

Empire and Environmental Destruction in Haiti

By Marc-Arthur Fils-Aimé, Karl Lévêque Cultural Institute, Haiti

Haiti means “High Ground” or “Mountainous Land” in the language of the two aboriginal nations that lived here prior to the arrival of the European invaders in 1492. At that time, Haiti was covered with forests. The two indigenous groups lived together peaceably—contrary to all the allegations of cannibalism promoted by Western racists—and in their cosmological vision believed that the zone of Abricot (apricot) in Grand-Anse (part of Haiti’s south-west peninsula) sheltered their paradise. Christopher Columbus and his crew were so enchanted by this green island that they called it Hispaniola, or little Spain.

Today, only 2 percent of the national soil is still covered by vegetation that could be called a forest. The country is so deforested that in regions such as the North-West, the people scratch the earth to remove what remains of the roots of trees to satisfy their energy needs. How is it that Haiti, once called “the Pearl of the Antilles,” has come to be like this?

Generally, small farmers are accused of being the origin of this destruction. This accusation ignores the demands of globalization, which are effectively responsible for their behaviour. The great majority of these producers possess less than a hectare of land, often unsuitable for agriculture, or no land at all. For their domestic needs, they gather twigs and branches. The unjust land tenure system forces them to practices such as the cutting of trees, for survival. First of all, such cutting allows them to survive by making wood charcoal and, though less frequently now, quicklime. In turn, this charcoal is used by people selling goods in small markets and by the working masses in the urban areas who use the charcoal for energy. The small farmers end up having to cut down fruit trees that might have brought some income with each harvest, in order to survive in the immediate future. Can they really be held responsible for their own destruction?

Environmental destruction in Haiti began with colonization. The colonists destroyed vast green surfaces for the sake of profits from cane sugar, indigo, cotton, and other products. By 1770, they were attacking the mountainous zones to make coffee plantations, since the value of the coffee bean was increasing in the international market. After our first Independence in 1804, the new leaders did not divorce themselves from the colonial modes of production, and continued to strip the soil. In 1887, log wood (campeachy) was Haiti’s most valuable export, ahead even of coffee exports. Log wood, wood for carpentry (mahogany), and wood for construction (pine) became increasingly large parts of export production. But to whom did these ships belong? They did not belong to the small farmers. Who was exporting these varieties to Europe and the United States? Not the small farmers.

During the American occupation that began in 1915, U.S. capitalists took thousands of hectares, expelling small farmers in collaboration with some Haitian leaders. By 1929, 266,600 acres were in the hands of American capitalists. In the North-East and elsewhere, these new investors introduced the growth of sisal and rubber plants in large areas. These two plants suck the moisture from the earth and render it infertile. By the 1980s, the Haitian subsidiary of the U.S.-based Reynolds mining company that extracted bauxite in the Miragoâne region, and a Canada–U.S. company called SEDREN that extracted copper outside Gonaïves, withdrew from Haiti and left behind deserts. With the complicity of different Haitian governments, these companies (like many others) did not respect clauses in their contracts that required reforestation of damaged surfaces.

Government policies go against the welfare of small farmers. Economic globalization has also demanded policies that go against the welfare of small farmers. Small growers are often forced

to grow “cash crops” of cereal, in order to survive. Growing cereal crops means uprooting coffee trees—trees that had prevented erosion of hills and bluffs.

In spite of the fragility of this situation, the rich continue to build their castles in areas around the capital city, while the peasants have been forced to migrate to the cities. But the peasants do not find a better life. They live in subhuman conditions. They build their homes on the hillsides and even within the ravines and thus they are the first victims of the floods and slides that happen regularly after a few millimetres of rain. A good part of national and international public opinion blames them for environmental degradation instead of seeking the causes in the anti-social distribution of goods that is an element of capitalism and empire.

In Port-au-Prince, Haiti’s capital, the rich draw extraordinary volumes of water that is sold throughout the capital. This region once contained some of Haiti’s largest underground water reserves. It is now threatened with contamination by seawater.

Water contamination, drought, and flood all threaten the poorest citizens of Haiti. Once fertile, Haiti has become a mostly arid country with a few oases. Those who have the least security feel the effects of environmental destruction the most. The threat to small farmers and to the environment is a result of a long historical process, begun with colonization, and continuing today with economic globalization and imperialism.

This reflection was written by Marc-Arthur Fils-Aimé, director of the Institut Culturel Karl Lévêque (ICKL) (www.icklhaiti.org), a global partner of The United Church of Canada. It was published in Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire (www.united-church.ca/economic/globalization/report) a report to General Council 39 in 2006.