Haiti’s Environment: At a Glance

By Josette Perard

Haiti’s ecological system, most specifically the rapport between its population and the environment in which they live, is in a dismal state. This reality has serious consequences on the quality of life for Haitians in both rural and urban settings. It is no coincidence that Haiti’s ecological health has degraded significantly while the government has been absent in managing the national territory and its resources.

As one travels through the country, it is easy to see that marshes and open spaces have deteriorated, forests have been destroyed and outdated agricultural practices have contributed to severe erosion. Sediments from the soil are then carried away by water and threaten sea life and the coastal areas.

This very systematic breakdown of Haiti’s ecology has adversely impacted overall production capacity on the island. Day after day, small farmers living in Haiti’s countryside struggle to get by as quality of life have considerably worsened.

In spite of these mounting challenges, the government refuses to implement the policies and regulations that this situation necessitates. Instead, the government continues to make statements and write reports that remain on paper without employing concrete actions.

How did Haiti get here?

When Christopher Columbus arrived on the Island of Hispaniola in 1492, forested area was abundant and covered 80% of the island. Upon their arrival, Spanish colonists immediately began destroying the environment. They imported animals for breeding and allowed them to graze freely - openly dismissing pasture practices that protected the land and supported food production.

Additionally, they began cutting trees like mahogany and campeche for coloring and for export. Between 1664 and 1803, French colonists continued deforestation at the same rate. They destroyed forest land near Haiti's Environment: 1

For Agriculture in Haiti, The Hits Keep Coming

By Sarah Leavitt

It’s a common scene in Haiti: Marceline, a small farmer, walks into a bustling market to sell her harvest and the marketplace is riddled with imported goods. Fruits and vegetables are from the Dominican Republic, packaged goods from the U.S. line the rows and large bags of rice stamped with USAID lay on the ground. To an unknowing eye, this wouldn’t mean much, but to Marceline these imported goods are undercutting her and other Haitian farmers’ ability to make an honest living.

In Haiti, the idea of food sovereignty means so much more than growing food that is healthy, culturally appropriate and produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods (as defined by the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty). For the more than half of Haitian society that depends on agriculture for its livelihood, an agriculture system that supports locally grown foods is imperative.

The struggle to protect and strengthen local agriculture is nothing new to Haiti. Severe environmental degradation and years of deforestation have eroded the soil and left much of the land devoid of the nutrients.

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Deforestation is a Domino Effect in Haiti

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the coastal areas and at the base of mountains to cultivate tobacco, indigo and cane without planting trees to replace them.

After Haiti became independent, these practices continued. The Haitian government, in search of foreign investment, began to give abundant land concessions to large companies. For example, the United Haitian Corporation received 46,511 acres to use for a period of 50 years. Even so, forest cover at this time still accounted for 50% of Haiti’s total acreage.

During the American Occupation, the Haitian government gave 790,000 acres of land to SHADA (Haitian American Society for Agricultural Development). SHADA deforested thousands of acres to plant sisal and rubber, two plants that destroy the quality of the soil. Even more troubling, their cultivation had nothing to do with meeting the needs of the Haitian people.

By 1945, the number of forested acres had decreased to 21% and by 2002, the number of trees was down to 2%. Today tree coverage is estimated at just 1%!

Soil Erosion

Years of alarming deforestation that still continues today has utterly depleted the soil of valuable nutrients. In 1978, it was estimated that 4,651 acres of arable land were uncultivable due to poor soil quality. Today, 36,000 tons of soil that would otherwise be secured by the roots of trees is being hauled off by water each year – this is the equivalent of 9,300 acres. This is purely arable land that could produce food that is being lost.

Water Is Rare

Haiti is located in a tropical zone so it benefits from substantial rainfall, but because of deforestation and erosion, the infiltration capacity of water has considerably diminished. Of the 40,000 m³ of rainfall in Haiti annually, only 10% soaks into the soil. This means the water table is disappearing and the rivers are drying up. It is incredibly painful to watch the soil washed away during the rainy season, disappearing into the sea.

