

CHAPTER 15

Conflicting Environments

Negotiating Social and Ecological Vulnerabilities in Urban Jamaica and Curaçao

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Introduction

Caribbean islands, including Jamaica and Curaçao, form one of the “biodiversity hotspots” selected by transnational environmental organizations such as Conservation International. Maintaining global biodiversity hinges on the protection of the exceptionally diverse ecosystems, and dozens of endangered and often endemic species the region harbours. Apart from the intrinsic value of Caribbean ecologies, many of the region’s tourism-based economies are strongly dependent on (the idea of) unspoiled natural landscapes and an image of the region as paradise. The coastal zones which encompass much of Caribbean nature are especially vulnerable to both natural and human-made hazards. In Jamaica and Curaçao, local environmental non-governmental organizations, and to a lesser extent governments, connect with global environmental discourse and lobby for the protection of ecosystems and biodiversity, with an emphasis on the marine environment.

In a number of ways, the discourse employed by these environmental professionals is a continuation of colonial ideas of an Edenic Caribbean. To many citizens of these urbanized islands, who live in polluted city neighbourhoods, this form of environmentalism has limited appeal. This chapter examines the clash between a discourse of ecological vulnerability conveyed by non-governmental and governmental stakeholders, and the contradictory experience and communication of social vulnerability by residents in blighted urban areas. While supralocal stakeholders may tend to portray the natural environment as threatened by the uneducated masses, stakeholders at the community level are preoccupied by a different range of environmental problems which they associate with their socially vulnerable positions.

This chapter analyses how constructions of Caribbean environments are associated with class, ethnicity and scalar orientation, while possibilities are explored for reconciling social and ecological vulnerabilities. It is based on twelve months of fieldwork in Kingston, Jamaica and Willemstad, Curaçao with residents of low-income areas and with policy makers, NGOs and academics (see also Jaffe 2006).

Caribbean Vulnerabilities

Both Jamaica and Curaçao are considered to be small island developing states (SIDS). SIDS share certain economic, social and ecological traits that are all related to vulnerability, a key term in speaking of such territories. Vulnerability is defined as “exposure to risk and an inability to avoid or absorb potential harm”, and its twin concept is found in resilience, “the capacity to adjust to threats and mitigate or avoid harm” (Pelling 2003, 5). Vulnerability and resilience are seen as the result of differential access to economic, political, social, environmental and geographical assets, while the distribution of these assets is determined by both human and physical forces (Pelling and Uitto 2001, 51).

The ecological vulnerability of SIDS relates in part to their high exposure to natural hazards. The active plate boundary nature of the Caribbean’s geological setting leads to earthquake and volcanic hazard, as witnessed, for example, by the 1995–1997 eruptions in Montserrat which obliterated two-thirds of the island. Other common

hazards throughout the centuries have been hurricanes, flooding, droughts and mudslides. Recent examples are heavy floods in Suriname in 2006, Guyana in 2005 (Williams and Johnson-Bhola, chapter 4) and Hurricane Ivan, which devastated Grenada and parts of Jamaica, in September 2004. Hurricanes appear to be increasing in frequency and intensity in recent decades, presumably as the result of global climate change (for discussion, see Gamble, chapter 2). Likewise the rising of sea level connected to global warming will have devastating effects on low-lying islands like those in the Caribbean, and tsunamis, such as the one that devastated large parts of Asia in December 2004, are not unthinkable (Zahibo and Pelinovsky 2001).

One of the properties of SIDS is that a relatively high proportion of their land consists of coastal zone, recognized as especially vulnerable to a range of natural hazards. This is especially urgent in the Caribbean, as the majority of human life and property is concentrated along the coastline. Mangrove forests, dunes and coral reefs shield shorelines and beaches, but, as coastal development threatens these ecosystems, the coast itself becomes subject to erosion. Conservation of the natural environment is essential in protecting cities and villages from environmental hazards including flooding and storms. This relation is all the more critical when population pressure on resources, lack of regulatory authority and poverty lead to inadequately planned construction in inappropriate areas, illustrated, for instance, by extensive damage to improperly or illegally constructed dwellings in the Jamaican parish of Clarendon following Hurricane Ivan in September 2004. Urban areas are especially vulnerable to this combination of anthropogenic and natural hazards, as poorly regulated urban expansion equates to social and spatial concentrations of risk. Informal settlements that have been developed without land tenure, basic services and infrastructure aggravate this vulnerability.

