

Conservation of pine forest in Haiti: SAVING TREES – IMPROVING LIVES



One woman, Deslourdes Jean Laurent, a member of the Environmental Monitoring Corps and the Local Reforestation Committee, teaches local schoolchildren about the techniques used to reforest clearings.

“Finally, a project that deals with people as well as trees!” These words from an inhabitant of the Forêt des Pins (Pine Forest) sum up the Conservation and Enhancement of Biodiversity (CEB) programme put in place 13 years ago by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation in south-eastern Haiti. The project aims to save one of Haiti’s last remaining forests from deforestation, which is causing an increase in flooding and deadly landslides. Most importantly, it is about more than just a ban on the logging that was previously essential to the local population’s survival. Instead, it involves locals at every stage of the process and offers them alternative means of fighting poverty. After all, who is better placed to ensure that the forest is preserved than the people who live there?

The Forêt des Pins is located between 1,500 and 2,674 metres above sea level in the Chaîne de la Selle mountain range. One of the country’s last native forests, it was given protected status back in 1937.

It is a natural watershed with numerous sources of drinking water and rivers that serve some of Haiti’s biggest cities further downstream. The coniferous forest ecosystem plays a key role in preserving

land and regulating water. Home to some 5,000 plant species, it is the second most biodiverse region in the country. It has the appearance of a splendid forest...

DESTRUCTIVE PRACTICES

On closer inspection, however, it becomes increasingly clear that the forest has been thinned out by artificial clearings that bear witness to the destructive practices of the major concessionaires up to the 1980s and the local population thereafter. Around 50,000 families have been intensively exploiting the forest to make a living. In 2004, in fact, the Haitian press



Philippe Jean, once a producer of “bwa gra” (lightwood), now grows leeks.

reported that 200 trees were being felled every day. The wood is used for timber and charcoal and to fuel fires for making lime water. The most harmful practice of all is the production of lightwood, known locally as ‘bois-gras’, which is used to start fires. The base of the tree trunk is burned, and the heat causes the sap to fall. Pieces of the resinated wood are then taken from the bottom of the tree. The procedure destabilises the pines, which end up falling over – unless they are burned down first to create more farmland. Of the 32,000 hectares of pines that existed at the start of the 20th century, only 10,000 are left today. At this rate, the entire forest will be gone in 20 years’ time.

This deforestation is having dramatic consequences. Instead of soaking into the ground and feeding the water sources, rainwater washes straight down the slopes, leading to flooding and deadly landslides lower down. In May 2004, torrential rain swept away the town of Fonds-Verrettes and flooded Mapou, leaving 1,200 people dead and 1,300 missing. The rains of 2010 also claimed thousands of victims. Some two million Haitians live downhill from the forest, including some in parts of the capital Port-au-Prince. There is a lot at stake.

GIVING PEOPLE A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY RATHER THAN DOLING OUT PUNISHMENT

For 30 years, the government resorted to repressive measures to protect the forest, but armed guards and arrests did not stop the damage. The rare attempts at reforestation also ended in failure. Those in charge failed to take the local population’s interests into account, which inflamed the conflict between the two sides.

This was the situation that prevailed in 2003, when Switzerland became involved with the western section of the Forêt des Pins known as Unité 2, a semi-deforested area of 14,000 hectares. The challenge at that time was to find a way to preserve it while also meeting the locals’ socioeconomic needs. With this in mind, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, working together with the Ministry of the Environment and local partners, developed the Conservation and Enhancement of Biodiversity (CEB) project. It aims to raise awareness among the population of their responsibilities and help the authorities to put in place an inclusive and sustainable system for managing the forest.

CONSOLIDATING AND DIVERSIFYING

The first step in this process was defining management zones in the central part of the forest. This zoning meant that locals could be offered activities that were tailored to their area and in tune with its ecosystem as an alternative to logging.

Families living in heavily wooded zones were given training and equipment to develop market gardens growing food crops like carrots and leeks as well as medicinal crops like thyme and camomile, which need much less space than farming. The 800 families who have taken up market gardening make between HTG 5,500 and 38,000 (approximately CHF 85-600) from two to three harvests a year. The strategy in the zones dedicated to the forest is to consolidate and diversify. This is why around 60 families now have a small chicken coop in addition to their market garden, while others specialise in foraging or non-wood forest produce such as wild fruit jams and honey. This can bring in an extra HTG 1,000-3,600 (CHF 15-50) a year. The same goes for planting trees and collecting pine seeds for the nurseries created as part of the programme.

In the zones where the land is suited to pastoral and arable farming, meanwhile, the programme endeavours to intensify these practices, gearing them towards lucrative economic sectors and improving the techniques used. Livestock farmers are benefiting from increased availability of feed and better access to veterinary treatment. These support and training efforts have now gone way beyond the 10,000 people living at the heart of the forest to encompass the 50,000 families living on its fringes, 1,600 of which have been able to improve their farming know-how. Most of those taking part are women, who can now play an economically important role within the family. Some zones with infertile soil have been set aside to house supply infrastructure such as markets, drinking water facilities etc.