In addition, most water sources are full of toxic material because of a lack of watershed management where they are located. Pesticides, trash and human waste contaminate local water sources. This poor water management is accompanied by the epidemics of malaria, typhoid fever, and other waterborne diseases. This of course is on top of the deadly and devastating arrival of cholera through the UN occupation two years ago. Inadequate access to clean water and sanitation made Haiti a fertile breeding ground for cholera to flourish – to date there have been nearly 600,000 cases and over 7,000 deaths.

Haiti is Losing its Biodiversity

Not surprisingly, destruction of the environment has resulted in a lack of protection for many plant and animal species, causing them to disappear.

Urbanization

For rural Haitians, the degraded environment and decline in resources has led to a gradual decrease in economic opportunities. So, many rural communities are witnessing a massive exodus of their populations towards larger towns and the capital city of Port-au-Prince. In 1950, there were 152,000 inhabitants in the capital. The 2004 national census revealed 2.3 million resided in Port-Au-Prince, a number today that is estimated to have increased to 3 million.

Throughout the country, Haitians are incurring a diminishing quality of life. Families that could once live and prosper off the land no longer can.

A deforested hillside

Selling charcoal is the only means of income for many Haitians

Despite the odds Haiti is still home to 5,000 plant species and unique fauna, 220 bird species, 300 fish species, and a large reptile population. Urgent actions need to be taken to preserve this rich biodiversity.

Current Causes of Environmental Degradation:

Political Factors

The complete absence of political will to protect the environment
Farmers Struggle for Food Sovereignty

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essential to producing high yielding crops. This, coupled with Haiti’s propensities for natural disasters, like hurricanes, leaves small farmers especially vulnerable to fluctuations in the environment.

Take Hurricane Isaac for example. Heavy rains came and quickly washed away topsoil no longer anchored down by the roots of trees, leading to the destruction of many crops and livestock. The damage was so severe, it is estimated that the agriculture sector suffered from $2.4 million in losses from damage (Caribbean Journal 2012). This susceptibility to crop loss makes relying on agriculture in Haiti a difficult endeavor.

For small Haitian farmers like Marceline, losing crops to a hurricane is devastating. Selling goods from a harvest in the market is now out of the question and the need to feed her children, send them to school and eke out an existence becomes a herculean feat.

If the seemingly ever-present threats of the environment were not enough, small farmers continually face ramifications of unfair trade policies that promote the incessant dumping of food aid and cripple local markets.

The most well-known example of this is the infamous U.S. rice subsidy policies that destroyed Haiti’s rice production in the mid 1990s. The Clinton Administration negotiated an agreement with the Haitian government that dramatically cut tariffs on imported U.S. rice, which became cheaper than Haitian rice. As a consequence, the floor dropped out from beneath Haitian rice growers.

As Clinton explains it, "It may have been good for some of my farmers in Arkansas, but it has not worked. It was a mistake." Clinton told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March of 2010, "I have to live everyday with the consequences of the loss of capacity to produce a rice crop in Haiti to feed those people because of what I did; nobody else."

Then again in May 2010, on the heels of the earthquake, when communities were still reeling from the devastation and loss of life - farmers’ crops were attacked yet again. Monsanto announced the donation of $4 million dollars’ worth of hybrid corn and vegetable seeds.

Much like Clinton’s rice subsidy policies that were at the time touted as providing Haitians with a cheap and affordable source of food, this donation was given under the veil of benevolence to help farmers who “may not have had sufficient seeds to plant,” an assumption without merit (Monsanto 2010).

Monsanto’s actions were harmful for a couple of reasons. First, the seeds came coated in toxic fungicides and require significantly more water, chemical fertilizers and pesticides than local Creole heirloom and organic seeds. In addition, these hybrid seeds cannot be stored, so farmers who use them must purchase new seeds for planting each year.

Small farmers saw this ruse for what it was – a move by Monsanto to create agricultural dependency in Haiti. The peasant farmer leader Chavannes Jean-Baptiste of the Peasant Movement of Papay (MPP) called this donation, “a new earthquake [for Haiti]” and “a very strong attack on small agriculture, on farmers, on biodiversity, on

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New Project

The Moje Planters’ Association

The 150 members (50 females, 100 males) of The Moje Planters’ Organization (OPMO) live in the Artibonite’s fertile valley, which is great for agriculture, but it suffers from low rainfall. Farmers in the region work hard to cultivate and produce bountiful harvests from their crops, but unreliable rainfall leaves crop yields low and below their full potential. Recognizing this critical difficulty for agriculture in the region, OPMO partnered with the Lambi Fund of Haiti to irrigate the fields of its members.

