To: Dr. Mary Hedberg, Dean of the College of Arts and Behavioral Sciences  
SVSU Office of International Programs

From: Beth Jorgensen  
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Subject: Exploratory visit to Ciudad Romero, El Salvador

Dr. Boles and Dr. Jorgensen express their deep appreciation to SVSU for funding this exploratory visit. We trust that this report will demonstrate that it was put to good use, and that a strong potential exists for students to engage in a very unique, globally important, and encouraging study-abroad experience.

We attended a delegation of 13 people to the “peace zone” in Bajo Lempe area of El Salvador, which encompasses some 35,000 low-income farmers, fishers, and community leaders in ninety communities (Figure 1). We observed their internationally-recognized model of organic, sustainable, and self-sufficient rural development.

**Background**

During El Salvador’s ten-year civil war, some 300 peasant refugees fled their mountain plots in a remote area to endure ten years of harsh exile in a UN-protected deep-jungle camp in Panama. As part of the 1992 peace accords, they re-gained land in the Bajo Lempe region of El Salvador, specifically what would become the community of **Ciudad Romero**. However, a combination of difficulties -- annual flooding, government efforts to retake the land combined with conflicts with former Army soldiers settled nearby, and not least of all grinding poverty -- led Ciudad Romero leaders to innovate. In 1996 they established **La Coordinadora del Bajo Lempa y Bahia de Jiquilisco** (The Coordinating Network of the Lower Lempa River and Bay of Jiquilisco) -- or simply “La Coordinadora.” Initially composed of thirteen communities, the organization has grown to include about 35,000 low-income rural farmers and fishers in ninety communities (see green-shaded zone, Figure 1), each organized into local clusters that elect representatives to the general assembly, the **La Asociación Mangle** (The Mangrove Association), which is the legal governmental counterpart to La Coordinadora. This popular democratic movement has diverse leadership, ranging from former FMLN guerillas, former Salvadoran Armed Forces, women leaders, as well as Catholics and evangelicals.

The delegation visit is organized and sponsored by the **Foundation for Self-Sufficiency in Central America** (FSSCA), a non-profit also formed in 1996 that has worked in close partnership and solidarity with La Coordinadora with financial, technical and moral support. FSSCA annually provides more than $100,000 to La Coordinadora for general operations, organizes delegations, and raises funds. Through their partnership, the community now boasts a system of independent sustainable farms called “fincas,” an agricultural education and extension program, a UNESCO Biosphere Preserve, new shrimp farms, a cashew processing plant, a radio station, a holistic youth program, and a visual arts program for children. They have increased living standards, reduced crime and social conflict, and helped people enrich their lives culturally as well as materially. The organizations also distribute long-term aid to victims of hurricanes and earthquakes with projects that build stronger houses, potable water systems, efficient wood stoves, and composting toilets. Some of La Coordinadora’s accomplishments include:

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**Figure 1**: The grey-shaded southern area is the Zone of Peace; the green-shaded area is where La Coordinadora’s 90 communities are located.
• Quick and effective disaster response following Hurricane Mitch (1998), the 2001 earthquake, and Hurricane Stan (2005)
• Construction of 90 homes and a shelter that withstood the 2001 earthquake
• Environmental protection in the Bay of Jiquilisco
• Development of local leadership through youth programs (sports, health education, art, drama, and leadership activities)
• Creation of a democratic, representative organization in over 90 communities
• Development of:
  o 1160 community organic farms, called fincas
  o 12 shrimp farms
  o 450 cottage chicken businesses
• Training of 1,200 small farmers in “green” agriculture techniques
• Establishment of the Zone of Peace
• Successful mediation between rival youth gangs
• Election of municipal governments sensitive to rural needs.

Clearly, the primary aim of this cooperative effort is to meet the material needs and aspirations of the area’s residents in the most direct manner, while increasing their ability to influence public policy in ways which bolster the economic security and environmental sustainability of the region and the country at large. This aim bears three aspects:

**Organizational Strength.** La Coordinadora encourages collaborative problem-solving through elected community organizations, and works through these elected bodies to offer schools for community leaders, including the youth program, which is aimed at providing future leaders. Community leaders organize residents for building and infrastructure projects, for negotiation of fair prices for locally produced goods, and for disseminating key information on economically and environmentally sustainable practices. With the assistance of La Coordinadora, local community boards also work to establish legal identities for the municipal communities in the locale.

