Cuban Tobacco Industry Continues to Grow Despite Campaigns Against Nicotine Addiction

Daniel Vázquez

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation
Cuban Tobacco Industry Continues to Grow Despite Campaigns Against Nicotine Addiction

by Daniel Vázquez

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 2014-07-10

Cuban tobacco, considered the best in the world and a legend for more than half a millennium, remains one of the fundamental sources for millions of dollars in income for the island, is a source of employment for more than 150,000 farmers, and generates impressive sales in the more remote parts of the world despite national and international campaigns against nicotine addiction.

Cuban tobacco sales amounted to US$447 million in 2013, 8% more than in 2012, and tobacco is the second-largest export after nickel. Marketing of the renowned tobacco products is carried out through a joint venture between the Cuban company Habanos S.A. and the Franco-Spanish company Altadis. Their main market remains Europe despite its severe anti-smoking laws.

The island utilizes very efficient methods for marketing the crop, primarily through an international fair in March in which tastings, selling limited editions of habanos, and combining tours of farms, factories, and other steps in the production of cigars on some of the best farmland in the western region of Vuelta Abajo, about 150 km east of Havana. The fair brings in up to 1,500 visitors from 70 countries, said the local press.

Among the cigar brands that Habanos S.A. markets are the famous Cohíba, Montecristo, Romeo y Julieta, Partagás, Hoyo de Monterrey, H. Upmann, and Punch. Some brands, such as H. Upmann and Romeo y Julieta, have been on the market for more than 140 years. Cohíba became famous as the long, elegant cigars of former President Fidel Castro, an unrepentant smoker until the 1980s who used to hobnob with those attending the international tobacco fairs in Havana.

The famous habanos are hand-twisted, and 90% of them are sold on the international market. Also sold through the Internacional Cubana de Tabaco S.A. (ICT) joint venture are tobacco products that have been manufactured mechanically since 2001, with 134 million units produced in 2013 and marketed throughout the world, according to their managers. The small, mass produced cigars are well-received in the market. From January to May, 64.7 million units were exported, valued at US$10 million, reported ICT.

Among the countries consuming Cuban tobacco are Spain, France, China, Germany, Switzerland, Lebanon, and the UAE, as well as Latin American and African countries. Marketing Cuban tobacco extends to 160 countries and thrives in Asia and the Middle East. Its distribution in the US is prevented by the trade embargo in place for more than 50 years.

US consumers of Cuban tobacco products can travel to points just across the border to sample the cigars and purchase them. Meanwhile, visitors to the island have the opportunity to buy boxes of cigars in the boarding lounge at the José Martí International Airport in Havana until the last minute before boarding the plane back to the US; however, they should be aware that, upon entry into the US, the inquisitive voices of the customs agents are often heard asking, "Are you bringing in any Cuban cigars?"
The island is perfecting holographic seals to prevent the sale of counterfeit cigars, which the international black market offers to visitors for a paltry sum compared to prices determined by the official marketing network. Today, any tourist walking down the street in Havana, a major tourist destination, will probably hear three deals whispered in their ear: sex, habanos, and rum. However, sometimes those cigars are imitations made from low-quality leaves.

Habanos S.A. announced in June that in the coming months a new hologram will be added to each cigar ring to make them difficult to forge and also to provide additional information about the distributor, the invoice number, and other details about the product. Factories have also increased security to prevent theft of the better-quality leaves.

**Impact of climate**

Some news reports and talks by experts point to the possible effects of climate change on the production of tobacco, a delicate crop that requires very specific moisture levels and temperatures. Earlier this year, torrential rains in four tobacco-growing municipalities of Vuelta Abajo in the province of Pinar del Río forced farmers to plant the fields three times. This is the province that accounts for half the raw material for the domestic production of tobacco.

Some farmers believe that the climate in tobacco areas has changed in the past three decades, while investigators from the state Instituto de Meteorología estimate that the Cuban western territories will not be exempt from global warming. Studies have already been carried out on how to mitigate the impact of climate change and the eventual decrease in crop yields resulting from increased heat. Further analysis is recommended on the effects caused by changing rainfall patterns.

Tobacco has been a factor in the island's cultural identity for more than 200 years. In some families, more than four generations have been dedicated to its planting and cultivation. Some are descended from ancestors that migrated from the Canary Islands in the 19th century to western Cuba. The delicacy of some of the operations, such as harvesting leaves, keeps tobacco production predominantly in the hands of campesinos whose skills are passed down through their families.

Towns like San Juan y Martínez or San Luis, about 150 km east of Havana, have depended on the tobacco crop for more than a century. The humility and simple life of the campesinos makes it difficult to imagine them as managers of one of the chief luxury goods on the world market.

**From tobacco dependence to cancer**

It is common to walk around in Cuba and see people smoking cigarettes on the streets, in parks, and in other open spaces, although the bans on tobacco consumption in indoor public spaces have taken effect. Authorities say the overall prevalence of smoking has declined, but consumption has increased in groups such as adolescents who start smoking at 13 or 15 years old.

Local experts warned in May that 15% of the country's mortality is from smoking, with 13,300 deaths a year, while 1,500 die from being exposed to secondhand smoke. Addiction is associated with eight of the top 10 causes of death on the island, including various cancers. Eighty-three percent of lung cancer deaths are attributable to smoking, said sources from the Ministerio de Salud Pública (MINSAP). Since 2012, cancer is the leading cause of death in Cuba.

Just over five centuries after Nov. 6, 1492, when Christopher Columbus first mentioned in his travel journal the aromatic smoke delighted in by the natives, Cuba is in fifth place in Latin America and
the Caribbean for prevalence of tobacco use. Twenty-five percent of the Cuban population smokes, and they average between 10 and 19 cigarettes a day. Such addiction is considered a worrisome situation and a challenge for public health.

-- End --