Through this union, Lambi Fund is working with OPMO to irrigate 30 acres of land and to establish a community credit fund for its farmers. In order to cost effectively and efficiently irrigate such large swaths of land, two mobile irrigation pumps are being purchased. These motorized pumps will water fields using water from the nearby river. The versatility of these mobile pumps makes it easy to move from one crop to the next after each has been appropriately watered.

OPMO and Lambi Fund staff members both felt that launching a community credit fund in concert with the irrigation pumps would make a good pairing. This credit fund, which following training in bookkeeping, the issuing of loans and credit fund management and oversight will be managed by committees formed by members of OPMO. The first loans, which are set to be issued in time for the next planting season will be made to farmers who will then have the much needed capital to purchase more seeds, tools, fertilizers and other supplies needed to increase crop outputs.
Irrigating Land to Increase Crop Outputs

Member Profile:

Marie Denise Charleus
Youth Organization for the Development of Saint Martin

My name is Marie Denise Charleus, I am 35 years old and am a member of the Youth Organization for the Development of Saint Martin (AJSDC). I can proudly say that I have been a member of AJSDC since its inception in March 1997.

Our organization’s proudest accomplishment and biggest realization has been the construction of a grain mill, which we built in partnership with the Lambi Fund of Haiti.

Personally, this grain mill has done me a great service. I no longer have to travel far to process my harvest and the mill provides quick service. Because of this, I am able to save time and money. Even in the midst of a harvest, when the mill is bustling with customers, I am taken care of quickly.

This mill is a means of decentralization for the region. At my local mill it is easier for me to sift 2-3 cups of grain to bring home food for my family versus at other grain mills in the area where I have to wait long periods before I can sift my grains because they have so many clients.

I also don’t grind with a hand grinder anymore. I don’t run myself down anymore. This mill helps me to live better, and it is helping me to better my health. As a member, I can grind at the AJSDC mill even if I don’t have the money up front, and can pay AJSDC once I have sold my products.

This is a great help during times when money is tight. When I go to the market, I do not waste time because the grains that are processed at the mill are beautiful and they sell quicker than the others. There are a lot of clients that regularly do business with me now because I sell beautiful merchandise.

Thanks to the grain mill, I have more time to work at home now too. As a mother of three sons and two daughters, I now have time to take care of my children and more time to work on my little gardens. Now that I have seen the results we can achieve, I believe in AJSDC more now - I am proud to be a member of it.

This mill gives me more motivation to work towards the growth of the organization and I will do everything I can for the association to last longer to serve people in the community. I can proudly say that the mill has been operating for almost two years and I hope that it and our organization will bring many more opportunities for me and the people in this community.

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continues to cripple Haiti. The Haitian government plays no role in protecting its natural resources. Most often, the government takes a nonchalant attitude and “laissez faire” approach towards the clear acts of destruction and violations of its natural resources.

Socioeconomic Factors

A lack of environmental education, understanding and appreciation is engrained in the Haitian culture. The resulting social norms and behaviors reflect a need for greater respect and care for the environment.

Demographic Growth

Haiti’s population is growing at an unsustainable rate. In 1971, Haiti had 4.2 million inhabitants. By 1982, the population rose to 5.77 million and by 2004 the population totaled 8.3 million. Today, there are around 9 to 10 million Haitians. It is easy to see that this level of population growth is putting undue pressure on Haiti’s already precious resources.

Poverty

According to studies by the World Bank, 80% of Haitians live below the poverty line – most of whom live in rural Haiti. In order to survive, the peasant population has little choice but to exploit the land intensively.

The Need for Energy

Haiti relies on wood to meet 72% of its energy needs. Wood is used for charcoal, cooking, and use in industrial settings (bakeries, dry cleaning, etc.). Every year thousands of trees are cut down for energy use. Which of course, has significant consequences.

Unregulated Exploitation of Sand

The absence of regulation means that sand mining is being exploited as well. This lack of policies or regulation around sand mining is resulting in the reduction of plant coverage and a change in the topology of the landscape.