Key to their organizational strength is the radio station, which announces community events, fosters community solidarity through public service and personal announcements, broadcasts public service messages and entertainment, and serves as a public warning system in the event of inclement weather and other hazards.

**Diversified Production.** Food production engages both agriculture and aquaculture. Agricultural outreach provides organic supplies, such as compost, saplings, seedlings, seed, and other necessities through a “green credit” program which requires farmers to return seed for the seed bank, supply materials for composting, as well as contribute volunteer hours in assisting other farmers. To ensure an adequate diet and to protect
against catastrophic crop losses, the program works to diversify farm plots, encouraging organic practices, complementary planting (the co-planting of crops which protect and nurture each other), and permaculture (the co-production of annual and perennial food crops in a permanent, micro-ecosystems).

In addition to plant sources of food, the agricultural program works with farmers to raise cattle, sheep, turkeys, goats, and laying hens. A sizeable shrimp farming operation is also underway near the estuary, and efforts to produce tank-grown tilapia have begun.

**Environmental Protection.** Diversified crop production is aimed at environmental benefits as well, among them the reduction of pesticide and herbicide use, which has contributed to kidney problems and other ailments in the local population. Sustainable fishing practices are also encouraged and fishing areas are monitored by resource guardians. Residents also engage in practices to protect three local watersheds from agricultural and industrial pollutants, including manure; to address climate change concerns through alternative fuel sources and increased fuel efficiency; to reduce deforestation through sustainable agriculture and efficient use of wood resources; and to restore the mangroves, which provides habitat for sea turtles, a traditional source of human sustenance, nourishment for the estuary and fish stocks within the estuary, and protection from flooding caused by tropical storms.

**Purpose, Vision, Mission, and Strategic Objectives**

**Purpose**

To gradually and progressively transform the communities and people of the Bajo Lempa and Bay of Jiquilisco, achieving better living conditions.

**Vision**

To establish a democratic, autonomous, supportive, self-sufficient organization capable of producing qualitative and material change in the communities of the Bajo Lempa and Bay of Jiquilisco.

**Mission**

To consolidate the collective and individual organization, participation, capacities, and abilities in order to advance the process of transformation in the communities of the Bajo Lempa and Bay of Jiquilisco.

**Strategic Objective**

To strengthen and amplify the local and farmers groups through a gradual and progressive process of building cultural, social, and economic relationships in the communities of the Bajo Lempa and Bay of Jiquilisco.

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### Values

- Solidarity
- Legitimacy
- Equality
- Courage
- Integrity
- Responsibility
- Self-Management
- Tenacity

### Principles

- Democratic Participation
- Build on Experience
- Respect for Human Dignity
- Community Autonomy

**Our Visit**

While residents of the Bajo Lempe region experience various levels of poverty, our stay was comfortable, safe, and secure. Upon landing in San Salvador, Dr. Boles and Dr. Jorgensen, who arrived on different
days, were both greeted by a friendly driver sent by the FSSCA and safely delivered to their hotel in a friendly neighborhood. Hotel accommodations at the Arbol del Fuego were well suited to North American standards, providing a private bath, wholesome food, and bottled water. The following morning, Professor Boles and Jorgensen returned by hired van to the airport where we met with the remainder of our delegation and representatives of FSSCA, who provided van transportation to Ciudad Romero.

At Ciudad Romero, we stayed in a gated compound consisting of a dormitory (Figure 2), greenhouse complex, and office building, which were attended and protected 24-hours a day by local residents. While the gates and security personnel added an extra degree of safety for us and our belongings, the hospitable atmosphere of the community suggested that these precautions were largely unnecessary. Communal flush toilets, showers, and hand laundry facilities were available in the dormitory building and quality bottled drinking water was available 24 hours a day. Fresh bed linens and towels were provided; visitors were asked to provide personal mosquito netting. A medical clinic exists nearby, which offers prompt, inexpensive, high-quality service, and the staff was well-equipped to apply first aid.

