

# Cuba: Model of sustainability

BY WAYNE GROSZKO

Last Friday, Dr. Pat Lane, of the Dalhousie Biology Department gave a seminar entitled "Will we achieve sustainability in the 21st century? A closer look at the Cuban model."

Sustainability, a buzzword of the nineties, has a variety of definitions. In the 1987 book, "Our Common Future," the Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as "Development which meets the needs of the present without compromising

the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Dr. Lane gave evidence which suggests that human society is not presently practicing sustainable development. For example, all 17 fishing areas of the world are producing at or above their limits,

which has resulted in the collapse of several fisheries. Also, some countries are "mining water," which means pumping water from ancient underground aquifers. These aquifers are not refilling fast enough to keep up. Some people estimate that 18 to 55 countries will have serious water shortages in the next 20 years.

To compound the situation, the human population of the world may double before the middle of the 21st century.

Dr. Lane is searching for models of nations with the potential to become sustainable, and has found that models of the North, such as Canada and the United States, cannot be applicable equitably around the world, because they consume too many resources. It is estimated that if every person consumed at the rate of an average Canadian, three earth-sized planets would be required to maintain the consumption.

Cuba is in a unique situation because its nearest neighbour, the United States, has maintained an economic embargo against Cuba for over three decades. Then in 1990, Cuba lost about 80% of its trade with the former Soviet Union, due to changes in that country. These trade restrictions have caused hardship for the Cuban people because of a lack of products they might otherwise trade for, such as medicines.

This time of hardship and adjustment is referred to as the "Special Period." Cuba has tried to switch away from trade-dependent activities like growing sugar cane for export, to self-sufficient activities like growing food for domestic consumption. The lack of oil imports has also caused an increase in the exploitation of domestic oilfields and the use of solar energy.

Despite the hardship, or in some ways because of it, Cuba has managed to become more self-sufficient, and has achieved some remarkable successes. For example, Cuba now has a lower rate of infant mortality than the United States.

Care for the environment has been part of Cuban society and government from the beginning of the movement for Cuban independence. José Martí, a national hero, was an enthusiastic naturalist, writing descriptions of Cuban nature in his diary only months before being killed by the Spanish in the war for independence in 1895.

Cubans plant more trees per capita than Canadians do, and from 1960 to 1990, the forest cover in Cuba grew by eight percent. In addition, two thirds of Cuban forests are protected by law, and Cuba does not export raw timber.

According to Dr. Lane, Cuba is not perfect, but has had greater success than any other developing country, under extreme external pressures. Her research has found that the Cuban model is based on three pillars:

- Social Development and Health;
- Scientific and Educational Development; and,
- National and International Concern.

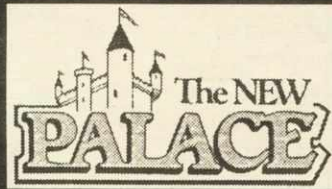
In consultations with the Cuban government, Dr. Lane has suggested they should add a fourth pillar: sustainability.

Dr. Lane is optimistic that Cuba may become the first sustainable nation in the twenty-first century.

The Nova Scotia Cuba Association (NSCUBA) is an active group which supports Cuban independence, opposes the U.S. economic embargo against Cuba, and sends direct aid in the form of medical supplies to the Cuban people. Parts of this article were excerpted from the December, 1995 issue of their newsletter, "Cuba, ¡Contigo!" They meet at Dalhousie University, and you can contact them by phone at 422-4606 or email (NSCUBA@WEB.APC.ORG).



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