It is in this area that ecological vulnerability merges with social vulnerability. Vulnerability to all types of environmental hazards is connected to poverty, social isolation and political marginalization. Environmental risk tends to be increased for groups and individuals with limited financial, physical, social and political assets (Pelling 2003, 67). The urban poor, stakeholders with limited access to various assets, are most likely to both suffer the ill effects of environmental problems and be

blamed for their prevalence. Poverty and urban environmental issues are related in various, not necessarily straightforward, ways. While urban environmental degradation and hazards do contribute to poverty, activities and lifestyles of the urban poor do not directly cause environmental problems. Rather, macroeconomic conditions impede environmental management, as municipal and national governments suffer a shortage of resources. Yet inadequate and inefficient governance is an important mediator in this regard. This is apparent in the environmental degradation associated with rapid, unplanned urban expansion, and the environmental injustice produced by environmental policies which disregard equity and inequity issues.

As Satterthwaite (2003, 76) argues, “the environmental problems that low-income groups face are often more related to inadequate provision of infrastructure and services, lack of any rule of law, discrimination, and lack of political influence than to a lack of income”. He reasons that many studies have neglected the contribution of middle- and upper-class urban residents to environmental degradation, resulting in inappropriate policies that tend to blame the poor, such as the clearing of slum settlements or the obstruction of informal livelihood strategies. The removal of informal sidewalk vendors from downtown Kingston or the eviction of squatters could be seen as Jamaican examples.

In linking vulnerability and Caribbean environments, the distinction between ecological and social vulnerability is in large part the difference between “green agenda” and “brown agenda” approaches to environmental problems. There is no rigid dividing line between the two approaches, but they can be differentiated along spatial, temporal and political dimensions. The green agenda refers to dispersed and delayed problems that affect future generations. The issues prioritized by the green agenda impact mainly on ecosystem health, and the scale at which they operate is global or regional. Characteristic attitudes include the following: nature should be protected and worked with, people should be educated, and environmental services should be used less. The brown agenda, in contrast, addresses local, more immediate, problems that predominantly affect the poor. Brown agenda issues relate mainly to impacts on human health. Nature is seen as a domain that should be manipulated to serve human needs, people are to be worked with and more environmental services should be provided (McGranahan and Satterthwaite 2002).

Another emerging idea is the “blue agenda”, which refers to problems associated with water supplies, watershed management and coastal and marine resource management (IIED 2001). In the context of the Caribbean, this blue agenda, to a large extent, overlaps with the green agenda. While the green and brown agendas appear to be conflicting, they can also be framed as complementary, “meeting the needs of the poor is not a major threat to sustainability except when it allows environmental abuse by all sectors of society. Similarly, pursuing environmental sustainability is not a major threat to the environmental health of the poor except when it is used to justify maintaining the most deprived residents’ already inadequate access to environmental resources” (IIED 2001, 3).

Ecological Vulnerabilities: From Colonial to Elite Environmentalism

Colonial Proto-environmentalism

Colonial reports on the Caribbean reveal the wonder Europeans experienced on being confronted with the abundant and supposedly pristine natural landscapes they came across. In 1494, when Columbus and his crew first encountered *Xaymaca*, as Jamaica was called by its original Taino inhabitants, they expressed their delight at its natural beauty: “there silhouetted against the evening sky, arose sheer and darkly green Xaymaca. It is the fairest island that eyes have beheld: mountainous and the land seems to touch the sky; very large, bigger than Sicily, and full of valleys and fields and plains” (Floyd 1981, 25).

The roots of the environmental movement can be traced to such colonial encounters with what they saw as a tropical paradise. Various authors (Grove 1995; Barton 2002) point to European expansion as the context in which environmental awareness first materialized and the role of islands within these developments. Environmental degradation resulting from colonial practices, combined with the image of the colonies as so-called tropical Edens, gave rise to the emergence of European proto-environmentalists from the seventeenth century onwards. Insular ecosystems display environmental degradation rapidly and natural resource depletion, deforestation, soil erosion and localized climate