Daily breakfast and lunch were provided by a host family that provided high-quality meals prepared according to North American hygienic standards. Our evening meal was prepared and served in the community dining hall and was plentiful and delicious.

Beginning Sunday evening and continuing until Friday noon, activities consisted of meetings with local officials, visits to farms, shrimp ponds, food production facilities, an art studio, radio station, a theater exercise with the youth group, observations of alternative technologies and discussions of issues at various locations. Our translators were very capable, making each experience highly educational. Following our final activities on Friday, we traveled by van to the Hotel Pacific Paradise La Costa del Sol for two days of ocean side relaxation. Our experience indicates that FSSCA, La Coordinadora, and Ciudad Romero can provide a safe, enjoyable and very educational experience for SVSU students.

**Itinerary**

**Sunday, July 5:**
Tour of Ciudad Romero and historical overview from co-founder Don Jose Antonio.  
*Highlight:* A moving narrative of the Church mural depicting the flight of the original 300 peasants from the civil war to the Panamanian jungle with UN protection and their return to El Salvador in 1992.

**Monday, July 6:**
Meeting with La Coordinadora Board for an overview of their organization and projects.  
Site visits  
- Cashew processing facility (Figures 3-8)  
- Radio station
• Youth drama workshop. Current projects include:
  o Illustrating the roles and responsibilities of youth toward their community
  o Teaching about the benefits of sustainable agriculture.
Future projects may include family planning education in conjunction with the radio station.

Figure 3: Spent cashew shells are used as biofuel to fire autoclaves used to roast nuts in the shell.

Figures 4 and 5: The autoclave is operated in an open-walled shelter to reduce heat in buildings.

Figures 6 and 7: Cashews are shelled by hand, using a kick pedal to reduce pressure on the hands. The cashew processing facility provides income for the families of 16 women and 1 man. Workers in the facility may earn up to $10/day, 60% more than earned by government workers on road crews.

Figure 8: After a final light roasting in a stainless steel gas-fired oven, the remaining cashew husks are removed by hand before vacuum packaging.

Tuesday, July 7:  Site visits:
  • Tour of organic, sustainable farms (Figures 9-13).
  • Boat tour to mangroves and turtle hatchery (Figures 14-19).
Livestock is allowed to roam freely through cropland to reduce grasses and weeds. Cattle are chiefly used to provide dairy products, but may also be sold for meat.

Farmers integrate a diversity of crops to ensure against devastating crop loss as well as a nutritious diet.

La Coordinadora not only trains farmers in sustainable agriculture, they also provide micro-credit up to $2500 over 5 years at 8% interest to enable families to establish their own 2-hectare fincas, or farms. Credit may go to the purchase of land, livestock, seed, seedlings, or equipment. The seed and seedling bank is also available to farmers who repay by returning from the product more seeds and seedlings than they consume. They may repay loans earlier with no penalties and are expected to assume responsibility for sharing their knowledge and results with their neighbors and for providing organic waste material for composting.

Farmers integrate annual crops with perennial crops to exchange nutrients and to take advantage of shade cover, vertical vining, and other mutual benefits.

Grassland is cut by hand with a machete to provide bedding and forage for livestock. Grasses serve as “green manure,” adding nutrients to soil where food crops will be grown in another season.

Solar panels are used to produce electricity for operating pumps in drip irrigation systems.
The El Salvadoran mangrove, or *mangle*, is one of the world’s largest remaining marine forests, covering over 10,000 hectares. The endangered Hawksbill sea turtle, which calls the mangrove home, lays around 100 eggs per clutch, but only 1/1000 survive to adulthood. Hawksbill turtles must reach an age of 8-10 years to reproduce.

**Figure 14:** Deforestation for residential and resort development, as well as for fuel, has taken a great toll on the mangroves.

**Figure 15:** Turtle hatcheries have been established to revitalize populations of 4 sea turtle varieties, especially the endangered Hawksbill Turtle. Egg harvesters have established a price of $.25/egg.

**Figure 16:** The guardian of the turtle hatchery lives on site, far from the nearest community. Supplies are delivered every 2 weeks.

**Figure 17:** Communities along the estuaries depend on the mangroves, or marine forests, for fish, crab, and turtle stocks, protection from tropical storms, and filtering of contaminants from local watersheds.

