CUBA-US WORKING TOGETHER AGAIN: LESSONS FROM ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION

Introduction

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On April 20, 2010, an explosion on a British Petroleum (BP) oil rig off the coast of Louisiana resulted in the largest marine oil spill in history. For nearly 3 months, more than 200 million gallons of oil spilled freely into the Gulf of Mexico, wreaking havoc to marine life, ecosystems, and coastal communities far and wide. The spill spread out over 4,000 square miles and polluted roughly 200 miles of Gulf waters along the edge of the Cuban EEZ, and posed a threat to beaches, reefs, mangrove swamps and towns along Cuba's northwestern coast. An international incident was prevented by the chance timing of the central Gulf Loop Current gyre formation, which interrupted the delivery of oil down current as far as Cuba and the Florida Keys.

The BP disaster laid bare the gross weaknesses in the oil industry's approach to safety, in the way the US government regulated offshore drilling, and in the plans in place to prevent and respond to spills. It also revealed how utterly unprepared the US government was in addressing the threats posed to neighboring countries down current of the spill. Though Cuba has some of the best environmental laws on the books, its hands were tied when it came to protecting itself from pollution originating across the border. What made Cuba especially vulnerable was the lack of formal contact and

coordination with the United States on pollution in shared waters, or on virtually any environmental matter. At that time, Cuban officials had no effective or efficient way to communicate with US counterparts about the spill's movement or to coordinate in responding and curbing its impacts. They couldn't simply call the US Coast Guard and ask for information or help. Likewise, in the event oil were to enter into its waters, Cuba couldn't count on help from US government or from private sector resources to help it contain the oil--US law prohibited response teams from entering Cuban waters.

Fortunately, a number of US-based environmental groups with experience working in Cuba, including Ocean Doctor and Environmental Defense Fund, were monitoring the spill and could act as unofficial channels of information between government officials in both countries throughout the crisis. It took more than 18 months until the two governments found a way to talk directly to each other about how to deal with future oil spills. And those talks, which ultimately produced a bi-lateral agreement on oil spill prevention and response in January 2017, might have never happened had people in Florida not woken up to the fact that Cuba had its own plans to drill for oil off its northern coast. They realized that an offshore spill in Cuba could have devastating impacts on Florida's Keys and much of the state's southeastern shorelines and cities.

We're Connected.

It's never been any secret to Cuban and American scientists that our two countries are connected and that shared environmental problems require shared solutions. Scientists

on both sides of the Florida straits have been finding ways to study and work together literally for centuries, through good times and bad. The fruits of their labors have been many—discoveries of new species on land and in the water, advances in restoring and conserving soils impacted from decades of overuse, new approaches for managing pests and invasive species that threaten agricultural yields and biodiversity, improved methodologies for tracking hurricanes, reductions in overfishing, and new protections for endangered species. The list goes on and many are captured in this book, as summarized below.

The articles in this book resulted from *Cuba-US Working Together Again: Lessons from Environmental Cooperation, a* two-part webinar on February 22, 2021 hosted by Columbia University's Institute for Latin American Studies, the Fundación Antonio Núñez Jiménez, the American College of Environmental Lawyers, and the Environmental Defense Fund. In addition to the authors in this volume, participants in the webinar included experts from Cuba and the US with experience in environmental and scientific collaborations. Together they make a strong case that the United States and Cuba should resume dialogue and cooperation on environmental matters and provide a road map for doing so.

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Reinaldo Funes, in *A Brief Historical Overview of Environmental Exchanges between the United States and Cuba*, explores the genesis of scientific and environmental collaborations over the years and what propelled them, the diversity of scientists,

academics, government officials and business people involved in them, and why such partnerships have proven to be so mutually beneficial. For example, Dr. Funes notes that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, numerous American companies owned sugar plantations and mills in Cuba. With support from Tropical Plant Research Foundation and the United States Department of Agriculture, with financial support from the Sugar Club of Cuba, Cuban and American scientists teamed up in the 1920s to classify Cuban soils and to better understand the role of soils in the cultivation of sugar. American scientist Hugh Hammond Bennett, who led the study and who is widely regarded as the father of soil conservation in the US, wrote in his book *The Soils of Cuba,* "There is probably nowhere else in the world where the influence of the soil is more important than in the sugar plantations of Cuba." At a meeting of the Cuban Society of Soil Science in Havana a few years back, a Cuban scientist told me that they still regarded Dr. Bennett (a fellow North Carolinian of mine) as a hero and that his work remains an important resource in Cuba to this day.