change were particularly evident in the Caribbean island colonies. Watts (1987) traces the earliest evidence of environmental degradation to the introduction of plantation agriculture in the early sixteenth century. Through the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth century, deforestation for plantation agriculture progressed until, as Watts (1987) notes, very little natural forest remained in islands such as Barbados by the latter half of the seventeenth century. By the mid eighteenth century, soil exhaustion on Barbadian sugar plantations was of such grave concern that efforts were made to import more fertile soil from the Guyanas (DeLoughrey 2004, 299). The visibility of such degradation contributed to the sensitization to, and understanding of, human-environment interactions. A basic sort of environmental awareness developed following interactions with natural environments as the demise of natural landscapes provoked the image of a “paradise lost”. Explorers, naturalists and scientists, including the staff of botanical gardens, recognized the detrimental effects of certain policies and practices, and took colonial governments to task, with varying levels of success.

Apart from direct confrontation with human-induced environmental change, the environmentalism of these first “activists” was also influenced by philosophical currents such as Romanticism (Tomalin 2004). The notion of discovering the Garden of Eden and the fear of losing it again is a recurrent theme in fuelling conservation, and it extends from colonial times to the present (Grove 1995). Such a narrative, however, focuses on the relationship between European – or later Euro-American – outsiders and Caribbean nature, to the exclusion of both population groups and Caribbean urbanization. In colonial accounts, the “natives”, who are mainly African slaves and their descendants, are generally depicted as childlike creatures, incapable of managing their natural surroundings sensibly. Connections between ecological and social vulnerabilities are seldom made. In a similar manner, urban areas, present from the early days of colonialism, are elided from celebratory descriptions of lush, tropical settings and supposedly pristine islands.

Though the concerns expressed by these proto-environmentalists were predominantly related to “green” problems of resource depletion, Sachs (2003) argues that colonial figures such as Alexander von Humboldt did link the exploitation of natural resources to the exploitation of specific social groups, resembling the connections made by the environmental justice movement centuries later.

Current Professional Environmentalism

Certain parallels can be observed between the colonial proto-environmentalists and present-day environmental professionals in Jamaica and Curaçao. Like their predecessors, current environmentalists tend to focus predominantly on ecological vulnerabilities, to the exclusion of social vulnerabilities. Most efforts at the level of environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) and governments go towards “green” issues, including biodiversity, marine environment and coral reefs, and nature conservation within a framework of sustainable tourism. Supralocal environmentalism tends to neglect or ignore the urban, which figures only as the cause of environmental degradation. Similar to the situation under colonialism, a majority of the population is often excluded. The “green” environmental discourse encountered at the professional level is an elite phenomenon, interwoven with specific socio-economic and ethnic constellations, and it is indicative of globally hegemonic forms of environmentalism.

A focus on ecological vulnerabilities is evident in the supralocal environmental discourse in Jamaica and Curaçao, which is overwhelmingly “green”. This disposition towards this type of environmental problems is clear in governmental policy documents and ENGO campaigns and websites. For relevant policy documents see Vomil/Mina 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2004; NRCA 1998; NEPA 1999, 2002.

The island governments do attempt to address “brown” issues, but financial interests in utilities, industry and environmental services complicate decisive action. Most ENGOS tend to focus on less “dirty”, more attractive, issues. Prominent Curaçaoan environmental organizations include Reefcare, Uniek Curaçao and Carmabi. The first, which was founded in 1992 by a group of dive operators, marine biologists and educators, is dedicated to the “worldwide protection and preservation of the Coral Reef” (see www.uniek-curaçao.an). The organization’s website states Reefcare’s motivation as the fact that the reef is a unique and beautiful natural phenomenon, which generates income for Curaçao through dive tourism. Their activities include research and monitoring of the reef, and environmental education and awareness raising projects, including snorkelling lessons for “underprivileged children”.

Uniek Curaçao is a foundation with a “creative, educational and recreational character” that organizes nature tours and is involved in

both environmental education and the raising of awareness. Its goal was stated, in an interview with one of its (Dutch) interns, as “getting the local population to realize that nature should be respected and not regarded as a trash can”. Carmabi, the Caribbean Research and Management of Biodiversity Foundation, started as a marine biology institute but merged with another organization into a foundation responsible for managing Curaçao’s protected areas, acting as a consultant for the government and establishing environmental education programmes. Their initial focus on the marine environment has broadened to nature in general.

