

The environmental roots of the Haiti tragedy

Rich Heffern | Jan. 20, 2010 NCR Today

The following is from Sierra Club executive director Carl Pope's blog *Taking the Initiative*:

Washington, DC -- The world is still reeling from the magnitude of the disaster in Haiti. Many Sierra Club members and staffers, particularly from our Florida and Puerto Rico Chapters, are close to members of the Haitian expatriate community. All of us want to help the people experiencing this almost unimaginable human catastrophe however we can.

Seeing the terrible images of suffering from Port-au-Prince, our grief forces us to ask ourselves "Was such a disaster truly inevitable?" Of course we cannot control -- or even truly predict -- earthquakes. But in some places earthquakes kill tens of thousands, while in others there are only a handful of casualties. Why? I see two closely related factors that make a difference: forests and poverty.

In Haiti's case, it's easy to see how the loss of forests and the resulting impoverishment of the countryside led to the overcrowding of Port-au-Prince with three million people. But forests also matter because if they are nourished and abundant then people (even desperately poor people) aren't forced to live in the unreinforced masonry or rock buildings that kill most earthquake victims. Instead, they can use wood to give their homes and schools resilience. And poverty matters because, even without forests, it's still possible to build structures that can better withstand quakes -- but the poor cannot afford them. Poverty, of course, also leads to the almost total lack of capacity to respond to a tragedy such as the one we are witnessing in Haiti.

It's a sobering reminder of how fragile our societies are and how important it is to value and protect the natural systems on which we all depend. It's also a reminder that if we don't deal with poverty -- whatever its cause -- nature can be transformed from a nurturer to a destroyer.

Once we have done all we can to alleviate the suffering in Haiti, will we look for a way to rebuild and reforest the island so that it can someday prosper?

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