**Figures 18 and 19:** Youth are involved in all aspects of the community. To the left, 16-year-old Douglas, the youngest of the mangrove guardians, keeps records of the day’s trip. To the right, 19-year-old David serves as youth leader for a variety of projects.
Wednesday, July 8

Site visits

- Permaculture finca (Figures 20-27)
- Boat tour to community in UNESCO Bio-preserve community, Monte Cristo (Figures 28-29)

**Figure 20 and 21:** La Coordinadora encourages women to establish independent fincas, regardless of marital status, to ensure economic stability for families. Delme’s farm, a model of permaculture, provides well for her family and ensures that her son will not have to work in chemical-laden industrial agriculture, where children as young as 14 have reported severe kidney problems and other disorders allegedly due to insecticide and herbicide poisoning. Delme’s crops include lemons, 4 varieties of limes, papayas, mangos, pineapples, coconuts, bananas, and plantains.

**Figure 22:** The organic fincas exist side by side with industrial agriculture, which prevents farmers from meeting USDA organic standards due to pesticide and herbicide drift.

**Figure 23:** Delme protects her crops from pests by covering the fruit with plastics bags, which she recycles for use next season.

**Figure 24:** Hair sheep are grown for meat rather than for wool.
The holistic and diverse agriculture encouraged by La Coordinadora has the potential not only to provide a healthy diet for the family, but to provide much needed cash. For one, farmers save money by delinking from dependence on petro-chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides, by improving their diets, their health, and maintaining healthier top soils, while the diversity of plant crops and livestock serves as a hedge against a single crop failure, an advantage not afforded the mono crop farmer. As many citizens of the United States move toward consuming more local diets, this model holds potential for Michigan farmers as well.

Figure 25-27: Other livestock includes chicken, for eggs and meat; turkeys, primarily for meat; and goats for dairy and, occasionally, for meat.

Figure 28: The community of Monte Cristo has depended on the estuary for sustenance for many generations. Devastated by Hurricane Mitch, they have rebuilt a thriving fishing community, working hard to protect their resources from illegal activities such as bomb fishing.

Figure 29: While many fishers now have access to motorized vessels, many others continue to rely on hand carved canoes.

Thursday, July 9: Site visits
- Rays of Light Art Project class (Figures 30-31)
- Potable water project/The Solidarity Community (Figures 32-35)
- Shrimp farms (Figures 36-42)
Figures 30 and 31: The Rays of Light art project was established in 2002 to encourage cultural and personal expression. Student work is for sale on site and in the gallery at La Coordinadora headquarters. Select students have also exhibited in Austin, Texas and in San Salvador at the Spanish embassy.

Reaching out to survivors of Hurricane Mitch (1998) and the 2001 earthquakes, La Coordinadora has been instrumental in developing a Solidarity Community among villages in outlying areas. They have assisted in building housing, developing potable water systems, constructing composting toilets, and installing more fuel efficient stoves to reduce lung disease and deforestation. During the first three years, 75 families were provided with housing plots, support poles, and roofing materials. After 7 years they acquired walls and enclosed 9 houses, and during this last year closed of the last house.

Figure 32: The potable water system provides pure water for drinking, bathing, and domestic chores. Bacteria levels are so low that chlorination is not recommended. Before the system was installed, residents complained of stomach ailments and had to haul water for miles.
Figure 33: More efficient stoves with taller chimneys allow families to burn smaller logs, which may be gathered rather than harvested from growing trees. The stoves also allow users to cook rice, beans, and tortillas simultaneously, a major advantage over traditional stoves.

Figure 34: Composting toilets provide a sanitary means of human waste disposal while producing organic fertilizer. Two units exist side by side, the first for current use, the second for processing the compost, which takes about 6 months. Safe compost is removed by sliding a loose block from the base of the chamber.

Figure 35: Carmen, a community leader, spoke proudly of the ways in which the community has benefited through cooperation: “We are poor, but we also like to work and help out wherever we can.”

Figure 36: Workers shore up channels for inflow and outflow of water from the estuary into the shrimp ponds.

Figure 37: Large shrimp ponds are regulated according to tidal flows.
Figure 38-40: An old school bus was dismantled to make use of its engine to pump water for shrimp pond aeration.