HAITI'S DISAPPEARING FOREST

Only 4% of Haiti's original forests remain, compared with 18% in 1952 and 60% in 1923. If this trend continues, the entire Haitian forest will soon disappear, further increasing the risk of natural disasters in a country that already shows one of the highest rates of incidence in the world. Against this backdrop, the SDC programme aims to help in developing public environmental policies and sustainable management mechanisms for all of the country's protected areas.



Daméus Délicieux used to work in a sawmill. These days, he is in charge of a nursery and helps to educate young people from the region on environmental issues.

INVOLVING THE POPULATION

Success depends on acceptance by the local authorities and population, so these are involved at every stage of the process, and their interests are taken into account. Workshops are organised twice a year to present, define and validate the programme's actions. Young people from the area have been trained to gather information on natural resources and take part in zoning. Management committees have been formed, comprising both elected officials and ordinary citizens.

This inclusive approach has helped the project to become firmly established on the ground. Most families are now aware of which zone they live in and engage in economic activity that is appropriate to that zone. Even though the majority of them are no longer exploiting the forest, their income has grown.

A RESPECTED MONITORING SYSTEM

It goes without saying that a project like this cannot be sustainable without a monitoring system that is accepted by the population. One of the main pillars is an environmental monitoring group made up of 33 locals, four of them women. The group comes under the aegis of the Ministry of the Environment's Environmental Monitoring Corps, but it is not armed. Its mission is to monitor the clearings being reforested, prevent forest fires, give verbal warnings to offenders and inform locals about the importance of the protected areas. Despite the fact that it fights against practices that harm the forest, its presence is appreciated and its authority respected among the population.

Of course, not everything works perfectly. The team of 33 agents is too small to cover the whole area effectively, and government support for the monitoring apparatus is proving slow to take hold. Nevertheless, the results are encouraging: traces of lightwood and illegal felling of pines have reduced, as have the frequency and severity of fires. In fact, this monitoring approach, initially rejected by the Ministry of the Environment, is now recognised at the national level.

AN ECOSYSTEM IN REMISSION

The measures put in place by the CEB programme have served to ease the pressure exerted on the forest by its inhabitants. This state-owned land needs to be protected against the erosion caused by the harmful methods of small-scale farmers. To this end, the micro-watersheds have been restored, and stone structures have been built along the slopes to shore up the banks

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Will these initiatives be enough to save the Forêt des Pins? New management measures are needed to apply zoning to the 14,000 hectares at the centre of the forest. The local population, for its part, needs more markets for its produce. Its revenue sources are still insufficient. Institutional partnerships are needed to support farmers and fruit processors. Much is still required to ensure the programme's long-term future – in particular, its ownership by the government and especially the National Agency for Protected Areas. Without a strong political will, the momentum built up to date could become as fragile as a scorched pine tree.



“THE CHALLENGES: FUNDING AND POVERTY AMONG THE LOCALS”

Interview with **Claude Phanord**, initiator and head of the CEB programme for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

What is so innovative about the programme?

Up to now, environmental projects haven't taken the economic issues into consideration. They entered into a conflict with the population, which led to failure. With this in mind, we thought it was essential to include a socioeconomic perspective in terms of combating poverty. We developed a project with the ultimate aim of offering a new approach that will serve as a model for other protected areas in the country.

This phase will come to an end in 2017. What results have been achieved so far?

The local population and authorities are invested in the project. The alternatives put forward have allowed people living in the forest to diversify, tapping into new sources of income that offer them more stability. Having the authorities on board makes them more credible on the ground. People have come to trust our approach and play a central role in the programme's work and the long-term management structures.

Will the SDC continue to support those who live in the forest?

Helvetas has been in charge of implementing the programme thus far on our behalf. To ensure its sustainability, the aim from 2017 onwards is to transfer this responsibility to the National Agency for Protected Areas, part of the Ministry of the Environment. This is why we've been working to strengthen the agency's technical and financial resources since 2014.

What challenges does the programme face?

Securing more funding! For now, the SDC is providing 90% of the money. We're talking to the national authorities to persuade the government to invest more in the environment. The other challenge



Around 30 agents from the local population have been monitoring the forest since 2011. “Over the last two years, we've seen a reduction in the number of forest fires and in fresh traces of lightwood production,” confirms Mérihan Bonheur.

concerns population growth and poverty. Despite the alternatives put forward, it's hard to satisfy all families' needs. We need to develop further actions in fields like education and healthcare – not just in the forest, in the surrounding areas as well.



At the heart of the Forêt des Pins, a workshop is held for local authorities, community leaders and ordinary citizens to plan project actions together. Women are well represented and now have an important socioeconomic role.

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