Lack of Urban Planning

In the cities there is no urban planning. People build housing wherever and in any manner as they wish. While the space and planning for roads, sewage, draining and other essentials are not provided.

Natural Causes

75% of Haiti’s territory is mountainous, which creates vulnerabilities for the ecosystem. While Haiti is situated in “Hurricane Alley” in the Atlantic Ocean along fault lines that are susceptible to earthquakes, making it particularly vulnerable to frequent and severe natural disasters.

Impact

Clearly, the impacts of Haiti’s degraded environment have ramifications far beyond the loss of a vibrant ecosystem. On an ecological

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level, deforestation leads to nutrient loss in soil, soil erosion, degradation of water quality, sedimentation in canals and rivers and a loss of animal and plant life.

In addition, deforestation leads to the phenomena of desertification – which is not only devastating to agriculture, but also intensifies natural disasters (landslides, flooding, and forest fires). Socioeconomically, it is not difficult to draw the connections. A decrease in natural resources limits what citizens can utilize to make a living. A decrease in agricultural productivity leads to declining incomes, while polluted water sources are responsible for a myriad of waterborne illnesses.

Above all, these dire effects of a degraded environment increase dependence on other countries as increased trade becomes a necessity.

What Should be Done?

Primarily, it is the role and responsibility of the government to respond to this question. Democracy should be utilized whereby the people turn to the polls to vote for and elect competent leaders.

Here at the Lambi Fund of Haiti, we can raise our voices. Together, community-by-community across the country, we can raise our voices in unison in a fight to save the environment that is threatened by total destruction. In all reality, it is necessary for the power of the state to control the population explosion, manage urban planning, spearhead the fight against poverty, reforest the land and reduce the pressure on Haiti’s natural resources. This will not be realized though, until Haitian civil society unites and begins demanding these rights.

In light of these current struggles, Lambi Fund is doing everything in its power to bring to the forefront the realization of these objectives. Through the convening of conferences and workshops, community members are educated not only on the importance of the environment, but of their civil rights as well. Lambi Fund is working with partner organizations to reforest the localities in which they live, to build cisterns for potable water, latrines to manage human waste, and training farmers on techniques that protect the environment and improve productivity.

This being said, Lambi Fund’s reach is limited and we realize that it takes a force far larger for change. As such, we must join forces and demand a comprehensive plan to restore and protect Haiti’s environment - for the well being of all of us.

Help Build a New Office for Lambi Fund

Brick-by-Brick

Setting the Foundation for Haiti

In the spring of 2012, the Lambi Fund of Haiti announced Brick-by-brick, Setting the Foundation for Haiti - a campaign to build a new office space in Haiti. While the task at hand is a large one, Lambi Fund is happy to report that this effort is making great strides. A plot of land for Lambi Fund’s new home has been identified and the legal paperwork necessary to make a purchase is currently being processed. Hopefully by the time this newsletter hits your mailbox, Lambi Fund will have a great place to begin building!

Great care was taken when picking a new location for Lambi Fund’s office. This land is blocks from Haiti’s current office and is centrally located. In addition, rigorous soil analyses and survey evaluations by experts in Haiti were performed that identify the land as secure and formidable to earthquakes and heavy rainfall should it occur.

Now, the next step is to acquire an architect and contractor in Haiti. This will be an important step in the process as these specialists will play an integral role in designing, staying on budget for and building an office building that fully embodies Haitian innovation, is environmentally conscious, energy efficient, seismically sound and of course is a fit home for Lambi Fund to do important work for years to come!

Lambi Fund is very much in the beginning phase of building a new office space in Haiti and we need your support to help make this a reality. There are many ways to get involved in the Brick-by-brick campaign ranging from hosting an event, fundraising online, and more. To learn more about building specifics and project plans please visit www.lambifund.org/officespace. You may also email info@lambi-fund.org for more information on naming opportunities and more.

