Haiti: Process Of Desertification May Be Complete Within 20 Years

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According to the Federation of the Friends of Nature (FAN), Haiti will become a desert within 20 years unless tree felling and soil erosion are quickly and drastically reduced. Haitians cut down an estimated 40 to 50 million trees per year, leading to the erosion of some 6,000 ha. a year. An estimated 43 billion cubic meters of rain is dumped by tropical storms on Haiti every year, washing topsoil into the sea. FAN executive Pierre Chauvet noted, "To survive today, Haitians are obliged to destroy their environment and their resources of tomorrow." In 1923, the forest still covered 23% of Haiti. By 1974, the forest had diminished to 7%, and today one percent or less. According to FAN, 72% of the nation's six million people depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. In 1990, says FAN, some 50% of the land will no longer be cultivable. Virtually every family on the land uses wood fuel for cooking; dry-cleaning companies burn up an estimated 20,000 tons of wood a year. The annual rainfall also destroys the natural habitat for fish and destroys agricultural resources, according to Chauvet. He said, "Look at our dilemma. There is no more water to put out the fire; there is no more wood to fuel the fire." FAN has launched a program for water reservoir construction throughout the country. The plan involves capturing rain water in simple family-sized water reservoirs with a capacity of about 11,000 liters each and in community-sponsored reservoirs which would hold 76,000 liters. According to FAN, some 100 such reservoirs must be built every year if Haiti is to salvage its agriculture and horticulture sectors while also reducing the need to cut down its few remaining trees. (Basic data from AFP, 07/04/89)

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