

Reforestation Haiti

By Lois Levin/Guest Columnist

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The shocking human tragedy in Haiti has lately been eclipsed in our consciousness by the shocking oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. These disasters have a cumulative effect, and we must continue to take measures to mitigate environmental damage wherever it occurs, to slow the unraveling of the ecosystems on which we all depend.

There is reason to be hopeful about Haiti in the long run.

Haiti is the poorest country in our hemisphere, but not long ago it was rich in natural resources. In the 20th century, millions of Haitians living on the land abandoned their way of life to endure the hopelessness of urban slums. The land tenure system that benefited absentee landlords had left the land severely degraded. And Haiti's people harvest 50 million trees annually to make charcoal, the cheapest fuel available. Most of those trees are not being replaced. Today, some rural areas of Haiti resemble moonscapes, devoid of trees and soil. Many communities lie in ravines vulnerable to being washed away in mud each rainy season.

In the aftermath of the earthquake that devastated Port-au-Prince, 800,000 people have migrated back to the rural areas. Many are living in tent cities at the base of steep mountains, where flash flooding is common when it rains.

A severely degraded environment and stagnant economy will not be able to sustain these desperate refugees. To create more arable land for growing food and provide long-term sources of income, Haitians will need to plant millions of trees.

When Europeans first arrived in Haiti, it was covered with dense tropical forests. Even after a century of logging hardwoods for export, two-thirds of the country remained forested. In colonial times, Haiti's land was deforested to plant sugar, still a major crop, a monoculture highly vulnerable to market changes; sugar never brought prosperity to sugar workers.

Reforestation Haiti is not a pipe dream. The Dominican Republic, Haiti's neighbor, also lost much of its forests. Fifty years ago, that government began subsidizing gas-cooking stoves. Today the Dominican Republic is lush and green, albeit relying on imported fossil fuel to meet its energy needs.

Planting trees captures carbon, creates micro-climates that encourage biological diversity, puts water back into aquifers, cools and cleans the air year after year, and brings back wildlife — all good things you don't get from importing fossil fuels. And when trees are correctly harvested, charcoal become a sustainable, environmentally friendly, fuel.

Trees for the Future, www.treesfff.org, a nonprofit organization that has been planting trees and teaching agroforestry in tropical countries since 1989, has been working in Haiti since 2002, and has already helped local people plant 1.5 million trees along the Arcadine coast. This organization is helping farmers to select trees, while also supplying seeds and implements for planting. TREES' Haitian coordinator, Timote Georges, has been designated an EcoHero by the Discovery Channel's Global Education Partnership,

because he has been so effective at getting fellow Haitians to work together for the common good.

According to Dave Deppner, TREES founder and executive director, “Step one is to plant multipurpose fast-growing trees that grow back after cutting, repeatedly. Species such as *Leucaena leucocephala* and *Acacia angustissima* protect and restore soil (by dropping leaves that biodegrade), grow on degraded lands, and produce a wide range of renewable products rapidly. These trees provide high-protein forage for livestock, make excellent charcoal and can be used to make tools.”

Then, Deppner explained, “you can plant fruit and nut trees, hardwoods and integrate plants that produce traditional medicines. And forest gardens can be combined with small-scale livestock projects.”

Haitians need technical assistance to ensure that the selection of trees will allow not only for sustainable harvesting of charcoal, but also for the production of high-quality fruit for export. There is also a potential for developing biofuel programs that will create jobs, provide a local fuel that reduces indoor air pollution and produce green fuel for export. For more than two years, in test flights by major airlines, biodiesel produced by *Jatropha curcas*, which has long been grown in Haiti, has been powering planes more efficiently than fossil fuel.

If just half of the 500,000 families in rural Haiti each plant 200 trees, there will soon be 50 million new trees, restoring productive life to 80,000 acres of degraded and abandoned land within 30 months, and bringing in \$15 million annually to these communities — an enormous return on investment.

By helping Haitians reforest their countryside, we can enable our hemisphere’s poorest country to reverse land degradation, feed its people and face the challenges of climate change. It costs 10 cents to plant a tree, and that tree takes 50 pounds of CO₂ out of the atmosphere every year.

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