

How Haiti hopes to break the cycle of disaster: restoring its lost forests

The stripping away of its trees for fuel has left Haiti vulnerable to floods, landslides and severe storm damage. Now aid agencies are launching efforts to protect the land with a new blanket of greenery. Ed Helmore in Port-au-Prince reports

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On the bare mountains outside Port-au-Prince one of the few remaining trees has been cut into to feed charcoal cooking fires. When the trunk falls, the wood is used for building. Photograph: Daniel Morel/AP

Deep gashes in the steep mountains around Gonaïves are the claw marks of the disasters that strike this north-western coastal city with deadly regularity. They are also Haiti's stigmata: the wounds of a nation caused by the near-complete deforestation of a land

that was once a rich tropical habitat.

But after a hurricane season in which this, the poorest nation in the western hemisphere, was struck by four intense storms triggering flash floods and landslides that took hundreds of lives and created tens of thousands of refugees, richer nations are again being asked to help a country often described as beyond hope. So far, the call for aid has fallen on mainly deaf ears. The UN appealed for \$108m in emergency aid after Gonaïves and another town, Cabaret, were buried under millions of tons of mud, sewage and rock after being hit by storms from mid-August to mid-September. But so far only 40 per cent of that target has been met.

After a relative lull in the disasters afflicting the country - it is more than three weeks since a poorly built school on the outskirts of the capital, Port-au-Prince, collapsed killing 94 pupils and visitors, and more than six months since Prime Minister Jacques-Edouard Alexis was removed after riots over the rising price of food - there are reports of widespread malnutrition in rural areas, as well as two dozen cases of child starvation in the Baie d'Orange region along the south-east coast.

But there is a gathering effort to alleviate Haiti's misery by addressing one of its critical underlying problems - deforestation. Without trees, even moderate rain brings a deluge of soil and rock down on its towns; without trees, there is nothing to hold the soil together for agriculture. This year's mudslides, which killed 300, are not unprecedented: poorly situated Gonaïves was flooded in 2004 by tropical storm Jeanne, killing 3,000. In the north-west, Lake Azuei, on the border with the Dominican Republic, is close to bursting for similar reasons - deforestation and rubbish.

'You can really see here how environmental degradation is tied to extreme poverty,' said Antonio Pereira, the UN Environmental Programme's co-ordinator in Port-au-Prince. 'Deforestation, problems with run-off, waste management and sanitation. Here we don't even need a big event to cause a disaster.'

The US Agency for International Development estimates that only 1.5 per cent of Haiti is still forested, compared with 60 per cent in 1923. The Dominican Republic is still 28 per cent forested. Haiti is in danger of losing what trees it has left - as many as 30 million a year - to the insatiable demand for the charcoal used as cooking fuel.

The loss of Haiti's trees, coupled with a decline in agricultural self-sufficiency and loss of top soil, has made the politically unstable nation even more vulnerable to outside forces.

After a dramatic rise in food prices this year, violent protests culminated in Alexis being forced from office by President René Prével.

So far, development and aid agencies are still experimenting with planting trees and shrubs that will help to halt the natural disasters that annually erase any moderate advances in Haiti's sickly economic picture. Christian aid groups favour eucalyptus; others, including the UN's environmental development arms, believe aloe and elephant grass are suitable for more arid areas around disaster-prone Gonaïves.

Fondation Seguin, an environmental organisation supported by musician Wyclef Jean's Yéle Haiti, which sponsors aid for Haiti, has launched its 'Ecole Verte' programme. The Lambi Fund of Haiti, a Washington-based group allied to the Kenyan Nobel prize-winner Wangari Maathai's Green Belt movement, has announced the planting of more than a million trees in the country. 'Reforestation is key to sustainability,' said the fund's Haiti director, Josette Perard. 'This is not about offsetting climate change but about restoring the natural ecosystem. We're trying to undo years of damage. Without tree cover we keep getting setbacks and the mudslides show how far the system is out of balance.'

As Haiti last week celebrated the black slave uprising against the French in 1804 that led to its independence, the scale of the problem it faces was plain to see. In Gonaïves, two months after the deluge that brought three million tons of sediment into town, large hillocks of ooze, reinforced with detritus and parts of old cars, have yet to be removed. The other component of Haiti's disaster scenario was also evident: floating islands of plastic bottles that block storm drains. 'Every time it rains, it becomes chaos again,' said one UN peacekeeper, Jeanne Nidaji from Benin. 'Mud makes it impossible. You cannot swim in it, so you drown.'

Jean-Marie Vanden Wouwer, of the UN's International Labour Organisation, a technical adviser to the UN development programme, heads a project to slow the run-off of topsoil and rock by digging holes in mountainsides and planting elephant grass. 'When it's possible to break the speed of the water, you can slow erosion dramatically,' he said. 'Our problem is the budget comes in too late to plant, and goats eat the seedlings.'

With the UN warning that the problems of deforestation, precarious shanty towns and blocked rivers make the capital vulnerable to the same fate as Gonaïves, there is new urgency in the effort to tackle environmental degradation. Haiti's new Prime Minister,

Michèle Pierre-Louis, installed in August, warned that the fate of Gonaïves could befall Haiti itself. 'The whole country is facing an ecological disaster,' he said. 'We cannot keep going on like this. We are going to disappear one day. There will not be 400, 500 or 1,000 deaths. There are going to be a million deaths.'

But with poverty and instability as natural to the nation as voodoo - now recognised as a state religion - efforts to reverse the damage run counter to experience and expectation. 'It's a critical situation that requires exceptional effort and investment or we will not be able to consolidate the gains we have made,' said UN spokesperson Sophie Boutaud-de-la-Combe.

Treating environmental degradation as a cause, and not just a symptom, of poverty represents an important change in emphasis. Even Haiti's government, long without political will to tackle the problem, now speaks of change. Pierre-Louis has spoken of passing laws and erecting billboards throughout the country warning: 'You cannot build here.'

One solution comes from close to home. In Kenscoff, 40 miles from Port-au-Prince in the hills, Jane Wynne, a US-educated environmentalist, praises the benefits of bamboo. Her father, a structural engineer, imported dozens of species to the island in the 1950s under the fervent belief that bamboo offers a near-perfect combination of attributes.

Wynne, who has spent her life trying to get Haitians to change their lifestyles to help avoid devastation, has developed a system of parallel terracing coupled with bamboo that could help stop the denuded mountainsides slipping into the cities. 'We've been warning of this disaster for years,' Wynne said. 'We could see what was coming. In 1956, my father said bamboo could save that country.'

'People say they cut the trees because they're poor, but I don't believe that. Poor people would never cut down a tree. A branch maybe, but not a tree. The real problem is with the people who have houses and cars but would rather steal someone else's tree than cut their own.'

Part of Wynne's programme is to help Haiti develop new sources of fuel, possibly using the waste from sugar cane to make combustible briquettes. After all, the use of charcoal is a relatively new phenomenon that only gathered strength during US President Bill Clinton's blockade of Haiti in 1993 to bring about the restoration of Jean-Bertrand Aristide as President. That helped to push Haitians from kerosene to dependence on

cutting down trees to make charcoal.

Fuel is a part of the puzzle that will need to be solved to rescue Haiti. But in a nation where 65 per cent of the people now live on a dollar a day, reforestation - and a chance of returning to self-sufficiency - can sometimes appear a luxury, not a necessity. But environment is the key, Wynne believes: 'Young people want to learn, we need to encourage them. We come from the soil and we go back to the soil, we cannot destroy the soil.'

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