

DEFORESTATION & DEVELOPMENT:
Colonialism and Legacy of Degradation in Haiti

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Haiti's modern environmental history began with French occupation in the 17th century and the rapid development of a plantation economy that sent cash crops to Europe. Persistent land abuses, overreliance on wood for fuel, and population pressures have transformed the once lushly forested island country into a barren ecological wasteland. Once France's most valuable colony, Haiti is now the poorest in the West, and almost completely dependent upon foreign aid to support its ten million people. I will investigate the environmental legacy left by European colonization, and reveal how deep-rooted post-colonial dependency and degradation has shaped developmental failures in Haiti.

The Republic of Haiti occupies the western third of the Greater Antilles island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean Sea, sharing the eastern two-thirds with the Dominican Republic. Its land area totals approximately 10,200 square miles and is dominantly mountainous. Its original vegetation was dense forest across the uplands, and has had only small swift and shallow streams flowing from steep mountains to the sea. There are some arid areas, but a primarily humid climate is reflected in the original forest cover. The Caribbean's historic exposure to tropical storms and hurricanes certainly affected Haiti's natural landscapes as extensive forests in the highland helped to minimize water erosion while nutrients and fertile soils settled at the base of mountains in the lowland. Yet, three hundred years of denudation and deforestation initiated by the Spanish and French, perpetuated by poor central governance and international blacklisting, and further fueled by subsistence and desperation, and has choked Haiti's development possibilities and left its land and people today in shambles.

It was December 1492, at the dawn of European colonialism, when Christopher Columbus, encountering the native Taino (Arawak) and Cibony people, had claimed the large

island in the West Indies for Spain, naming it La Isla Española. Over the next few decades, in an all too familiar fashion, the Spanish enslaved the natives and forced their labor in mining for the gold and silver (the *encomienda* system) that fueled early exploration. Haiti's story of how European diseases, enslavement, and brutality devastated indigenous populations mirrors those told all over the Americas and Africa. It is estimated that between 500,000 and 2 million Arawak and Cibony had lived on the island just one-hundred years before Spain happened upon them and reduced their numbers to 30,000 by 1515 (Girault, 2013). During the next century the natives had all but vanished. The Spanish began importing African slaves from other settlements, but they too met similar fates. Although settlements were mostly situated on the eastern part of Hispaniola, the Spanish had begun to seriously alter the island's landscape by introducing cattle, pigs, and horses which quickly multiplied into herds (Girault, 2013). When gold was exhausted from mines many Spaniards left the island.

By the mid-16th century, French sailors had begun to establish settlements on the western part of Hispaniola as they sought a base on their way throughout the Americas; Port-de-Paix was the first permanent French settlement established in the 1660's. The French West Indies Corporation soon controlled the area, and private landowners, with no source of local labor, began importing large numbers of African slaves to the western part of the island.

In 1697, Spain gave the western third of Hispaniola to the French formally within the small print of the Treaty of Rijswijk, and France renamed it Saint-Domingue. Throughout the 1700's, Saint-Domingue became France's most valuable New World colony, providing France with great capital through exports of coffee, cacao, indigo, cotton and sugar cane. The region produced 50% of the world's coffee and three-fourths of its sugar (Macleod, 2011).

Imported Africans slaved to clear Saint-Domingue of its forests to make room for much more profitable plantation agriculture. Sugar cane quickly became the number one cash crop, but it began to profoundly alter the ecology. Cleared forests led to massive soil erosion during rains, especially in poorer areas relegated to slaves and laborers. Soil productivity dropped and diverted streams vanished. Landowners were oblivious to these effects, and sought simply to overcome any issues with more slave labor and intensification of agriculture (Girault, 2013). The stakeholders were blind to the long-term degradation they were causing. Saint-Domingue appeared to be an ephemeral supply for French coffers, and the exploitation was fast and fierce (Hallward, 2004).

