

COMMISSION FOR ASSISTANCE TO A FREE CUBA 2004 REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT—ASSESSMENT OF CHAPTER SIX: “ADDRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION”

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OVERVIEW

It is with great satisfaction that we note that about 20 percent of the *Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba 2004 Report to the President*¹ is concerned with environmental issues, in particular environmental degradation and how the United States, as well as the international community, could assist a post-transition Cuban government in addressing these issues. The report clearly details the Cuban archipelago’s most serious environmental problems such as: soil degradation (erosion, sedimentation, and compaction), deforestation, water pollution and contamination, deterioration of urban environments, deterioration of air quality, and loss of biodiversity.

The sections of Chapter 6 of the report dealing with fresh water, land management and quality issues are comprehensive and reflect the combined input of several specialized U.S. Government (USG) agencies. The approach is technically sound and recognizes the complexity of the problems Cuba faces. For instance, the report contains sections dealing with water resources and water resources infrastructure, and provides a discussion of issues related to ambient water quality, flood plain management and control, and a host of regulatory matters that must be addressed in the provision of clean water. The report follows a similar approach regarding land and air quality issues.

The vast majority of the report’s recommendations are oriented toward the provision of technical assistance to enhance the country’s human resource potential, although noting that, by regional standards, Cuba already occupies a privileged position in terms of the availability of natural scientists and engineers. Thus, the environmental problems of Cuba should call for remedies that can be addressed and managed within the country. Aside from a functioning environmental ministry and a legal framework (Law 81), Cuba possesses a large and literate population that can be readily educated on the necessity to protect and develop the environment on the basis of sustainable yields. It also has a large number of capable professionals that, given the appropriate authority and resources, can take on the responsibility of enforcing laws, conducting research and development programs, and administering relations with international entities involved in managing the environment.

The report is particularly strong on offering suggestions on how the USG can help a future Cuban government through technical assistance initiatives modeled on existing programs used in the United States, or designed to assist other countries with problems similar to those afflicting Cuba. An assertive move in this direction would be for the USG government to carry out starting now many of its training and development suggestions involving a large cadre of Cuban

1. The full report is available at <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rt/cuba/commission/2004/c12237.htm>.

environmentalists and NGOs inside and outside the country. Politically, this move would support the message about how seriously the U.S. considers the protection of its neighboring waters. This would also assist in the creation of a class of Cuban independent environmentalists that would be ready and willing to assist a new government to begin the reconstruction of Cuba’s environment.

The report’s main weakness is that it only perfunctorily reviews some of the reasons behind environmental decline. It seems as if the authors fell into the folly of simplification. Rather than recognizing the complexity of environmental decline—in the present and over time—they chose instead to embrace politically expedient simplifications by simply concentrating on the actions of Cuba’s present regime and ignoring the significant degradation that occurred from the time of the European discovery in 1492.

As defined by the Cartagena Convention, from an environmental standpoint, Cuba is not an isolated island within the Caribbean Basin. Oil transfers and vessel collisions present a likelihood of damage that will affect more than one country in the area of the Caribbean. The chapter falls short on exploring the possibility that environmental disasters within Cuban waters may very well affect its neighbors due to Cuba’s on-going oil exploration. At present and in the future, the danger of oil and/or chemical spills within Cuban territorial waters, as well as in the bordering Florida Strait and Old Bahama Channel, is a situation that needs to be continuously appraised and monitored with our neighboring countries. Clearly, oil exploration, oil transfers, and vessel collisions raise the possibility of damage that will affect more than one country in the area

A real present concern to the United States should be the immediate intent of the Cuban government to exploit the northern coast of Cuba for oil exploration. Given the secrecy and propaganda measures with which the communist government has operated for 45 years, it is worrisome that any accident in the oil operations may cause a disaster. It is surprising that at the moment, the USG has shown no public concern about the oil exploration activities being carried out by Cuba, 26 miles into the Florida Straits.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

As previously mentioned, the report is generally sound and comprehensive. For a report of this nature involving such a large number of agencies, it is still able to address a broad repertoire of recommendations that, if implemented, could have a major beneficial impact on Cuba’s environment and its people. Still, shortcomings include the failure to consider in depth and quantify how future Cuban generations will obtain the financial resources needed to cover such an enormous restoration bill. This includes the legacy of environmentally insensitive development policies of the socialist regime, as well as those of earlier colonial and republican governments.