In Jamaica, leading ENGOs include the Jamaica Conservation and Development Trust (JCDDT), the Jamaica Environment Trust (JET) and the Environmental Foundation of Jamaica (EFJ). JCDDT was established in 1988 and has been charged with co-managing Jamaica’s Blue and John Crow Mountains National Park, with two governmental agencies. It is also involved in environmental education and communication, as well as advocacy related to protected areas management (see www.greenjamaica.org.jm). Attempts at working with local communities and building the capacity of community-based organizations bordering the park has been, by their own admission, challenging (Otuokon 2007).

JET started off in 1991 as a group concerned about the fact that Jamaica’s unique natural environment was being destroyed. Funded through international NGOs and development agencies, the organization specializes in environmental education, especially through school programmes, and advocacy. Its director has been a prominent media presence. The EFJ is a foundation that promotes and sponsors sustainable development activities through the distribution of funds from a debt-for-nature-swap with the US. Some of the largest project grants disbursed have gone to conservation-oriented organizations such as JCDDT, JET, Friends of the Sea, Dolphin Head Trust and Negril Coral Reef Preservation Society (EFJ 2005).

The prioritization of conservation by Jamaican and Curaçaoan organizations appears to be typical of the Caribbean (cf. Jácome 2006). At this level of environmental professionals, a stress is placed on diminishing biodiversity, deforestation and degradation of the marine environment. In part, this focus on ecological vulnerability reflects the importance of tourism to Caribbean governments and business elites. Perceived as the motor for development in most islands, Caribbean tourism is connected

to longing for tropical abundance and supposedly “pure”, unspoiled nature. Such a tourist vision generally ignores or erases the existence of “impure” cities in the region. Additionally, global and local factors explain the near-exclusive orientation towards green agenda problems: global, in that this environmental agenda is pushed by international stakeholders, ideas and funding; and local, as green concern – apart from reflecting economic interests in the tourism sector – becomes a symbolic marker of distinction within society.

Globally, environmental thought and discourse is disseminated in particular ways through international, but Western-dominated, bilateral and multilateral fora. Green discourse and practice is diffused and imposed through donor countries, international financial institutions and international NGOs. As Hartwick and Peet (2003, 289) argue, through an increase in global governance mechanisms, “environmental concern has been ideologically and institutionally incorporated into the global neoliberal hegemony”. In the discourse that accompanies this sphere, “global environmental problems are presented as being *a priori* of a different order, and thus marginalize many other environmental concerns that might affect many people or eco-systems much more directly” (Hajer 1995, 11). Perhaps unwittingly, Caribbean governments and NGOs – under external financial and ideological pressure – reinforce the hegemony of this discourse, one which prioritizes ecological vulnerability and environmental problems with a global dimension. Environmental organizations in Curaçao are, to a large extent, dependent on the Dutch government for funding, while the Jamaican situation finds that the best-funded organizations are those with access to international funding, whether bilateral, multilateral or non-governmental. The implications are similar on both islands: “the interests of these international organizations determine which of the NGO activities are funded, and by extension which NGOs survive at an operational level” (Witter 2002, 24).

The globally oriented green discourse that dominates Jamaican and Curaçaoan environmentalism remains at the level of elites and segments of the middle class. Bilateral and multilateral aid agencies increasingly direct funding from governmental to non-governmental organizations, based in part on the assumption that NGOs work more effectively through participation and are more representative of the communities the funds are supposed to assist. Lundy (1999) argues that, in the case

of Jamaica, these are mistaken assumptions, as ENGO membership is overwhelmingly well educated and middle class, and ENGO activities reflect the concerns and priorities of local elites, thus inadvertently reinforcing inequality in social relations. A similar situation is found in Curaçao. Specific environmental prioritizations are associated with the socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds of stakeholders. At the ENGO level, differences between their members and the majority of the urban population are evident, most apparently in class, racial and ethnic identities. In Jamaica, many environmental organizations are headed by either foreigners, often expatriate Americans, or by upper-middle-class, often light-skinned, Jamaicans (cf. Carrier 2003). In Curaçao, the number of Afro-Curaçaoans in the environmental movement is fairly limited, certainly as the heads of organizations; white Curaçaoans and European Dutch émigrés tend to dominate as members and leaders. On both islands, the movement is not a grassroots phenomenon; it is plausible that displaying an interest in and commitment to conservation and other green issues has become a local form of elite and middle-class distinction. ENGO membership, nature hikes and support of national parks can all be means of acquiring symbolic capital (cf. Bourdieu 1984).