By the beginning of the 1800's the world's most prosperous colony had a population near 550,000, 500,000 of which were African slaves (Girault, 2013). Of the non-slaves, the white plantation owners, the French representatives, and the powerless mulattos and former slaves were all in intense power struggles. When a slave uprising led by former slave Toussaint L'Ouverture in 1791 attempted to draw on policies edified overseas after the French Revolution, the grossly outnumbered proprietors could not maintain the colony (Hallward, 2004). The last of the French had been forced out by 1803.

At the beginning of 1804, Saint-Domingue claimed their independence under the new Arawak name, Haiti. What should have been a glorious time in its history was shadowed in great hardship. The country was broke. Its form of income, the sugar cane crops and plantations were ruined, and the skilled workers had fled or were killed. The agriculture management structure was no longer functioning as free slaves, resentful and defensive of slavery, were no longer willing to do work for any authority or each other. The slave trade, once a source of revenue to the country, was no longer in operation there (Corbett, 2014). Haitians, who had no

previous formal structure to rely on, began to seize upon available land for immediate subsistence. They developed a sort of social and agricultural philosophy, referred to by scholars as a counter-plantation system, in which subsistence agriculture was instituted by the free slaves in response to the abusive system that forced them to earn profits for the French (Mouhot, 2013). The rush for personal land (without much attention given to infrastructure) and the subsequent growth of population led to further clearing of land and advancement onto highly erodible hills. This pattern continued as favorable lands were occupied. Wood was solely utilized as fuel for heat and cooking as the entire country collected and burned charcoal, their only energy source. This led to further clearing of forests and encroachment which destabilized the soil on an almost entirely sloped land area. As tropical rains brought powerful landslides and destruction through runoff, the dependence upon wood for fuel and rebuilding was compounded (Mouhot, 2013).

Following the Haitian slave revolt in the early 1800's, most European nations, as well as the United States, refused to recognize Haiti as an independent country, and were overtly hostile towards the free notion of Haiti. France, Britain, Spain, and the U.S. were still slave nations after all, and did not want their labor force uprising. Haiti was blacklisted as these superpowers, and many other countries, withheld trade relations to prove their disapproval, so Haiti was left with no alternative than to support itself from within, using what few resources they had to piece back together some semblance of an economy (Corbett, 2014).

At this time, the Industrial Revolution was beginning to purr in Europe and the United States, and while a small rich and powerful elite group was beginning to take the reins in Haiti, the international community was growing rapidly without them. The agricultural products that the nation was starting to ramp up (early Haitian leaders Dessalines and Henry Christophe helped resurrect sugar cane and later coffee production) were of less importance to the industrial

development taking place in more developed nations. Lack of resources needed in industrialization, lack of skilled workers, and lack of capital stunted Haiti's potential, leaving her to stagnate in neagrarian poverty (Corbett, 2014). The Industrial Revolution would pass Haiti by.

Unlike many other former colonies, Haiti did not receive any ongoing support from the mother country following independence, for it came by force. In fact, it was not until 1828 that France even considered recognizing Haiti's independence. In a strange act of bullying, France demanded 90 million francs in back indemnity for losses incurred during and because of the Haitian slave revolt. For a country in abject poverty, it was an unforeseeable amount, but Haiti's head of state, Jean-Pierre Boyer, could not imagine taking on a French military a second time, and conceded to the debt. Haiti would have its wealth and banks tied to France for another 50 years (Mouhot, 2013).

In its colonial years, Haiti endured a resource depletion that has set in motion its entire history of failed development. The French, slave-based plantation system aligned Haitians with a distinctive pattern. Guarded against slavery, they rejected the plantation agriculture that offered them an economic edge and comparative wealth. Their insistence on subsistence agriculture resulted in the clearings of the hills, a degradation that impacts the country still. Haiti's resentments, however justified, crafted their constitution which forbids foreigners and white men from investing in or owning property within the country. This inward-looking economy strangles Haiti as it has no choices left but to use what resources it does have, chiefly and diminishingly wood, to support the basic and hardly met needs of its people. An island that was once 98% forest is now only 2% of what it was (Mouhot, 2013). Haiti's story is a tragedy if we assume there's no repair, but how can a country rebuild itself without resources? Who will

look out for Haiti's unique interests, when Haiti trusts no one but itself? The slow path to development continues these 200 years later.

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