

Genesis of La Forêt La Source

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Tè a bouke . . . The earth is weary!

Haiti is a country that has lost at least 96 percent of its original forests and plant cover. Fruit production is now almost nil and, cleared of trees, hillside gardens have lost their fertile soil to erosion. Unable to grow enough food to feed their families, many farmers have resorted to cutting down trees to make commercial charcoal, the primary source of fuel in the country. The four hurricanes that ravaged the country in 2008 caused even greater damage to the treeless mountains. The consequences? Even more loss of precious soil and organic matter and waves of mud that made their way into the Artibonite Valley, the rice granary of Haiti.

Knowing all of this led me to think about creating a reforestation project that would complement the Haitian immersion experience for Saint Boniface students sponsored by the university's Development and Peace Committee. The students and I proposed this possibility to the Sisters of Holy Cross in Haiti, who were already sponsoring a youth group engaged in planting trees in the region of Thibeau.

Sister Agnes Louis, CSC, an agronomist, accepted the challenge and began developing the program. Meeting with families and local groups, she assessed locations and the interest of local populations, as well as resources available to assure the long-term viability of the land that would undergo reforestation.

Two sites were chosen: Thibeau and Pilate, both places where Sisters of Holy Cross can monitor activities and ensure that trees are not cut down. In Thibeau, planting is coordinated by Le Club Ceinturons Verts, a group of 53 students from the region; in Pilate, a local Parents Group organizes the work. Both groups have become very knowledgeable about the importance of reforestation and are highly motivated to protect the land.

Trees chosen for planting include mahogany and oak as well as fruit trees like coconut palm, cacao, walnut, orange, lemon, and mango. While waiting for the trees to mature, people plant faster-growing crops like peas, cassava, and corn among them.

Thanks to funds (\$25,000 CDN) collected by the university's



Development and Peace Committee, the La Forêt La Source project is currently expanding and more families are being included, particularly in the Artibonite Valley. People are especially heartened and pleased because in the past others have made promises that were never realized.

Arnold, one of the organizers in Pilate, has expressed the people's feelings eloquently:

You have made this day one of celebration and our hearts are overflowing with gratitude.... You were made aware of the problems created in this area by the four hurricanes that devastated our gardens and sabotaged our hopes. You allowed your hearts to be touched, and in a spirit of solidarity, came to our aid.... This project of reforestation that you came to launch

brings us much hope. Though we are aware that trees are necessary, we are not able to purchase enough of them to cover our bare mountainsides.... You have not only provided financial support to complete the task of planting and solve the problem of erosion, but you have also made such a long journey to visit our country and witness our struggle to survive. Many, many thanks!

We will do our best to watch over La Forêt La Source so all your deeds may bear fruit — results you will have the joy of seeing when you return to Haiti!

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