



Watering the desert to save lives

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The drive into the desert on the northern edge of Mexico is a bumpy one. Most of the dirt roads are dry and have begun to crumble. The intense midday makes it difficult not to squint as we look out into the distance.

On the back of our pickup truck is very precious cargo – water. We're carrying a large black jug filled to the top. But the water is not for us.



CHRIS MALLINOS PHOTO/FREE THE CHILDREN

Dozens of large water tanks like these in northern Mexico and Arizona are filled by volunteers under a program called Water For Life, aimed at migrants who need water to survive the heat of the desert.

We stop by a tree in the desert where a blue tank sits conspicuously. On it is printed the word *Agua*—"water" in Spanish. Our hosts pile out, fill the blue tank, then drive on to their next stop.

What we are witnessing is a twice-weekly routine in the struggle to keep people alive in this treacherous environment. And it is the front line of America's immigration debate. Every day 3,000 Mexican and other Latin American migrants begin the gruelling journey on foot through the desert, hoping to make their way to the United States for a better life.

They face heat exhaustion, starvation and severe dehydration. It's impossible to carry the amount of water they will need for the days-long trek, and they know that excess weight will make it difficult to dodge the U.S. Border Patrol. So they bring only bare essentials.

It doesn't take long for many to fall ill. Roughly 300 Mexicans have died so far this year alone, many from a lack of water.

That's why a coalition of community groups in Mexico has established a program called Water For Life. They have placed dozens of large water tanks throughout the Mexico-Arizona desert and use volunteers to ensure they are always full and ready to replenish anyone who needs a drink.

Organizers estimate they have placed 450,000 litres of donated water in the

desert over the past three years, serving untold numbers of desperate migrants.

"Our only objective is to prevent people from dying from a lack of water," says Raul Garcia, the director of a Mexican drug rehab centre involved in Water For Life.

With illegal migration a hot topic in both the U.S. and Mexico, such programs can be interpreted as defiant political statements. Helping illegal migrants, after all, is a touchy issue in both countries.

But Raul doesn't see it that way. For him, the motivation is purely humanitarian. "Helping is a goal in and of itself," he explains. "It's not something you do for a reason. These people need help, so we help them. It's as simple as that."

Not everyone agrees. Water For Life used to also leave tanks on the American side of the desert until anti-migrant vigilantes began cutting them open. Organizers decided to remove the tanks for fear the water would one day be poisoned.

Still, Water For Life continues its work. Volunteers have even set up migrant camps in the Mexican desert, complete with food, medical care and spare clothes.

For program organizers, the work is never-ending. As we finish filling tanks and head back to town, we come across small white crosses lined on either side of a stretch of road. We're told they are in memory of Mexicans who entered the desert and never came out.

But Raul and others at Water For Life remain undeterred. While the migrants' plight is an issue too large for them to solve, they know that by filling those blue tanks every week, they are doing their part.

"This is a way for us to envision a life bigger than we had before," Raul says. "You have to learn to help others to learn to help yourself."

Craig and Marc Kielburger are children's rights activists and co-founded Free The Children, which is active in the developing world. Online: Craig and Marc Kielburger discuss global issues every Monday in the World & Comment section. Take part in the discussion online at www.thestar.com/globalvoices.