre-Colombian realm, one of Mexico's oldest civilizations, and an early exponent of writing. It is one of Mexico's top archeological attractions, visited by people from the world over.

But, like many such sites in Mexico, it is underfunded for investigation, embroiled in land conflicts and being spoiled by the sheer number of visitors.

UNESCO puts Mexico in the world's top 10 nations for archeological locations, with 172 of its 32,000 sites open to the public. Experts believe twice that number are waiting to be discovered.

Mexico spends \$160 million per year on the National History and Anthropology Institute, or INAH, which is in charge of preserving archeological sites.

But the bulk of the budget is used for operational costs. Just \$17.5 million is earmarked for conservation and investigation.

### PERU DOES IT BETTER

By contrast, 81 sites of the Andean Inca civilization are open to the public in Peru. The Ministry of Culture there, responsible for protection of the ruins, has a \$17 million budget, of which \$11 million is for investigation and preservation.

For Nelly Robles, director of Monte Alban, the problems in Mexico are a vicious circle -- more investigations at more sites means more money is needed for conservation because ruins often need to be restored after the disruption of a dig.

"We would like much more resources for archeological investigation," Robles said. "Unfortunately, at these sites almost any investigation becomes a problem of conservation," she said.

Preservation of Mexico's pre-Hispanic heritage is further threatened by the country's numerous land conflicts, and endemic poverty in the countryside.

At Monte Alban, where the ruins are spread out on 4,940 acres (2,000 hectares) of land that stretch far beyond the frescoed tombs and ball courts visited by tourists, poor farmers frequently occupy parts of the site to plant crops.

But more worrying for the archeological authorities are cases like the giant Chichen Itza Mayan ruins in the Yucatan peninsula.

There, the government may be forced to heavily compensate people who claim to own land within the boundaries of the ruins and the cost of settling land claims further drains resources that could have gone into investigation.

"Just maintaining all the sites is costly, but there are many sites that belong to somebody and that is a more important problem," said Alejandro Martinez, head of archeology at INAH.

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Martinez says some sites have a land value of tens of millions of dollars.

Even tourists bring problems to Mexico's ruins. While millions of tourists visit every year, the money they bring in covers only part of the costs of keeping the ruins in good shape.

#### TOURIST EROSION

At Monte Alban, traffic from 8,000 tourists a day has forced the authorities to close of some tombs to stop erosion.

The tombs are one of the ancient city's top attractions as the Zapotecs were the only Mexican people to bury their dead inside their homes.

For archaeologist Miguel Angel Cruz, new excavations at Monte Alban would reveal more about the Zapotec culture and the later civilizations who lived there.

"In Monte Alban, only 15 percent of the site is excavated, even in the Maya regions, which have been well investigated, sites like Palenque have only excavated three of 13 square kilometers (one of three square miles)," he said.

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