

Regreening Haiti

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By Melanie Lenart

In Tucson and elsewhere, people are gathering resources – money, food, even people – to send to Haiti for the latest in a string of disasters.

Gerard Dalencourt, a Haitian-born Tucson resident, blew a soulful sax with his funky voodoo band, Green Light, to help raise money during a Jan. 31 Hotel Congress benefit. The benefit raised about \$2,500 for earthquake relief, plus the proceeds of a donation jar that so far covers about half of Dalencourt's plane ticket to Haiti. He says he wants to help out in his hometown of Cité Soleil.

It may be an earthquake this time, but Haiti has taken quite a few blows this past decade. Dalencourt's wife, Tucson Symphony Orchestra violist Ann Weaver, says they went through three hurricanes during their 2008 stay in Haiti. Flooding from one of them killed hundreds of people in Gonaives, a nearby city that had been assaulted by a wall of mud during an earlier flood.

About 8,000 people have lost their lives in Haiti to a series of hurricanes and floods since 2002, according to a U.S. Agency for International Development /Associated Press summary published in the Jan. 15 Arizona Daily Star. Although a fraction of the 200,000 killed by the recent earthquake, that's more than six times the number of people who died in the U.S. South in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Haiti's barren landscape makes it particularly vulnerable to the floods and landslides that raise death tolls during hurricanes and heavy rains. Sitting outside Hotel Congress to talk after his gig, Dalencourt planed his hand down at a 45-degree angle to gesture how water sheers down the mountainside when it rains on denuded slopes.

"It's the primary reason that the hurricanes are so dangerous," Weaver says, referring to the lack of ground cover. In satellite images, Haiti's barren hills starkly mark its border on the island with the still-lush Dominican Republic.

Tree by tree, Haiti's hills lost their cover to the local charcoal industry. In the countryside, people sold charcoal to pay for schooling for their kids, Dalencourt explains, while city dwellers bought charcoal to cook for their families.

The Haitian government makes public service announcements exhorting people not to cut down trees, Weaver says. But on an island where millions often go hungry, such as during flood-related food shortages in the spring of 2008, this amounts to forbidding people to survive.

The only way to wean the local people off charcoal is to meet their survival needs in other ways. This is something a successful disaster relief effort could offer, if extended long enough.

As recovery gets underway, providing jobs to local people to plant trees would be a potential way to pull Haiti back into the green. Dalencourt reminisces about getting friends together to plant avocado, pine and grapefruit seedlings – a forest cover that comes with fruits and nuts.

If the Haitian people supported the idea, restoration of the island could even fit the bill for reducing emissions from deforestation in developing countries (REDD) as part of the proposed climate treaty.

A REDD effort to green Haiti would help for many reasons. It would pull down into the trees some of the airborne carbon dioxide heating up the climate. It would increase the island's resistance to hurricanes and heavy rains, both of which are expected to become more intense as the climate continues to warm. Forests also could provide wind barriers, flood protection, even a sunscreen as temperatures continue to climb.

As it is, Haiti stands without even a sheltering crown of trees between hillsides and hurricanes. It faces storm surges and floods without even a layer of roots to grasp soil made slippery by rains. It faces tropical temperatures without the cooling shade of trees.

Even in the aftermath of earthquakes, trees could come in handy. Finding drinkable water and edible food has been a big challenge for earthquake survivors. Juicy grapefruits, fatty avocados and shade would improve the situation in just about any crisis.

Those interested in contributing to the relief effort can reach Dalencourt at [**saxophonesax2000@yahoo.com**](mailto:saxophonesax2000@yahoo.com) or the Tucson Haiti Alliance at [**tucsonhaitialliance@gmail.com**](mailto:tucsonhaitialliance@gmail.com).

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