

Haiti's Diverse Ecosystems in Peril

The futures of Haitian ecosystems are uncertain because of a battle between necessity and conservation.
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PRACTICAL SCIENCE WITH PHIL FREDA

According to [CNN](#) and the [Alliance for Zero Extinction](#), the mountainous forests of [Haiti's Massif de la Hotte](#) region is home to more critically endangered species than anywhere else on the Planet.

The region is home to 42 different species of mammal, bird, reptile, amphibian and plant that are on the [International Union for Conservation of Nature](#)'s (IUCN) Red List of Globally Threatened Species.

Thirteen species of frog alone are on the verge of extinction in the area.

The root of the problem

Why are all these species going extinct?

The answer is somewhat complicated, but at the surface, is deforestation.

Only 3 percent of Haiti's original forests remain and are disappearing at a rate of approximately 10 percent every five years, according to a group of conservation missions including [Birdlife International](#) and the [Zoological Society of London](#).

Here the issue gets a bit complicated.

The forest is disappearing because desperately poor communities use the trees for firewood and to clear land for agriculture.

To add insult to injury, the [earthquake in Haiti](#) caused an influx of refugees, from the capital of Port-au-Prince, to double the size of the local population.

According to [CNN](#), a bag of charcoal (fuel obtained from the felled trees) can sell for \$30.00. This may not seem like a lot of money, but when people make about one dollar a day, it's substantial. I can relate.

It's either feed yourself and your family by cutting down a tree or two or possibly starve to death. Not exactly a hard decision.

Being somewhat of a naturalist, I feel horrible at the fact that a beautiful and diverse ecosystem, such as Haiti's, is being destroyed.

As a human being, however, I understand the position of the Haitian people. Being stuck between a rock and a hard place, the destruction of the forest is not about greed, but of necessity.

What is being done to help?

Recently, Birdlife International, the Zoological Society of London and [Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust](#) obtained \$450,000 from the UK government to work with Haitian Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) like [Societe Audubon Haiti](#) and [Fondation Macaya](#).

The money will be used to help local communities find alternative income that would not harm the forest and to also improve the livelihoods of the Haitian people.

These groups understand that to start helping the environment, it must start at the community level.

This money will be used to deliver water from natural springs into the villages.

This saves people from having to venture into the forest for fresh water, which usually results in the clearing of trees to access proper water sources.

Additional initiatives include starting agricultural projects like chicken farming cooperatives and planting fast growing tree species that can be used for fuel.

Also, the money will go to the area's only school, which closed in 2000 because of funding issues. In addition to improving the human condition, these groups are also planting trees in tree nurseries to start a reforestation effort.

Better yet, the reforestation project also employs local people.

The [conservation](#) groups stated that they will continue to help in Haiti until NGOs are able to successfully sustain themselves.

Can the forests be saved?

Scientists and researchers are now designating which areas should be considered "hot spots" for emergency conservation efforts.

This means that it is important to identify which areas of the forest contain the most endangered species. These areas will be made priority areas for the reforestation effort.

Deforestation happens in patches so that there may be small tracts of forest that are isolated from larger ones.

These "islands" of forest habitat may be the only place left where a certain species exists.

By locating these areas, researchers and scientists can start to determine what measures can be made in order to help bolster these diminished, or isolated, groups of organisms.

Massive damage has been done, but nature always finds a way to bounce back.

It may be true that some species could have been depleted to critical points that are almost impossible to return from.

The important thing is though, that conservation groups, with the help of the Haitian people and Haitian NGOs, are starting to realize the effect deforestation has on the ecosystem and are beginning to help.

Hopefully the combined efforts of these groups will not only help save a precious and diverse ecosystem, but also send much needed aid to the people of Haiti.

Think about it!

Interested in helping? Check out these links:

[Alliance for Zero Extinction](#)

[International Union for Conservation of Nature \(IUCN\)](#)

[Birdlife International](#)

[Zoological Society of London](#)

[Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust](#)

[Societe Audobon Haiti](#)

[Fondation Macaya](#)

[UNICEF](#)

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Have you thought about it? [Tell us in the comments.](#)