Lambi Fund staff in the current office CLOCKWISE: Lener François - IT Specialist, Sarah Leavitt - Digital Outreach Manager, Paul Rodney Henry - Ass. Program Director, and Ferry Pierre-Charles - Program Director

Most importantly, stay tuned for updates on Lambi Fund’s building progress along the way! 🌐
In The News

Lambi Fund Welcomes New Board Member

The Lambi Fund of Haiti is very pleased to welcome Mark Schuller as a new member of the board of Directors. Mark comes to Lambi Fund with a great breadth of work and experience in Haiti. Currently, he is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology and NGO Leadership Development at Northern Illinois University and an affiliate at the Faculté d'Ethnologie, l'Université d'État d'Haiti. Mark has done comprehensive research on globalization, NGOs, gender, and disasters in Haiti, has been published in twenty book chapters, peer-reviewed articles, and public media.


Bienvenu Mark!

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Creole seeds…and on what is left of our environment in Haiti.”

Local peasant farmer movements were so opposed to this attack on food sovereignty that they committed to burning Monsanto’s seeds upon arrival. Undoubtedly, not all of the seeds were destroyed and thousands of Haitians received these seeds unaware of the long-term risks and impending dependency – all of which impoverished farmers simply cannot afford.

In spite of these egregious threats from the U.S. and international corporations, small communities throughout Haiti are uniting to strengthen local food production, protect the environment and promote Creole seed and food storage.

One such example is the Youth Association of Sél (AJS) who are partnering with the Lambi Fund of Haiti to build a grain storage facility and to launch a community credit fund in their community. The organization is building a grain silo to store surplus grains and seeds for use in times of need – droughts, natural disasters and in between growing seasons. The storage facility will also be a place to store local Creole seeds. With this silo, AJS members are working to increase access to high quality, local seeds that they can share and sell to one another at an affordable rate.

AJS, a youth organization comprised of 255 members (120 women) is a young and vibrant group that realizes the importance of fighting for and promoting food sovereignty in its community. In order to increase their capacity, members attended workshops administered by Lambi Fund on grain storage management and operation, bookkeeping, the issuing of loans and how to manage a community credit fund.

To date, 50 low-interest loans have been issued to members who are using the funds to purchase more seeds, tools and organic fertilizers to grow more peanuts, peas and corn in the area. One recipient noted that investments from the loan allowed him to cultivate 25% more land. All of these loans were repaid on time and as a result, AJS members are planning to issue an additional 19 loans this fall to farmers in preparation for the upcoming planting season. The silo is currently under construction and committees have been formed that will be responsible for managing the food storage unit and distributing the grains and seeds in an equitable manner.

It is through efforts like these that Haitians are taking back control of agriculture in Haiti.

R.I.P. Bernard Philogène

It is with great sadness that we announce the unexpected passing of Lambi Fund’s agronomist Bernard Philogène. He died on September 5, 2012 battling Cirrhosis of the liver and was just fifty-two years young.

Bernard was a tireless champion of Haiti who found great joy in teaching grassroots organizations the power of change and sustainable agriculture in Haiti. He will be greatly missed and the Lambi Fund family is sincerely grateful for the wonderful impact he made in his lifetime. Rest in peace Bernard.
Why I Give

By Steve Thyberg and the Bellevue High School Ecology Club

I am the advisor of the Ecology Club at Bellevue West High School in Bellevue, Nebraska. Last year our high school produced the musical "Once On This Island." The Island is Hispaniola and the play is about poor people coping after a devastating storm hits the island. The main character is a poor girl whose heart is broken by a wealthy boy. She dies and is turned into a tree that watches over the people of the island. It is a great musical and very moving!

Anyway, my wife is the theatre teacher and she asked if our club wanted to do a fundraiser associated with the musical and the Ecology Club loved the idea. So, for each of the four performances three to six club members asked members of the audience to make donations and most of the money was collected this way.

The decision of where to send the donation was made before funds were raised. The club discussed who to give the donation to and considered a number of environmental needs in Haiti including:

- soil erosion
- making cooking fuel briquettes from recycling trash and paper
- clean water initiatives
- solar ovens
- reforestation

Reforestation got the nod because the main character turns into a tree.

From there, we did research on reforestation in Haiti and the Lambi Fund of Haiti shows up very early and is also listed as a partner of the trusted organization the Green Belt Movement. So that helped make our decision.

Our club loved being able to help the people of Haiti and the environment at the same time!
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MISSION STATEMENT
Lambi Fund’s mission is to assist the popular, democratic movement in Haiti. Lambi Fund provides financial resources, training and technical assistance to peasant-led community organizations that promote the social and economic empowerment of the Haitian people.

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