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Whittle, Daniel

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Cuba–USA: Environmental Protection Knows No Borders

Daniel Whittle JD

In 2010, PBS *Nature* aired a stunning documentary about Cuba's environment called *Cuba: The Accidental Eden*. The film showed footage of natural areas and nearly pristine ecosystems, from healthy coral reefs off Cuba's northwest coast to the fertile wetlands and mangrove forests of Zapata Swamp National Park in the south. It also featured the work of Cuban scientists who, with low salaries and few resources, remain dedicated to protecting and sustaining the country's rich and diverse natural heritage. The show left many viewers with the impression that conservation in Cuba was a fluke, an accident brought about by 50 years of political isolation and economic deprivation.

Some pundits have even suggested cynically that the US embargo is the Cuban environment's *best friend* and, once it is lifted, uncontrolled tourism and the rush for economic development will wipe out the island's natural areas and forever tarnish the *Crown Jewel of the Caribbean*.

This was on my mind on December 18, 2014, when I had coffee with a friend in Havana to celebrate the historic change in US–Cuba relations announced just the day before. As a lawyer for Cuba's environmental ministry since its inception in 1995, my friend has been instrumental in working on many of the country's far-reaching environmental policies. He has also been an advocate for US–Cuban cooperation to protect the ocean waters, migratory marine life and other resources shared by the two nations and subject to the same threats.

I asked him what he thought about suggestions that Cuba's beauty was accidental or that the embargo was actually good for its environment. Moreover, with the door opening to better relations, I was already wondering how we could seize the opportunity to expand scientific exchange and environmental cooperation between our two countries. For starters, he confirmed my own experience, noting that while political isolation may have influenced Cuba's development patterns, conservation of natural areas and biodiversity has not happened by accident. During the height of the 1990s economic crisis, the Cuba's National Assembly amended the constitution to add environmental provisions, established Cuba's first-ever cabinet-level ministry for the environment, and enacted the ambitious *Law on the Environment*. This law spawned a series of regulations, policies and programs that together make environmental protection and sustainable development top policy priorities.

One formidable example is Cuba's network of more than 250 national parks, nature reserves and other protected areas, on both land and sea. Cuban scientists and managers—joined by US scientists from our Environmental Defense Fund and other NGOs—designed these terrestrial and marine areas to provide refuge for countless plant and animal species, many of which only exist in Cuba. One of these areas, the world-renowned Gardens of the Queen off the southeastern shore, is the largest marine park in the Caribbean and home to some of the region's healthiest coral reefs.

The Cuban government also takes the threat of climate change seriously. In response to rising seas, it has imposed strict rules for tourism and other new facilities, limiting how close to the coast they can be built, and has begun removing structures along vulnerable shorelines. In fact, for years now, land-use planners from coastal states in the USA have studied Cuba's proactive programs for adapting to climate change.

Normalization of relations... could open the door to new collaborative efforts to tackle water pollution

On the topic of the embargo, my friend and other Cuban colleagues have long maintained that res-

trictions imposed by US policies have impeded environmental protection, not helped it. Despite its remarkable natural beauty and biodiversity, Cuba has its fair share of environmental woes, many of them exacerbated by such political isolation and trade barriers. The severely contaminated Havana harbor is emblematic of other waterbodies throughout the country, suffering from antiquated or nonexistent sewage treatment facilities. The country has made some progress in curbing water pollution, but clean-up and reclamation have been costly and slow. Dozens of US companies and nonprofits would contribute time, know-how and money to help clean up these waterways, but the US embargo has prevented them from doing so.

Normalization of relations, implying broad changes in US policy, could open the door to new collaborative efforts to tackle water pollution and many other environmental problems in Cuba—from soil erosion to contamination from hazardous wastes, deforestation, overfishing, air pollution and more effects of climate change.

What's more, working together becomes a necessity, since such environmental problems don't stop at either the US or Cuban border. The prevailing currents and Cuba's proximity to the USA tightly link the two countries' marine and terrestrial ecosystems.


Consider the example of oil. Three years ago, Cuba began exploring for offshore oil in deep waters off its northern coast, not far from Havana. Discovering abundant domestic oil reserves would be a boon to the Cuban economy, but a major oil spill could be devastating to shorelines and communities in both Cuba and the USA. Yet, once again, trade and travel restrictions imposed by US law and Cold War politics have made it difficult for the two countries to cooperate to prevent and respond to an eventual spill. Undoubtedly, working together would benefit both our countries, as much to address existing problems as to keep others at bay.

Finally we talked about what could happen once the embargo is lifted and Cuba opens up to US tourists, businesses and investors. Will its conservation programs and environmental policies take a back seat to economic growth, as we have seen in so much of the region and world? Or will Cuba double down

Viewpoint

and strengthen policies to ensure that future growth is truly sustainable?

Neither of us had a crystal ball, but we agreed that Cuba's natural bounty can be the backbone of sustainable economic growth. Tourists will flock to Cuba not just for sun and sand, but for diving, birdwatching, wildlife viewing, biking and other activities that depend on protecting and perpetuating wild places. Success will demand strong political will at all levels of the Cuban government, expanded scientific research to guide managers and policymakers, public participation in environmental deci-

sionmaking, and money. But success will also demand strong international support for environmental protection in Cuba—primarily from its closest neighbor. Dismantling US policies that have impeded scientific exchange and environmental cooperation is a vital first step towards this goal. 

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Disclosures: None

Correspondence: dwhittle@edf.org
