

Forests without Borders Haiti Project

Four forest biologists from Atlantic Canada landed in Haiti in April, on a journey that had occupied their thoughts for some time: what can be done to put the Haitian landscape back on the road to environmental health and sustainable benefits for rural people? We were the lead guard for Forests without Borders-Forêts sans frontières. The project came to each of us in its own way, but we soon found each other and the FwB fit seemed perfect, so with a quick blessing and offers of support from CIF headquarters and CIF Newfoundland Section, we soon found ourselves in Haiti.

Dropping into Haiti with good intentions but little experience could have left us with little to show for our week. Fortunately our pre-trip research lead us to the Canadian NGO 'Foundation for International Development Assistance-Productive Cooperatives Haiti' or FIDA-PcH. Executive Director Betsy Wall wisely directed us toward their work in Duchity and neighboring communities of Beaumont, Les Cave and Gorjet. Newly formed Cooperatives in each of these communities have a wealth of knowledge and future vision; perfect for us to begin to understand where we could contribute.

But what could Canadian foresters do? We aren't tropical forest experts, but maybe our skills in forest science, education, planning and organization could come into play. Stepping into a damaged environmental, economic and social system, we carried the attitude that our first job would be to look, listen and try to understand - an approach that would be necessary throughout our trip.

Haitian forests have been devastated over more than 50 years by hurricanes, harvesting and conversion to agriculture, to arrive at the current desperate situation where even small stems are harvested and burned to make charcoal for domestic cooking. The result is often no forest at all or remnant fragments (Haiti was once more than 75% lush tropical forest and is now less than 1%). Remote sensing images of the Haitian - Dominican border are the literal poster children for how bad things can be.

Leaving Port-au-Prince for the south was the eye-opener that so many first timers experience: crowds, garbage, broken buildings, aid organizations, and UN trucks. But contrasting with this everywhere is a level of industriousness; brightly dressed people evidently with something to accomplish if only eking out a living selling simple articles street-side to their neighbours. Arriving in the mountain village of Duchity (population 27,000) was a pleasure. Cooler air, still no intact forests but wonderful landscapes and scattered remnants of forest. Our experience began the next morning when we met with leaders of the newly formed agricultural cooperatives and put our listening skills to use.

Haitian reforestation is NOT simply a matter of planting trees. It's about replacing the local charcoal production economy with another cash crop; it's about restoring forests slowly, maybe through use of shade trees for coffee, a cash crop but not one that can generate income right away. It's about producing yams instead of charcoal, which generates cash but with a trade-off as agriculture replaces forests with forest openings, not to mention the need to produce poles for the yam vines. Is it about the vision that

some locals have of a forest environment that is full of mature trees, tropical birds and plant life like they can just remember from 50 years ago. Then there are the fruit trees that grow in the forest; mango, almond, papaya, banana, breadfruit, plantain. Reforestation IS definitely about restoring the clean water that used to flow where now there is nothing and women walk for kilometers with buckets on there heads, several times a day.

Following our successful April trip DFAIT came on board immediately with support, allowing the work to continue and our second trip occurred in October 2011. FwB can now claim to be one of the many NGO groups in Haiti, but one determined to find a more effective route through the many constraints on international aid. Our relationships with 3 constituencies are now being cemented: 1. we are a highly valued partner of the Canadian NGO, FIDA-PcH and featured in their program development; 2. we have community acceptance by several local Cooperatives in the Duchity area and; 3. we have a positive relationship with the government's regional agronomist. Our next job is to draft a credible work plan for the future which encompasses the many issues relating to a goal of regional reforestation and environmental stabilization while respecting the wishes of the Haitian people. Our October efforts have resulted in plans for a meeting with a senior minister in the Haitian government (Minister of Environment) on our next trip. The government has recently highlighted reforestation as a necessary precursor and priority for economic, environment and social (health) stability in Haiti. We will be introduced by Haitians as credible Canadian foresters with a well developed empathy for and understanding of the Haitian need to lead their own destiny but with support from outside. This would close the circle on the last constituency required to advance a developmental plan, and takes the work of FwB beyond the local level.

CIF members Chris Dickie (NB INFOR), William Clarke (Newfoundland and Labrador Forest Service), Ron Smith (UNB), and Bruce Pendrel (CFS/NRCan) lead the April mission and were joined by Hector Adegbidi (U de Moncton) and Nairn Hay (Fundy Model Forest) for their return trip in October.

Pitch 1:

Join FwB in its work in Haiti! Many hands and many minds are needed yet to address the problems of reforestation and environmental degradation in Haiti. If you are interested in joining the FwB initiative in Haiti, contact one of us and be part of the team.

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Pitch 2:

Helping to reforest Haiti should not be about giving charity, but sometimes that is needed and it does demonstrate good intentions. One need identified is tools for local farmers. Tools which can be produced in Haiti, thereby supporting local industry and which will directly contribute to efforts to plant agroforestry crops. As part of the Christmas season the CIF-IFC would like to raise a few dollars to start to make this happen and the resource can be delivered directly to here it is needed before April. *Describe how to give.*