

RIO CAUTO, CUBA

“I’ve always wanted to have lots of children, but I never thought I’d have quite as many as this,” Magaly Jorge told me, running her fingers lovingly across a little palm tree seedling.

As it turns out, Mrs. Jorge—one of the first women to be put in charge of a tree plantation in Cuba’s Cauto river basin—has just two children of her own, teenagers who attend an agricultural college in their hometown of Rio Cauto, on the banks of



Emeralds of the Cauto

BY ALBERTO D. PÉREZ



A mother and daughter work hand-in-hand.

the country’s biggest river. But she likes to think of the tens of thousands of trees on her 16-hectare woodland farm as “her children,” too. And with good reason. For the reforestation project she is responsible for—in the hardscrabble eastern province of Granma—is proving to be a remarkably successful experiment in support of the region’s environmental rehabilitation and economic and social progress.

“The plantations have been a revelation,” says Julio Zayas, deputy director of Empresa Forestal Integral Bayamo, which provincial authorities in Granma hired to oversee the reforestation effort. In view of the magnitude of the challenge, the company sought assistance under a Local Human Development Programme sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) through the UN Office for Project Services, with co-funding from the Government of Italy.

The project turns out to be perfectly suited to the Cauto. The 372-kilometre river, which flows across much of the eastern portion of the country before emptying into the Caribbean Sea, has been both a saviour and destroyer, depending on the vagaries of nature. While its waters irrigate fertile plains and nourish crops of all kinds in a landscape of striking beauty, the Cauto can also be a conduit for tragedy. During storms such as the devastating Hurricane Flora in 1962 and Hurricane George in 1998—the erosion of crevices and gullies from flash floods causes major landslides. To address this problem, the Government of Cuba decided to build a system of dams and, in 1998, initiated a reforestation scheme to halt erosion, protect the water table and combat drought. More than three years and 4.5 million trees later, these goals are well on the way to being accomplished.

According to Mr. Zayas, as of late 2001 in Granma province, 69 of a proposed 112 tree plantations—ranging between 16 and 33 hectares each—had been established in the Cauto river basin. Women have played

a key role in this development and in planning for future activities, whether as individual plantation managers themselves or the partners of managers. “Without their participation, the progress that’s been achieved would not have been possible,” Mr. Zayas says. His company provides the plantation

Stark evidence of erosion.





Photos: Ahmed Velazquez/UNDP

Magaly Jorge is one of many women in eastern Cuba playing vital roles as tree farm managers along the Cauto River.

has a colour television and a music system, all of which are provided free of charge. In areas without electricity, solar panels have been installed. “The quality of housing and living conditions ensure that the population will remain in the countryside,” says Ms. Cassisi.

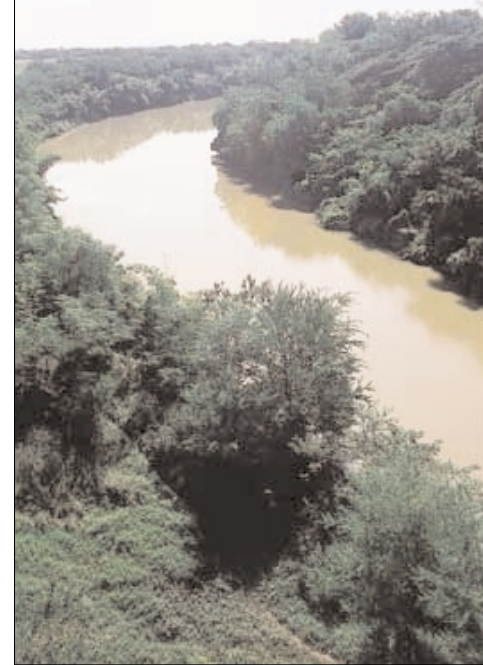
In the kitchen of her new home, while making coffee, Mrs. Jorge tells a visitor: “I’m happy to have a good roof over me and my family, and that my work is recognized and the pay is all right. I’m also glad I can show that women can do any job, no matter how hard.”

UNDP has considerable experience in providing support for forestry development in Cuba, taking advantage of the fact that this country is one of a very few to have succeeded in bucking a global trend towards the loss of forestry resources. (In 1959, 14 percent of Cuba was forested; by 2000 this had risen to 21.7 percent). UNDP has been helping since 1969 to strengthen Cuba’s forestry sector, while promoting integrated management of ecosystems in the country. It continued these initiatives in the 1990s through support for the implementation of a Forestry Act, and establishment of a National Forestry Service and Forest Ranger Unit.

UNDP is now taking a further step in its continuing support for the forestry sector. Luis Gómez Echeverri, the UNDP Resident

Representative in Cuba, says that despite limited resources, much can be done to bolster the efforts of the direct beneficiaries—such as the tree plantation managers. “We are trying to make this programme a reality by supporting people with projects that have real impact; community-based projects that can be repeated elsewhere.”

“Forest plantations are among hundreds of decentralized local development initiatives implemented since the programme came into existence, with more than a half million beneficiaries,” says Mr. Gómez Echeverri. “Reforestation in the Cauto basin not only contributes to a healthier environment in the region but serves as a protective barrier against further onslaughts by the river. We are very pleased to see that women like Magaly Jorge and so many others are playing an increasingly important role in this noble endeavour.”



workers with technical assistance, seedlings, fertilizers, tools, clothing, and transportation. They are paid on a piece-work basis and their performance is evaluated monthly.

Rita Cassisi, head of the Local Human Development Programme in Granma, explains that even though plantation workers are employees of Empresa Forestal Integral they defend the plantations as if they were the owners. “The purpose of the programme, the government and the company is to offer the workers better living and working conditions,” she says. The programme builds a sturdy and comfortable house for each worker, equipped with furniture and leisure conveniences. Each



To the accompaniment of warbling birds, Mrs. Jorge savours the fragrance of the forest. Lush green stands of trees rise on both banks of the river. “They are my jewels,” she says. For her, these emeralds of Cauto are gems that commemorate the rebirth of the river and the spirit of the people who live along its shores. ■

Restoration of the land has been a boon for families along the river, allowing them to grow enough produce to earn extra income.

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