Figure 41: Shrimp is harvested with nets.

Figure 42: Shrimp require about 1 month to reach market size.
Friday, July 10: Site visits

- Greenhouse complex (Figures 43-44)
- Tilapia farm (Figures 45-46)

Travel to resort for relaxation (Figures 47-49)

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**Figure 43:** The greenhouse complex at Ciudad Romero provides seedlings and rich compost, called *Bokashia*, for area farmers.

**Figure 44:** Permaculture requires that each plant in the plot serve multiple purposes, including food, medicine, mulch, and “green manure.” In this plot, woody fruit bearing plants coexist with leafy medicinal and vegetable plants. The yellow-flowering ground cover provides mulch and herbal medicine, while the caladium soaks up excess water during rainy periods. Hilling of vegetable plants also keeps produce dry during heavy rains.

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**Figure 45:** Pond-grown tilapia require about 6 months to reach market size.

**Figure 46:** Tanks are aerated by means of perforated irrigation tubes.

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After a long, intense week learning about sustainable communities, we were rewarded with a visit to a comfortable beach resort.
Sunday July 12: Héctor Hernandez, an El Salvadorian native on the delegation, invited Professor Boles to visit his relatives in San Salvador, who in turn suggested he cancel his hotel reservations and stay at his brother and niece’s home.

Figures 47-49: The delegation relaxes at Hotel Pacific Paradise La Costa del Sol

Figures 50-51: Patricia Hernandez, her mother, and her boyfriend Alex took Dr. Boles to Puerta del Diablo. According to Lonely Planet: “Once an ominous place - during the [civil war] this was an execution point, the cliffs offering easy disposal of the bodies...During the course of the 12-year war, an estimated 75,000 people were killed” (Lonely Planet, 2006).
Figure 52: Today Puerta del Diablo is a recreational area where people roam the step paths for spectacular views and may pay $2 to swing along the zip-line from one side of the ravine to the other. Though barely visible, one can see people standing on the center column rock formation and the zip line cable.

Monday July 13: Patricia Hernandez took Professor Boles to political sites important in the history of El Salvador’s civil war.

- Hospital la Divina Providencia (Figures 53-54)
- Centro Historico Monseñor Romero (Figures 55-56)

Figures 53-55: Chapel on the Hospital grounds where Monsenor Romero was assassinated while giving mass on March 24, 1980, touching off the civil war.
Figures 55-56: Universidad Centroamerica José Simónón Cañas (UCA), where Centro Monseñor Romero is located. The small but well organized center pays homage to Romero, to six Jesuit priests, who along with their maid and her daughter, were brutally slain in 1989, and to four US nun raped and killed in 1980, as depicted in the films “Romero” and “Salvador.”

Sunday, July 14: Patricia’s brother, his friend, Patricia, and Dr. Boles visited Mayan anthropological sites:
- Joya de Cerén (Figures 57-59)
- San Andreas (Figures 60-61)
- Tazumal

They also visited Santa Ana, a town of colonial architecture and bustling tourist-oriented markets.

Figures 57-59: Joya de Ceren, a Pre-colombian site in El Salvador, was an agricultural village abandoned in the year 250AD due to the eruption of a volcano (now Lake Ilopango) and re-inhabited in 400AD. “This excavation gives a unique insight into the daily lives of Mayan farmer in a village 1400 years ago (seventh century), and is the only known site of its type in El Salvador. It is one of the most important archaeological sites in Mesoamerica because it shows what life was like for ordinary people” (Lonely Planet, 2006).
Figure 60-61: San Andreas was established by Maya people between A.D. 600-900. About 12,000 people lived in the area and the city held sway over the Valle de Zapotitlán. While not the most impressive ruins in Central America, the valley, which is visibly circumscribed by steep hills and mountains, offers striking visual evidence raised in theories of city-state formation taught to students of Cultural Anthropology.
Figures 62-64: Tazumel is said to be the most important anthropological site in El Salvador. The area served as a port and trading center for cacao, obsidian, and ceramics, and the aesthetic influences range from the Olmec, Teotihuacán to Pipal. As with San Andreas and Joya de Ceren, the main interruption to human settlement occurred in A.D. 260, when the Ilopango volcano erupted.