Despite the fact that ENGO leaders and members are usually extremely well-meaning, hard-working, idealistic individuals, it is not hard to discern something of a condescending attitude towards “the community”. The president of one ENGO describes how “many in Jamaica do not have an appreciation of nature – they do not comprehend the relevance of lizards, insects and plants (except in the light of economic gain) and *have to be assisted to ‘see’* the wealth and beauty of our island” (Levy 1996, 25, emphasis added). In Curaçao, one of the more successful ENGOs, led by a Dutchman, has as its slogan *konosé bo isla*, “know your island”. Another NGO leader, also Dutch, stated, when interviewed, that environmental problems on Curaçao were a cultural problem, because the people did not learn to love themselves or their environment. The portrayal of members of the local population as insufficiently knowledgeable – or appreciative – of their own island reflects a similar sentiment to that expressed by the Jamaican ENGO leader quoted.

A general assumption made by decision makers is that environmental problems result largely from a lack of environmental awareness on the part of the population. The majority of Jamaicans and Curaçaoans

are depicted as unaware or problematic. These ideas are evident in the number of governmental and non-governmental campaigns and programmes aimed at raising awareness and environmental education. The “local” population is often seen as incapable of sustainable resource management. As a result, there has been a strong propensity towards top-down conservationist strategies in which nature is, or becomes, “unpeopled”.

People, and especially urban people, are seen primarily as the cause of environmental problems, rather than the victims. However, while both governmental and non-governmental environmental organizations are largely based in urban areas, their green focus incorporates an image of Caribbean islands which does not depict urban areas or their problems. This environmentalist vision merges with the tourism industry’s representations of paradise-like, non-urban landscapes. These “natural” landscapes are implied to be representative of the island, without due note of the fact that many of these are endangered. Cities and their residents are either ignored or depicted as aberrations, disturbing the natural order.

Social Vulnerabilities: Blighted Cityscapes

There is a persistent image of the Caribbean region as a range of lush, verdant natural landscapes that must be conserved, both as intrinsically valuable, high-biodiversity ecosystems and as crucial resources for tourism (Sheller 2003). In contrast with this “natural” representation, Caribbean islands are largely urbanized. In Curaçao and Jamaica, 90 and 50 per cent of the population, respectively, lives in urban areas, and most of those urban citizens reside in the capitals of Willemstad and Kingston. At odds with the tourist image of the islands, there is considerable poverty, and a significant proportion of the population lives in poor-quality housing in low-income urban areas (Clarke, chapter 12; Weeber 2004), rather than in a picturesque shack on a beach. These urban residents do not consider their surroundings Edenic. In Willemstad, the centrally located oil refinery – previously owned by Shell, now leased by the Venezuelan oil company PDVSA – is responsible for noxious emissions in the downwind “marginal” neighbourhoods or

barrios. In addition, the consequences of inadequate solid waste management are visible in the piles of litter that are found throughout the entire island, from construction materials and garden waste to plastic bags, beer cans and dead dogs. In Kingston, residents live in areas adjacent to the garbage dump, heavy industry or the polluted harbour. Open sewage and irregular garbage collection contribute to polluted surroundings that are hazardous to health.

These types of brown agenda problems receive highest priority among urban residents, in stark contrast with the focus of ENGOs and the government. In the perception of residents of low-income areas in Willemstad and Kingston, the islands are characterized not by threatened natural landscapes and ecological vulnerability, but by blighted cityscapes and social vulnerabilities. In these urban settings, brown environmental problems are linked to an inequitable social context. The state of the urban environment as perceived by residents can be conceptualized as “urban blight”: the combined and interrelated effects of environmental and infrastructure degradation, poverty, violence and crime, and social disintegration (Jaffe 2006).

