Haiti’s Environment (1492–present)
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A cautionary tale
Haiti, like Easter Island, often stands as a powerful cautionary tale to warn about environmental degradation. Al Gore, in An Inconvenient Truth (2006), comments on an aerial picture of the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic and notes how different sets of policies can impact the land. Jared Diamond also compares the two countries in his book Collapse.

Why study the Environmental history of Haiti?

Even though this cautionary tale is often used by environmentalists, we do not really know who or what is responsible for the widespread deforestation or soil erosion in Haiti, or how and when it happened.

We similarly know very little about how environmental factors affected Haiti’s history. For example, what role did the climate play in undermining Haiti’s economic development? Or did earthquakes or hurricanes matter in the long term?

This ongoing research project aims to provide some answers to these questions.

This poster offers a few examples of the topics I am investigating. As research has just started I focus on questions rather than answers.

The Pearl of the Caribbean...
Haiti – ‘Green Island’ in native Taíno language – was once considered the ‘pearl of the West Indies’. Haiti is part of the second largest island in the Antilles, and was once largely covered with forest and tropical vegetation. The colonial era introduced the plantation economy, whose aim was to produce cash crops for Europe and North America. The resulting land clearance, firewood demand, and rapid population growth have progressively encroached on native ecosystems. Forests today stand on only one percent of Haiti’s land and a massive soil erosion affects the country.

“Once a tropical paradise, Haiti is a case study of a country caught in an ecological / economic downward spiral from which it has not been able to escape. It is a failed state”
Lester Brown

Who is responsible?
The former colonial power, France, has been accused of starting the deforestation process by cultivating sugar and exploiting mahogany, before Haiti’s independence in 1804.

When in 1825 France recognized the independence of Haiti, it did so only in exchange for a large “indemnity”. To pay it, Haiti had to sell a lot of its wood.

Subsequently Haitians themselves cultivated small plots of land resulting in more clearances (Dubois 2012).

Charcoal (made of wood) remains the chief source of fuel today.

Climate regime and disease
“On a map of the world in terms of product or income per head, the rich countries lie in the temperate zones, the poor countries in the tropics or semi-tropics.”
David Landes

Scatter plot of real GDP per adult in 1985 (RY85) against the country’s distance from the equator (DIST) (source: Ratti 1997)

Could Haiti’s environment and its climate regime explain some of its economic problems? Obviously, it cannot account for everything: the Dominican Republic has similar environmental conditions but is today richer and has many fewer problems.

Yet, the role of climate for under-development has been re-emphasized (Landes 1998; Ratti 1997; Kamarck 1976; Hallé 2010). I will try to see how the impact (if any) evolved over time.

Haiti’s tropical climate discouraged French immigration and encouraged slavery; it made Haiti an ideal breeding place for the mosquito that is the vector for yellow fever, which played a crucial role in the Haitian Revolution (McNeill 2010). Disease continues to play a role in undermining development today.

Earthquakes and Hurricanes

Haiti has a long history of earthquakes. Just during the 18th century more than 100 earthquakes were recorded. In 1751 and 1770 Port-au-Prince was almost completely destroyed (see map below). Earthquakes do not seem to have had any long term impact. The 2010 earthquake among the five deadliest in world history, might be different.

Droughts and hurricanes also forced settlers to adapt to the local environment (Mulcahy 2005). In recent years, climate change has increased the intensity of hurricanes.

Works cited
- Jared Diamond, Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive (New York, Viking, 2005).
- Andrew Kamarck, Tropics and Economic Development: A Provocative View into the Poverty of Nations (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1976).

Contact & acknowledgment
Please send feedback, suggestions & ideas to jm2@georgetown.edu. This poster can also be seen online at http://jmouhot.wordpress.com
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