

Cuba: A Natural Paradise for the Smithsonian Institution

The U.S. liberal environmentalists in Cuba
in the name of a strange morality

**"To hell with the news. I'm no longer interested in news.
I'm interested in causes. We don't print the truth.
We don't pretend to print the truth..."**

Ben Bradlee, executive editor of **The Washington Post**
at a symposium sponsored by the **Smithsonian Institution**

By Carlos Wotzkow (translated by Robert Solera)

Frequently one sees an article published and well illustrated aimed to highlight the marvelous Cuban environment. Nothing strange in that if one takes into consideration that all Cubans know that Cuba, our country, boasts of the natural jewels. Every one of us appreciates them and although by the distance imposed on us by the exile, we endlessly worry about her.



Ecotourism in Cuba: There is no doubt tourists go away happy from our country. Maybe hunting the most rare Cuban species is what Castro's techno-crats call "Multiple Use Protected Areas".

Some days ago I read several versions on the Internet of an article published in 2003 by the *Smithsonian Magazine* about a trip "1000 miles in length" through the island of Cuba. It's author, Eugene Linden, spoke in exquisite terms of the conservation of nature in Castro's Cuba.

In that article, the sources of information given to substantiate the optimistic panorama included the "Switzerland-based *World Commission on Protected Areas*" and a photo of Antonio Perera Puga, the director of the National Center for Protected Areas in Cuba an acquaintance of mine for more than 20 years.

Absent among the additional sources, was the book of José R. Oro [1], the one of Carlos Wotzkow [2] and that of Sergio Díaz-Briquets and Jorge Pérez-López [3], considered a serious study even by the regime's historians [4]. Those three are the only books that to date have not suffered censorship on the topic of environmental degradation in Cuba.

How is it possible that the characteristically prestigious Smithsonian Institution censors and holds back access of its public to other sources?

My personal opinion is that the *Smithsonian Institution* is no longer that credible institution that young Cuban scientists admired clandestinely through the halls of the Academy of Sciences in Cuba since the mid 60s, but is now a general, ideological headquarters with a carefully oriented pseudo-scientific agenda to transmit false positive view of Cuba's handling of the environment using emotions rather than facts. It has become an institution that controls information in an attempt to validate a totally inaccurate view, rather than contribute to the preservation of the environment of Cuba.



Cuban airplane flying over the Mayabeque River plains, where formerly existed forests connecting, as a biological corridor, the provinces of Habana and Pinar del Río.

Picture taken by the author from another plane in 1989.

Among the environmental Bibles the Smithsonian uses to inform about Cuba, the most absurd is the book by Alfonso Silva Lee [5]. In it, its author (Raúl Castro's son by rearing) blames the Western society for the environmental degradation of Cuba. The Smithsonian also recommends the book written by Bill Belleville [6] which critics have said is a "useless book," "frustrating," "void of purpose" and "more interested in debating about the embargo than about the marine richness of our country." [7].

The practice of creating obstacles to opposing opinions is not unusual in police states, organizations or parties that need to defend

themselves from the threat that freedom of speech poses to their rule or inaccurate ideas. All the authors accepted by the Smithsonian [5,6,8,9] are proven indisputable masters in that art of covering up the facts. None of them (including my acquaintances) would dare to put among their references the titles that reveal the sad truth about the environmental programs of Cuba. But what is news to me is that the Smithsonian has become a participant in the pretense.

What does the Smithsonian mean when it adjudicates that 22% of Cuba is environmentally protected? And what did they use as sources?

It must be understood that it is not possible to believe that the Smithsonian could find scientists in Cuba willing to contradict the statistics coming out of the government. Thus, I can assure you that many of its advisers in Cuba, Switzerland and the U.S. are Cubans (all confessed defenders of Castro's regime) and obligated to support the data issued from Havana.

The majority of them work in institutions that distribute biased reports. They are people for whom accuracy is not of concern in their positions at the *International Union for Conservation of Nature* (IUCN), the *World Wildlife Fund* (WWF) - which are the Switzerland-based *World Commission on Protected Areas* that they

mention. Also they work at the University of Florida, the *Caribbean Marine Conservation (The Nature Conservancy, Caribbean Division)* the *United Nation Development Program (UNDP)* and Tulane University.

Reuters News Agency informed on August 10, 1999 Cuba had 21.5% of forests, but I assure you that if we are referring to healthy, preserved forest, our country does not go over 9% ^[10]. A high level Cuban officer now takes that number up to 21.7% ^[11] and the Smithsonian's practice is becoming, as in this last instance, only an echo of the information that Havana provides them. It is apparently the price to pay for a visa to visit the ecological "paradise" created by Castro.

I wonder if the readers of this article have taken notice of the big differences that exist between "protected areas," "multiple use areas" and "natural forests" (those called "untouched [rain] forests") that the *Smithsonian Magazine* mentions. It is a pity that the Cuban specialist in IUCN in Switzerland has not explained to the Smithsonian that the 50,000 hectares of trees planted per year by the Cuban government does not compensate for the consumed ones.

Switzerland is a country that is one-third the size of Cuba and is 30% forestland ^[12]. If one travels through any of its cantons, there is no single direction toward which one can look that does not allow you to see an immense and developed wood in the scenery. What happens in Cuba is the opposite. Does the Smithsonian believe a 1,000-mile trip through Cuba made by an American is more valid than the 1038 investigation trips I took in 12 years living on the island?

