Haiti's fragile ecosystems facing disaster

Title While the eyes of the world have followed the effect of Haiti's devastating earthquake on Port-au-Prince, an ecological disaster has been quietly unfolding elsewhere in the country. The mountainous forests of Haiti's Massif de la Hotte region have more critically endangered species than anywhere else on earth, according to Alliance for Zero Extinction, a global initiative of 52 conservation organizations. The area has 42 mammals, birds, reptiles, plants and amphibians on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List of Globally Threatened Species. More importantly, 13 species of frog on the verge of extinction live only here. The Alliance for Zero Extinction reports nowhere else on Earth has more than nine such species. However, only 2% of Haiti's original forests remain and they are disappearing at a rate of 10% every five years, according to a group of conservation groups including BirdLife International and the Zoological Society of London. The forests are being cut down by desperately poor communities who chop the trees for firewood and then use the land to grow crops, the conservationists said. The Massif de la Hotte region suffered further strain after January's earthquake when refugees from the capital Port-au-Prince doubled the size of the local population. "It's slash and burn subsistence agriculture that comes at the expense the forest," said David Wege, of BirdLife International. "People are just trying to eke out a living by cutting down trees for fuel and charcoal, and then using the land for agriculture. "A bag of charcoal can fetch US$30, which is a significant economical driver to people earning about US$1 a day. The consequences are landslides, mudslides, erosion and flooding. The people know the long term impact but they are just trying to survive." BirdLife International, the Zoological Society of London and Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust recently secured US$450,000 from the UK government's Darwin Initiative to work with Haitian NGOs, Societe Audubon Haiti and Fondation Macaya, helping local communities find alternative income without destroying the forest. Wege said: "Protecting the environment immediately comes down to helping local people with their livelihoods, because they are the same people who are impacting the environment. "We need to help people survive better with less impact on the environment, so our involvement has to start at a community level." Examples of the work in helping reduce the community's impact on the forest include piping fresh water from natural springs into villages, which saves people from having to cut down trees to reach the springs. The NGOs have also established tree nurseries, growing trees for reforestation and giving employment to local people. Other initiatives include establishing fast-growing wood for fuel around villages, setting up chicken farming cooperatives and reopening the area's only school, which closed down in 2000 because of lack of funding. Researchers are now starting to study the forest itself to discover where exactly the most endangered species are living, and which patches should be made priorities for reforestation. "We need to make sure species are not going extinct while are a reforesting somewhere else," said Wege. "The potential for extinctions there is huge. Because there are lots of little forest patches, any one could be the

only place where a specific species lives, and if that goes, so does the species. "The area is exceptionally high in endemic species that are not found elsewhere: frogs, mammals, plants, reptiles and birds. "There are two endangered species of mammal that are found only on the island: a solenodon, which is like a giant shrew, and a hutia, like a long-legged guinea pig living in trees."

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Wege said that although January's earthquake did not directly impact the Massif de la Hotte region, it did have an immediate influx of people fleeing Port-au-Prince. "The communities doubled in population after the earthquake," said Wege. "Seeing as these communities are living below the poverty line the impact on local resources is huge. "Our concern was that the forest just didn't stand a chance with this sudden influx of people, but many are now returning to Port-au-Prince. They have discovered there's not much to do here and their chances of eking out a living are better in Port-au-Prince, where there is aid and support." In addition, the region relies heavily on NGOs, and as those organizations lost staff and offices in the earthquake, the people of Massif de la Hotte have lost out further, Wege said. All the work is carried out by the Haitian NGOs, Societe Audubon Haiti and Fondation Macaya, while Wege and the other international partners provide technical support, fundraising and a global perspective. "We will continue to support the area until the Haitian NGOs are capable of doing it on their own," said Wege. "However, they already had a difficult financial situation there and the earthquake has set them back, so we are there for the long term. "The UK government was a bit concerned about funding a research project in Haiti after the earthquake, when there was so much human suffering. But this project looks long-term at working with the community to improve their livelihoods while ensuring their biodiversity heritage is not lost in the process."

Photo: Massif de la Hotte supports much of Haiti's remaining forest. Sam Turvey/ ZSL

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