Margarita Fernandez, founder and president of the Caribbean Agroecology Institute, writes about more recent collaborations between academic scientists, farmers and conservationists around the intersection of agriculture and the environment. In her piece, *Grassroots Learning: Cuba-US Solidarity and Cooperation in Agroecology and Climate Change,* Dr. Fernandez notes that a diversity of new collaborations started in the early 1990s and has continued since then. "Over the past three decades, there have been hundreds of exchanges between Cuban and US farmers, alternative agriculture

advocates, policy makers, and academics engaging in a variety of workshops and meetings on issues related to agriculture, food and more recently the climate crisis." As a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the ensuing economic crisis in Cuba, the country began to move away from industrialized farming, dominated by sugar monoculture, toward agroecological and organic production systems and smaller farms that produced a broader range of crops. Collaborations since then have looked at the social, economic, and environmental benefits of Cuba's shift toward small-scale farming and agroecology and how those benefits can be sustained in the future. Partners from the United States also have been keenly interested in learning from Cuba's experience and in adapting lessons learned there to advance more environmentally sustainable farming practices in the U.S. For example, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, a non-profit cooperative association of black farmers, landowners, and cooperatives in the United States, has longed worked with Cuba's National Small Farmers' Association (ANAP) to compare notes and share ideas on sustainable farming practices.

Following the normalization in relations between the US and Cuba in December 2014, agricultural exchanges and collaborations became a top priority, both for NGOs and farmer organizations and for both governments. In 2015 the Cuba-US Agroecology Network (CUSAN) was established and since then has brought hundreds of US farmers to Cuba for trainings and learning exchanges around strategies for climate resilience, climate justice, agroecology and food sovereignty. In 2016, the Cuban Ministry of

Agriculture and US Department of Agriculture signed two memoranda of understanding aimed at expanding trade and increasing opportunities for collaborative research.

Liliana Núñez, Patricia Gonzalez and Valerie Miller also focus their articles on productive environmental and scientific bi-lateral and multi-lateral collaborations since the 1990s. In her piece, *The Sea: a bridge that unites us*, Dr. Gonzalez, professor and former director of the Center for Marine Research at the University of Havana, argues that good policy and sustainable management depend upon sound science that is not artificially constrained to political borders. She examines collaborative research that has been critical to better understanding and addressing shared environmental problems, particularly around degradation to marine and coastal resources and the impacts of climate change. She observes that collaborations are especially effective when premised upon transparency, shared interests and mutual respect. Dr. Gonzalez is one of the leaders of the Tri-National Initiative on Marine Science and Conservation in the Gulf of Mexico, a research collaborative between Cuba, the US and Mexico that was established in 2007 and continues to the present day. This initiative, which includes six thematic areas, has been particularly effective in producing joint research to improve the management of migratory marine species and has led to tri-lateral efforts to establish a network of marine sanctuaries throughout the Gulf of Mexico. Dr. Gonzalez also cites the successful efforts of Cubans and Americans to convince the University of Miami's prestigious *Bulletin of Marine Sciences* to end its long-standing policy of not publishing Cuban authors. In 2018 the Bulletin published a special issue on Cuba, featuring articles

jointly written by Cuban, American and Mexican experts, prompting the Miami Herald to run an article entitled, *U.S., Cuban marine biologists put an end to 'academic embargo*.'

Liliana Núñez, president of the Cuban NGO Fundación Antonio Núñez Jiménez, addresses the important role that her group and other civil society organizations play in collaborative research and education on a wide variety of topics. She emphasizes the social and cultural aspects of environmental protection, natural resources conservation and sustainable development and stresses the importance of stakeholder and community participation in policy making and management at the local, national and international levels. With the Environmental Defense Fund, Ms. Núñez' group was one of the founding organizations in 2016 of the *Research Initiative for the Sustainable Development of Cuba,* an international initiative focused on sustainability in several sectors of Cuba's economy, including energy, agriculture, tourism and others. That initiative has provided a forum for academics, civil society and governmental officials to come together to discuss how economic development can be achieved without compromising the country's commitment to environmental protection and sustainability.

In *Oceans of opportunity: Recent Cuba – U.S. marine collaboration and future possibilities,* Valerie Miller, director of the Cuba Program at Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), writes that past collaborations on overfishing and conservation of marine and coastal habitats have resulted in new working relationships among resource agencies, research centers, business enterprises and coastal communities around common interests and objectives. For example, Ms. Miller and Dr. Gonzalez both discuss the partnership between EDF, University of Havana's Center for Marine Research and the