It would be very positive and honest if the defenders of Castro's environmental policy in Gland (Switzerland) would confirm to the Smithsonian that the forest richness in Switzerland belongs to and is being taken care of by 37,000 state entities and 250,000 private owners.

Meanwhile, if the data offered by Cuba is true, Cuban wilderness might cover more than 80% of the Swiss land. And if Cuba is the great wood producer that the Smithsonian claims, how is it that it produces just 7.5 million cubic meters of wood per year, ^[13] while Switzerland, produces 10 million cubic meters in a space equivalent to the area of Havana and Matanzas provinces?

The *WWF* (where this Cuban expert work) recognizes that the forests in Cuba were affected during the 1990s by an irrational use of wood as fuel. And the same decision maker, Castro, also decided to surrender his nature preserving efforts to an outside organization proven itself over and over to be of questionable value: the United Nations.

Why is it that an organization like the Smithsonian Institution does not acknowledge that Jamaica has the best environment in the Caribbean? Is it perhaps that its political agenda is a more important task than to tell the truth? I have flown over Cuba and Jamaica and while my country looks dusty and red from above, the beautiful island of Jamaica seems to be a green oasis in the middle of the Caribbean.

Cuba is the largest island of the Antilles. Only because of that and not for its good state of forest conservation, is it possible to find patches of forest, the coral reefs and the most extensive wetlands in the region. My book "*Natumaleza Cubana*" tells all about the unique species of Cuba and also about the fate that those forests, those coral reefs and those wetlands suffer. That book gives details of the fate suffered by the hábitats of the Cuban Solenodon, the Bee Hummingbird and the tiny frogs.



Perhaps the envooyees from the Smithsonian couldn't see the good health of these forests in the heart of Ciénaga de Zapa-ta, a National Park and a Castro's Revolution "protected area".

It is not the first time that I watch American science ignore the facts in search of popular emotions that support a political agenda. Also it is not the first time that the Smithsonian appears quoted next to other American institutions of the extreme left like the *Center for International Policy*, *Global Exchange*, *Sierra Club*, *MacArthur Foundation*, *American Friends Committee*, *World Watch*, *Natural Resources Defense Council* as well as Harvard University and the *Environmental Protection Agency* [14]. Based on that, I guess it is not surprising to see the Smith-

sonian acquiesce to the demands that Cuba dictates. That's why the key phrase in the article in the Smithsonian Magazine: "Much of the nation's ecological health can be chalked up to planning by Fidel Castro's regime."

Now it happens that the Soviets (seen as traitors to the cause of Communism) are the guilty ones of the Cuban ecological disaster. According to the Smithsonian (but also published in the books that it doesn't quotes), "during the soviet era, which ended in 1991, Cuban industry and agriculture, boosted by Soviet support, proved highly polluting."

That might be why Mr. Wayne S. Smith [15], former Chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana during the Carter Administration and a very close personal friend and admirer of Fidel Castro, uses some of the "advisers" in the Smithsonian Institution to deny that Cuba is suspect in having a role in biological warfare. According to him, the West Nile Virus could not be a biological weapon sent from Cuba for purely ornithological limitations.

In an article dated in March 2003 [16], the Smithsonian Institution, to which Mr. Smith went for help to disprove Cuba's role, urgently organized a symposium along with the Audubon Society to discuss the danger that the West Nile Virus represents for the United States. None of these institutions made the least reference to biolo-

gical warfare. But I would suggest the readers to take a peek at the zoogeographical evolution (they show the maps in the article) of that disease.

The Smithsonian Institution says in its article that ending the embargo (it must be referring to the federal limitations on the visits of tourists) might make their tropical paradise in the Caribbean disappear. Which clearly suggests that for the Smithsonian, as it is for institutions like *Greenpeace*, *Earth First!*, *Wilderness Society*, *Audubon Society*, *Environmental Defense Fund*, *Friend of the Earth*, *World Wildlife Fund*, *Ford Foundation* and *Rockefeller Foundation*, human welfare is always takes a secondary position to environment concerns.

The list of contradictions that abound in the scientific relations between Cuba and the U.S. would be too long. But I just would like for you to reflect and question: How is it possible to give Castro the role of wildlife protector, if none of the projects that his administration directs grants a single dollar toward its fulfillment?

To try to find an answer I suggest an example. Note the dollar amount of the project of Protected Areas (under the direction of the Cuban officer that appears in the photograph of Lynda Richardson illustrating the Smithsonian article) and with which Cuba works jointly with UNDP. According to that UN organization ^[17], they supplied \$148,278 dollars of the \$148,278 dollars assigned to the budget. The same happens with the rest of the joint projects.

Where is Fidel Castro's merit, or that of his regime, or of its technocrats? In my opinion, it is time to reconsider our admiration of the Smithsonian Institution, as their political agenda has overtaken all others. Considering the sources they used for this article, it appears that the far-left and liberals are dictating to the Smithsonian. While the UN dictates environmental controls over land that belongs to the people of Cuba.

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Bienne, Switzerland, October 4, 2003

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