

CUBA - an extremely brief introduction

Author : cat

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CUBA – land of promises, hopes and permaculture!



Cubans are proud of their island in the Caribbean under the tropical sun. Any Cuban will tell you stories of the Independence wars and the Revolution, and murals of Che Guevara, historical sites of the Revolution and songs about its heroes are as abundant as the turkey-vultures circling overhead. There was a time in the 1960s when any literate person above 14 years of age would be sent off to an illiterate region to teach. Cubans have always valued education, and the education system is free, resulting in near to 100% literacy and one of Cuba's greatest assets.

With the nationalisation of US businesses and their infrastructure following the takeover of Cuba by the revolutionary troops in 1959, the US instituted a full trade embargo in 1961. The Special Period started after the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1990, as the USSR was Cuba's primary trading partner, resulting in strongly diminished access to oil and scarcity of food and most other imported commodities. This put rationing of food on the menu, which is still in practice today. The Special Period has not really ended yet because of the persisting US embargo. Thus sugar, eggs and kerosene for cooking is still delivered in the "Bodegas" rationing shops. The current system ensures cheap access to a certain amount of food, and you can then buy more if you want to, but not at a subsidised price.

Permaculture in Human settlements in Cuba



Cuba is dependent upon import of food and has been for 500 years, creating a huge dependency on foreign trade. It developed as a cash crop country, first with cattle, then sugarcane powered by the international slave trade. In 1994 a restructuring of agriculture for the special period began changing the emphasis from cash crops such as sugarcane and coffee towards more sustainable local food production.

Production of food since 2004 focuses on increasing food sovereignty. Production must be satisfied in both the short term and the long terms to feed the needs of the Cuban people. Cubans' staple diet is rice and beans, and they love to have lots of meat when they can afford it. The rice is still mostly imported and in total 70% of Cuba's food currently comes from overseas.

75% of Cubans live in urban areas. The challenges they face, especially in Havana Centro, include crumbling buildings – every day more than three houses collapse in Havana, in some cases causing injuries or death. From the streets no food growing is visible in the tightly packed down town areas. But on the outskirts of the city, where the space allows it, there is a large variety of food growing in the backyards of individual houses and at community farms organised by the government and called “Organoponicos”.



“Organoponico” is the word for an urban organic farm where food is intensively grown in long troughs, often using epic worm farms to make new compost to renew the beds. There are hundreds of these sites all over Cuba, generally connected to an institution like a school or hospital. Many of the “Organoponicos” were started in the beginning of the Special Period and are still thriving today with new ones being set up. A part of the produce goes to the institution and the rest is sold off for cheap prices to

local buyers. We saw one in Sancti Spiritus city which directly recycled sections of an unfinished prefabricated concrete building to build the long troughs that the food grew in.



The Foundation of Antonio Nunes Jiminez got involved in November 1994, with cooperation from Australian Permaculturalists and the Cruz Del Sur organization.

“It was a learning and growing process”, says Maria Caridad Cruz. “We wanted a sustainable system with social, economic and environmental results using energy on a daily basis. It was a big challenge – and still is today.”

“If the systems we have established between plants, animals, water, energy, buildings and communities are not working, we have to learn how to do it better with a discovery of ancient knowledge and transformative culture,” says Maria Caridad Cruz.