Cuban Center for Fisheries Research to develop a new training program for professionals from across the island working in fisheries-related fields. Training from this program has already resulted in tangible actions and policies, including new fishery management plans and a nation-wide ban on goliath grouper, a species that is especially vulnerable to overfishing. She also highlights Cuba's progressive plan to prioritize the conservation and management of sharks, developed with assistance from American and Mexican scientists, and *SOS Pesca*, a four-year community-based project to address overfishing, protect marine habitats, and provide alternative livelihoods in remote communities. These past partnerships provide a pathway for new cross-sector initiatives on marine conservation and climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Orlando Rey and Daimar Canovas also speak about the past as a foundation for the future. In *Back to the road: Cuba, US and environmental cooperation*, Mr. Rey, a former government lawyer and now consultant at the Cuban Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, draws upon his experiences in collaborating with US environmental lawyers and policy experts in the late 1990s and early 2000s. At that time the Cuban government had just recently established a new ministry for the environment and was in the process of developing a suite of new environmental laws and policies. Cuba invited legal and policy experts from the US to work with them on crafting new measures on coastal zone management, environmental impact assessments, and biodiversity conservation, among others. He says that, "at that time, the potential of the environment as a space for cooperation was already very clear, as an area of mutual interest to both the United States and Cuba." Mr. Rey goes on to say that it was no

coincidence that in President Obama's speech on December 7, 2014, he chose environmental cooperation as one of the four areas of mutual interest between the US and Cuba. In fact, of the 22 bilateral agreements signed between November 2015 and January 2017, the first two dealt with environmental protection and resource conservation, and environmental matters were addressed in no fewer than 10 of the 22 pacts. Mr. Rey notes that *now* is the perfect time to broaden and deepen Cuba-US environmental cooperation, but rightly reminds us that the level of cooperation seen during the last two years of the Obama administration was short-lived and virtually vanished during the Trump administration. He cautions that for such cooperation to become more "resilient" and durable, it will take a more lasting change in US policy (e.g., a lifting of the US embargo) and strong commitment from both governments.

University of Havana Law School professor Daimar Canovas writes in *Conservation of biodiversity: a space for Cuba-US cooperation*, that global environmental challenges such as climate change and loss of biodiversity cannot be addressed unilaterally. He describes how both are included in the first two bi-lateral agreements signed between the two governments in November 2015. He notes that Cuba has made protecting the environment a top policy priority, even under extremely difficult economic circumstances, and that Cuban citizens now have a constitutional right to a clean environment. In 2017 the Cuban government adopted *Tarea Vida (or Project Life),* a sweeping long-term plan climate change adaptation and mitigation. Professor Canovas maintains that cooperation between the US and Cuba is an "ethical imperative" and that

cooperation must go beyond government to government accords and include the participation of NGOs, academics and other non-governmental actors. "The future," he says, "is in our hands."

Yordanka Castillo, a Cuban lawyer associated with the Fundación Antonio Núñez Jiménez, writes about the usefulness of the memorandum of understanding (MOU) as a tool to guide cooperation between US and Cuban entities (governmental and nongovernmental alike). Though non-binding in nature, MOUs provide a measure of formality to collaborations and have proven to be efficient and effective instruments through which partnering organizations can align priorities and provide a pathway for carrying out joint activities in service of common or shared objectives.

Yociel Marrero, of the Fundación Antonio Núñez Jiménez, suggests that the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations in its 2030 Agenda could provide a "safe and diverse platform" for bi-lateral cooperation between Cuba and the United States at a time when all nations draw up plans and partnerships for achieving the goals. He recommends that dialogue take place right away between actors in both countries (governmental and non-governmental) to determine which of the SDGs should be prioritized for collaboration. To this end, he sets forth a number of specific actions to get the ball rolling. These include forming a regional network of academic institutions and research centers from the US, Cuba and wider Caribbean around priority SDGs. Mr. Marrero also emphasizes the need for international financial

institutions (including those that don't currently fund Cuba) to provide funding to multi-lateral projects associated with SDGs.

In his article, *Cuba-US: Strategies on Furthering Environmental Cooperation,* David Farer, a fellow and former president of the American College of Environmental Lawyers, discusses the work of the College's International Pro Bono Committee and its partnership with Cuba's Fundación Antonio Núñez Jiménez. He notes that COVID-19 resulted in a delay of planned activities in Cuba in 2020, but that partners on both sides of the Florida Straits have found ways to adapt and to continue dialogue and joint activities while waiting for travel to open up again. Mr. Farer also provides a summary of specific ideas for future collaborations suggested by several contributors to this book and by others who presented at the series of webinars on February 21, 2021 that provide the basis for this book. Key areas for collaboration include climate change adaptation and mitigation, clean and resilient energy, sustainable small-scale fisheries, and coastal resilience, just to name a few.

That the United States and Cuba have a shared interest in environmental protection and sustainability is undeniable. It's also undeniable that suspending dialogue and cooperation until political differences are fully resolved undermines our national interests and is costly to both countries. In a December 11, 2020 letter to President-elect Biden, 15 leaders of US-based NGOs and academic institutions wrote urged the new President to "set a new course, one firmly based on constructive engagement and

the centuries old tradition of science diplomacy." Consistent with the articles in this book, the letter's authors argued that "[a] renewed policy of scientific engagement on environmental matters will advance the interests of the United States and those of the Cuban people in a way that ensures a clean and healthy environment and sustains the natural resources upon which our societies and economies depend. Engagement will also be fundamental to carrying out your agenda on promoting clean energy and addressing climate change in Latin America and the Caribbean."