Jamaican and Curaçaoan residents do not feel that the environmental problems in their communities are isolated from other problems affecting the broader urban environment. In what are sometimes high-crime settings, violence, for instance, is integral to understandings of environment. A qualitative study conducted among Jamaican lower-income youth, in the context of an environmental education campaign, found that any interpretation of environment includes social aspects; all definitions of “good environment” referred to peace and unity. To the majority, the word “environment” was defined as “what they saw in their surroundings: their community, people and their behaviour (including ‘war’), the state of the infrastructure, living conditions, flowering plants, painted and decorated corners, buildings, trees and animals” (Hope Enterprises 1999, 20). Similarly, focus groups in Kingston in a study by Dodman (2004) identified the ten top “environmental problems” in their city as unemployment, water, toilets, housing, garbage, lack of education, pollution, war/violence, electricity and sewage. This study also found a distinct division in environmental priorities between suburban middle-class and inner-city, low-income respondents. Brown environmental problems, including air pollution, inadequate sanitation

and solid waste management, are associated with social and economic concerns such as health, poverty, social equity, social disintegration, and violence and crime. These social and economic problems receive priority over environmental problems as presented by supralocal stakeholders: the environmental NGOs and government. For the most part, the professional portrayal of environment and sustainable development remains distant from local, specifically urban or low-income, priorities.

Residents of environmentally degraded and hazardous urban areas connect environmental problems to their status as low-income, politically marginalized communities. Environmental issues are seen in the light of socio-economic inequities at the urban and national levels, which are evident in a lack of political concern for their living conditions and an inability on their part to mobilize effectively against or influence policy that affects them. Low-income urban residents lack economic and political assets to solve or prevent brown environmental problems. Multiple protest marches in low-income Curaçaoan *barrios* do nothing to diminish the toxic refinery emissions. Yet when a twist in the island's trade winds causes the fumes to affect wealthier areas, the anger of more powerful citizens makes the papers. Community clean-up initiatives in Jamaican neighbourhoods fail when government trucks neglect to collect the accumulated garbage. High-income neighbourhoods need not depend solely on the government's irregular services and can charter private waste collection companies to keep their streets clean. A reduced exposure to brown environmental problems significantly diminishes the urgency of such issues to elites.

Issues of equity and urban environmental justice demand attention. The spatial distribution of urban environmental "bads" is skewed towards the homes, workplaces and communities of the urban poor who are disproportionately affected by brown problems. Urban blight, or the nexus of violence, poverty and environmental degradation, is, not coincidentally, concentrated in certain areas. Privatization of basic services and security, following neo-liberal restructuring, results in cities where a safe and healthy environment is available at a price that not everyone can pay. The ensuing concentration of urban blight ultimately reinforces existing patterns of socio-spatial fragmentation through fear, repulsion and isolation.

The spatial concentration of poverty and urban pollution can result in what Drackner (2005) refers to as “social contagion”: polluted streets or neighbourhoods reflect on their residents who may be seen as “dirty” or “nasty” people on account of their surroundings. In these historically divided Caribbean cities, elites may unconsciously associate this dirty reputation with the ethnicity or skin colour of “downtown” or “marginal” residents. This often entails some causal confusion: to many, poor and polluted neighbourhoods are dirty because of the polluting, “unhygienic” or “asocial” poor people who live there. In such causal constructions, ghetto dwellers are seen as “nasty” – why else are their areas of residence so polluted? The dirt must be caused by the environmentally unaware, unconscious state of being of the poor, hence the professional, elite emphasis on environmental education and raising awareness. This sometimes morphs into discourse and policies that blame the poor. As noted previously, such understandings of poverty-environment interactions neglect the mediating effects of vulnerability, resource access (to assets, labour, credit or markets) and institutions (including governance and tenure systems). As often as not, the “nasty” neighbourhoods are polluted because poor people do not receive environmental services and infrastructure, such as solid waste collection and adequate sewage systems.

The “downtown”, “ghetto” or “marginal” landscapes of urban blight are the reality in which many residents of Kingston and Willemstad live. These cityscapes, narrated powerfully in Caribbean popular culture, offer a different view from the landscapes related by past and present environmentalists. Well-known examples of Caribbean popular music and film that place a strong emphasis on urban issues are the decidedly urban genres of dancehall and reggaeton, and movies such as *The Harder They Come* or *Rockers*. This urban emphasis within popular culture entails a, perhaps inadvertent, mission of putting the city on the map, in contrast to tourist or conservationist images that limit the functions of Caribbean islands to tropical décor and biodiversity zones.

