

CONSERVATION CAN MEAN LIFE OR DEATH

A VIEWPOINT FROM THE SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION SOCIETY'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

I have talked a lot recently about shifting priorities for conservationists. Priorities for those of us living and working in Canada and the United States are shifting from resource conservation to environmental management. That shift is apparent in the articles published in our *Journal*, in the papers presented at our annual conference, in the policies and programs that drive much of our day-to-day work, and in the conversations I have with you. But I was reminded recently

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Above: Southwest of Port-au-Prince, the tree stripped La Selle mountain range and the silt-filled Rouyonne River show the direct effects of deforestation and soil erosion in Haiti.

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My reminder came in the form of a short article tucked into the back pages of the *New York Times*. The article, really just a couple paragraphs, was about the effect the recent series of hurricanes had had on land and people in the Caribbean. The article reported that fewer than 10 people had been lost in the Dominican Republic while 2,000 people had been killed in Haiti. Two countries that share the same island and that were hit by the same storm suffered such radically different consequences. How could this be?

A tour of websites produced the answer—a story of conservation failure causing an ecological collapse so profound I frankly found it hard to believe. The story was well told and the photographs were compelling, but I couldn't, and still can't, really take in the reality of what I was seeing and reading on the Internet.

The facts don't do justice to the story but here they are. Ninety percent of Haiti's forest cover is gone. Those forests—once so lush Haiti was called the “pearl of the Antilles”—held together a vulnerable landscape. Two-thirds of Haiti's land is on slopes steeper than 60 percent. Less than a third of Haiti's land occupies slopes less than 10 percent. Precipitation varies from 3 to 30 meters (or 118 to 1,181 inches) a year and severe storms are common.

Mike Stocker, South Florida Sun-Sentinel.

Right: Sediment from it's eroding landscape can be seen in the sky blue water surrounding Haiti.



Mike Stocker, South Florida Sun-Sentinel.

Erosion is extreme—37 million tons a year. Two-thirds of Haiti's productive farmland has been destroyed. Crop yields are shrinking and population is swelling. The hydrologic system has collapsed. Twenty-five of 35 watersheds are barren. Only 10 percent of the precipitation makes it into the soil. Over 400 streams have been completely silted in and base flow is erratic in the rest. Water is in short supply for people and agriculture at the same time daily damaging floods occur during the rainy season. Flooding during the recent hurricanes was catastrophic.

Ecological and social collapses have reinforced each other in a downward spiral into poverty, environmental degradation, social injustice, disease, and violence. It is as if "the very land is hemorrhaging," as one reporter put it, and along with it Haiti's future. Meanwhile, just across the border the Dominican Republic's forests are largely intact, watersheds are functioning, and soils are producing. An ecologist told me you can see the border clearly on satellite imagery—green on one side, brown on the other.

In Canada and the United States where most of us live and work we were lucky. Our land was less vulnerable. But we were also lucky because conservationists inter-

vened in time. In the driftless area where I grew up, soil cores on stream bottoms sometimes run into the roofs of buildings completely buried by sediment. Our story could have turned out differently.

The work most of us do in Canada and the United States to conserve resources and manage the environment is vital. It is sobering to be reminded that elsewhere that work is literally a matter of life and death.

The information presented in this issue of Homefront was taken largely from a series of articles published in the South Florida Sun-Sentinel. You can find those articles and a great deal more on the Sun-Sentinel website at www.sun-sentinel.com.



Craig A. Cox, executive director for the Soil and Water Conservation Society since 1998.