Some of these financial issues, however, are touched on in the report’s sections dealing with how to reactivate the economy. It does note that “a free Cuba should consider having a permanent nationwide market-based system for financing environmental infrastructure projects” (p. 364), suggesting that it be capitalized by donor grants. It also suggests participation in the U.S. Government Coral Reef Conservation Fund, as well as seeking out multi-lateral support (p. 422). The question still is: given Cuba’s needs in so many sectors, and donors’ budget constraints, how much will be required and how much will be available to address environmental priorities?

Also, more detail is required in planning the island’s environmental recovery. As such, a comprehensive and actionable environmental governance action plan for the transition period should be developed, leveraging what already exists in Cuba, in order to fully identify the country’s requirements. Based on this approach, any foreign government, including that of the United States, could assist in protecting the Cuban environment not only by offering courses and technical support, but also with environmental equipment, materials and supplies, software, cleanup technologies, financial assistance, international support imagery studies, and partnerships. Three environmental protection planning scenarios are recommended to group all the proposed recommendations. With each one, a logical prioritizing of the actions should be established, although their order may vary—and may be inverted—depending on the

course of events. The three scenarios will be defined as environmental emergency, institutionalization, and sustainability phases or stages.

The Environmental Emergency phase will focus on dealing with critical situations through the design and implementation of a body of temporary regulations and economic incentives to complement those already in existence. These will launch efforts aimed at soil recovery, reforestation, water decontamination, and the reestablishment of environmental sanitation systems. At the same time, it is an essential task of this phase to support and guarantee a legal framework under which any new environmental organizations could operate.

The *Environmental Institutionalization* phase will have as its basic objectives to establish environmental rights for all citizens of the republic, initiate the creation of new legislation for the protection and use of the environment, begin to establish permanent state environmental regulations incentives and policies, and establish priorities for the protection of coastal ecosystems, wildlife, and air quality.

The *Environmental Sustainability* stage will be geared toward establishing final regulations that guarantee the use and protection of the soil, waters, forests, coastal systems and air, as well as—for biological safety—natural reserve areas and other related issues. During this phase, a national system of environmental standards incorporating existing workable regulations should be implemented, and the development of the environmental business sector would be facilitated.

The report to a certain degree addresses the issue of protecting certain species such as birds, fish, and hawksbill sea turtles (pp. 416-420), while omitting the fate of others such as reptiles, mammals, and plants. Still, a critical aspect missing from Chapter 6 is a specific section dealing with an all-encompassing strategy focusing on how to protect all Cuban species facing extinction. The advantage of using this broad approach for preventing biodiversity loss is the fact that the benefits can be quantifiable, and specific funded efforts developed directed at those habitats

critical to the preservation of these species. According to the IUCN Red List, Cuba has a number of species that are critically endangered. Fortunately, Cuban environmental officials have done substantial work in identifying key sites that are needed for their preservation. As a next step, it is important that the U.S. Government coordinate its own future efforts with what has already been done in order to assure the survival of all of these endangered species.

SUMMARY

By any standard, Chapter 6 is comprehensive and actionable. The multi-agency group participants and its leadership efforts should be commended. It touches on practically every environmental realm by examining existing environmental problems and proposing potential bilateral interventions, be they over the immediate, medium-, and long-term, that may be implemented to arrest further environmental degradation or undo some of the damage already done. The report's comprehensiveness is reflected in the attention it devotes to ecological attributes, cultural and historical resources, and the often-neglected roles Cuban citizens and local NGOs should have if environmental decline is to be arrested.

Chapter 6 proposes to offer a future free Cuba support regarding bilateral training assistance aimed at implementing regulations and permit systems, pollution prevention, market-based incentives, sustainable development, human health protection, public participation, public right-to-know, environmental inspection, environmental enforcement, as well as improving the environmental impact assessment (EIA) system, among others. In addition, Cuba must build a real and credible environmental governance capability supported by committed Cubans and local NGOs.

Still, the future is challenging. Initiating Cuba's environmental recovery will be a complex endeavor, with courses of action to be determined by the extent of the deterioration, as well as by the economic, political and social dynamics established during the transition to democracy and by the financial constraints existing at that time.