Figure 65: The market at Santa Tecla.

Figure 66: A resident having his tennis shoes polished.

**Green Corps: El Salvador**

The Zone of Peace in El Salvador offers the possibility of a very special study-abroad opportunity for SVSU students. The development of “Green Corps: El Salvador” will provide an opportunity for both students and faculty from various disciplines to learn how their own specialties have been integrated into a holistic project of sustainable social transformation in rural El Salvador. They may see firsthand how specialized knowledge may be used in their careers not merely for individual or family material advancement, but for integrated community development that enhances lives culturally as well as materially. Chemistry students learning about vermiculture could discover how wildlife protection, youth development projects, and micro-credit programs are an indispensable dimension of sustainable development. Conversely, business students could not only learn about micro-credit operations that contribute locally to the achievement of equality globally, but they may locate such endeavors as only one necessary facet of community development, thereby expanding their understanding of the possible social purposes of their field. Cultural anthropology students may compare ancient and modern organic and
sustainable agriculture techniques while discovering the importance of a holistic approach to community
development that does not create hierarchy, as with ancient systems, but generates equality and
sustainability. And Spanish-language students may improve their linguistic and cultural skills as they
interact with translators, residents, and other students across these specializations and projects. In other
words, interdisciplinary study-abroad could potentially deepen students’ understanding of their
specializations while providing grounds to realize the benefits of a holistic and integrated approach to
social change and development.

Dr. Jorgensen is developing a PTW curriculum for Summer 2010, which will encompass writing for the
non-profit sector, intercultural communication, multimedia, and environmental writing. As an active
member of the Green Cardinal research team, Jorgensen is developing a partnership with Juan Luna, head
of the Agronomy team in Ciudad Romero, to employ their El Salvador facilities as a remote laboratory in
biofuels, hydroponics, aquaponics, and vermiculture. Engaging with this partnership will be a core
component of her curriculum.

She is also interested in involving students in a documentary project about the mangrove restoration
project. As Professional and Technical Writing is an interdisciplinary field, Jorgensen anticipates that the
course will appeal to students in life sciences, engineering, and social sciences as well a PTW majors and
minors. Jorgensen has broad experience in service learning including environmental cleanup projects,
environmental outreach, and community development. She is communicating with staff at FSSCA to
develop service options for students.

Dr. Boles will appeal to a variety of students from different disciplines who share a common interest in
sustainable social change. These may include art, anthropology, business, chemistry, nursing, sociology,
and social work students. The wide range of economic and agricultural projects in the Zone of Peace also
afford opportunities for service learning. Toward these ends, Drs. Boles and Jorgensen are committed to
improving their skills in Spanish.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to engage in this exploratory trip to El Salvador. We are pleased
to report that FSSCA and La Coordinadora offer exciting opportunities for SVSU students. If you have
further questions, please contact Dr. Boles at boles@svsu.edu or Dr. Jorgensen at ejorgens@svsu.edu.

**Illustration Credits**

Figure 1.

Floral photos. Beth Jorgensen.

Figures 2-46. Beth Jorgensen.

Figure 47. Alex.

Figures 48-49. Beth Jorgensen.

Figures 50-52. Alex.

Figure 53. http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/bib_autor/Romero/graf/asesinato/asesinato1.jpg

Figure 54. http://www.panoramio.com/photos/original/20679435.jpg

Figure 55. http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_5BV_YADVD7o/SGV4dSjTxOI/AAAAAAAAABnM/rTJmJLl7jVQ
Figure 56. http://tbn2.google.com/images?q=tbn:Ko3-nVMKYWbnfM:
http://cache.daylife.com/imageserve/01953BJ56B6sC/610x.jpg

Figure 57. http://img483.imageshack.us/img483/3856/12fw6.jpg

Figure 58. http://www.elsalvadorvacations.com.sv/fotos/imagen_cont20368.jpg

Figure 59. http://farm1.static.flickr.com/207/509342653_356e66295e.jpg?v=0

Figure 60. http://online.sfsu.edu/~kbruhns/cihuatan/small%20ceren%204.jpg

Figure 61. http://www.panoramio.com/user/190152


Figure 63-66. Elson Boles.