Feature No. 18: EcoCreto

When EcoCreto's co-founder, Nestor de Buen, speaks with a client for the first time, he brings a piece of his product, a patented water pervious concrete, to the meeting. "The best thing that I can do is to pour water over a piece of EcoCreto and let it run through, because the client needs to see it work to understand its potential," de Buen says. With major clients, such as Walmart, TV Azteca and the Mexican Government, you might be surprised to learn that EcoCreto is run by a scientist, Jaime Grau and an architect, de Buen, who are driven by a desire to use business principles in order to save the city which they call home.

Mexico City is built over an ancient lake, yet in recent years has found itself facing a serious water scarcity problem. This is due in part to the city's drainage system, built to prevent flooding, which directs the area's water more than 250 miles away into the ocean. The result: Mexico City is sinking and its water tables are running dry. Government officials estimate that more than 95 percent of the city's water is not returned to the region's aquifers and in some places the water tables are dropping three feet per year. When de Buen and his co-founders discovered EcoCreto in the lab, they thought their product might be the perfect solution for this environmental challenge.

EcoCreto combines traditional concrete with a patented additive that hardens into a porous, strong surface. But, as de Buen is quick to note, EcoCreto is not only a construction material, but a system to return water to the local aquifer. In fact, for each square foot of EcoCreto pavement up to 45 gallons of water is returned to the aquifer per year. Altogether, EcoCreto's system costs less than laying conventional concrete and sometimes even asphalt. It also reduces repair costs by avoiding much of the damage common to non-porous surfaces, saving the client money over the long term.

As EcoCreto emerges as a simple, inexpensive solution, other countries are expressing interest in the technology. Urban areas around the world are facing unprecedented water problems. More than 2.3 billion people live in water-stressed areas, and these numbers are set to increase as population, agriculture and human activity alter water cycles and supplies. EcoCreto has received calls from more than 40 countries in Latin America, Asia, North America and Europe. In fact, the company has an affiliate in the U.S. that has been successfully selling the product for a number of years.

While the company is driven by a hard bottom line, de Buen isn't shy about his motivations: "When someone invites me to talk about EcoCreto, I spend most of my time talking about the water problem, because it's what really scares me. I think of my sons and daughters and the kind of country they are going to have if we don't take action." It is this combination of passion, cost-effective problem-solving design and business acumen that is making EcoCreto a 'win' for its buyers and for the environment.

For more information about EcoCreto, visit www.ecocreto.com or see the company's profile at www.new-ventures.org.

Written by Sara Standish for the World Resources Institute ©2006 - The Rising Ventures Series features innovative small and medium businesses (SMEs) in emerging markets that deliver social and/or environmental benefits. These businesses have been identified through the New Ventures (www.new-ventures.org) and Development through Enterprise (www.nextbillion.net) projects. To view other Features in the Series, visit http://www.new-ventures.org/risingventures.