Where environmental professionals are influenced by global environmental thought, and focus on problems with a global scale, low-income residents display an environmentalism that is constructed in an explicitly local manner. They connect environmental degradation in their immediate surroundings to other localized urban problems. They draw

attention to the socio-spatial patterns of pollution, poverty, violence and exclusion within their city, using explanatory frameworks that incorporate local power relations. In their interweaving of environmental, social, political and economic concerns, this form of environmentalism avoids the people-nature dichotomy implicit in professional discourse, which tends to preclude tackling social and ecological vulnerabilities in tandem.

Conflicting Environments

Within Jamaica and Curaçao, environments and environmental problems are constructed and explained in drastically different and apparently conflicting manners. Professional environmentalism emphasizes and draws on a global scale; its elite stakeholders employ environmental discourse that is non-urban, excludes local participation and emphasizes ecological vulnerability. The “lay” environmentalism encountered in urban ghettos and marginal *barrios* is explicitly local in scale, and its urban discourse stresses the centrality of social relations and social vulnerability. Despite widespread global-institutional support for participatory approaches, and the incorporation of “local knowledge” in environmental and natural resource management, in practice, strong hierarchical divisions still exist between different types of environmental knowing. Conflicts of knowledge and power, reinforced by the social and spatial situatedness of the stakeholders involved, have been documented in the cases of protected area management and conservation projects in Trinidad, Grenada, Belize, Guyana and Suriname (Rosenberg and Korsmo 2001; Heemskerk 2002; Brown 2003; Colchester 2005; Sletto 2005). Such conflicts tend to be overlooked in urban areas, as if local knowledge were an exclusively rural phenomenon.

Within a structure of discursively maintained power and an expert-oriented epistemology of development (Ramphall 1997), environmental professionals have the authority to portray residents as uneducated, polluting urban dwellers, who must be led to conscious patterns of thought and behaviour by way of environmental education programmes. This mandate of “educating the masses” is not always far from a subtle form of environmental neo-colonialism, as the colonial situation of outsiders

and cosmopolitan elites organizing around the theme of ecological vulnerability is mirrored in the contemporary Caribbean. This association of a category of problems with specific groups of people can result in ecological vulnerability being perceived as an exclusionary sphere, the domain of the light-skinned elite and foreigners.

While not necessarily an intentional result, the emphases and tone employed by Caribbean environmental professionals elide and exclude the importance of local, urban issues and social vulnerabilities. They have also tended to favour conservationist solution strategies that are not based on participation of low-income populations. The professional environmentalists are themselves influenced and sometimes pressured by external bilateral and multilateral stakeholders; they generally operate against many odds with the wholehearted intent of achieving certain ends, such as maintaining biodiversity or promoting sustainable development. However, to attain these goals, the most efficient strategy is to adapt government and non-governmental policies to acknowledge and utilize local priorities and perspectives, so as to gain the support, or at least co-operation, of a majority of the (predominantly urban) population.

As noted earlier, the green and the brown agendas need not be mutually exclusive, nor conflicting. Neither does combating ecological vulnerability necessitate the exclusion or exacerbation of social vulnerabilities. The environmental issues that preoccupy low-income urban residents – sewage, garbage and air pollution – are connected with the professionally prioritized issues of biodiversity and the protection of coastal and marine ecosystems. Marine pollution is intrinsically related to land-based, urban problems such as wastewater and solid waste management; much of the uncollected garbage and unrefined sewage polluting poor neighbourhoods ends up in the sea and washes up on beaches, degrading ecosystems. The urban and industrial pollution that endangers human health, specifically in low-income areas, has similar harmful effects on non-human species. Ecological vulnerability is aggravated when causes of social vulnerability, such as limited access to basic services, infrastructure and tenure, are left unchecked. Conversely, including the socially vulnerable in environmental protection and conservation programmes, both in and outside urban areas, can provide a financial and social boost to disenfranchised citizens.

Given the urgency of both brown and green environmental problems, environmental organizations should avoid environmental policy and awareness-raising campaigns that do not connect to the reality of large segments of the population. Shifting the emphasis towards participatory urban environmental action can enhance ownership of environmental programmes, while furthering environmental improvements through an inclusive, learning-by-doing process. What is needed is an increased recognition of the interconnectedness of first, various environmental problems, and second, the relation between environmental and socio-political issues. Such an understanding could serve to establish environmentalism as a field in which disparate social groups find common ground, rather than having environmentalism function as a divided and divisive space, in which the connectivities between social and environmental issues and inequalities remain obscured.

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