



Cuba: Living between Hurricanes

A film about the elements – hurricanes and rain, the sea and the earth. About a fishing port on the north coast of Cuba which has seen better days: Caibarién, where Hurricane Irma – one of the most powerful ever to sweep the Caribbean – made landfall on 17th September 2017.

About the effects of climate across the centuries in a Caribbean island sucked into global markets for its commodity crops – tobacco, coffee and above all, sugar. How sugar changed the landscape, through deforestation and soil exhaustion.

About the growing threat from climate change, and the move towards reforestation, ecotourism and sustainable farming.

Although the story is told against the background of the Cuban Revolution, the rule of the communist state is only the latest stage in the history of an island that has always suffered extreme weather events, of which hurricanes are only the most dramatic. As Cuba's President, Miguel Díaz-Canel, told a meeting of Caribbean countries in Managua in 2019: "Living between hurricanes has conditioned our lives; it has modified our geographies and spurred our migrations. And it has also educated us in the need to further study the phenomena that await us and work to reverse their damage." This film takes a step in that direction.

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PART ONE - HURRICANES AND HISTORY



In the early hours of 9th September 2017, Hurricane Irma, one of the most powerful hurricanes ever to sweep the Caribbean, makes landfall in the port of Caibarién in the middle of Cuba's north coast. The damage, seen in local television reports and video, is huge. Citizens recall the experience.

Hurricanes have always played a part in Cuban history and affected the cultivation of commodity crops (especially coffee, tobacco and sugar) in past centuries. Coffee, an important commodity crop only briefly in the early nineteenth century, was overtaken by sugar, which was responsible for the great transformation of the countryside through widespread deforestation.

Around Caibarién, remnants of the sugar industry remain. An industrial sugar mill dating from 1891 was turned into a museum after it closed in 1999, as the sugar industry was thrown into crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union, then its principal customer. A growth in tourism would replace the lost foreign earnings. Meanwhile, Caibarién is threatened by climate change and the threat of rising sea levels.

PART TWO - CAIBARIEN



Caibarién's origins in the early nineteenth century and subsequent rise to economic importance as a *entrepôt* corresponded with the rise of sugar cane. A commercial culture developed, oriented to the sea and export, distinct from the nearby older town of Remedios which was rooted in land and even contraband.

Caibarién's hinterland expanded through the construction of railways, but its golden age in the early 20th century coincided with the decline of sugar and the political crisis in the country in the 1930s. The town turns to fishing. After the Revolution of 1959, sugar production grows again but becomes dependent on the Soviet Union, with disastrous effects when the latter collapsed and Cuban sugar was thrown into the global market where prices were falling.

The industrialisation of sugar production brought soil exhaustion through the growing use of fertiliser. The region around Caibarién shows other signs of ecological degradation and contamination, while climate change brings rising minimum temperatures and growing sedimentation along the coast.

PART THREE - WAYS FORWARD



Near Caibarién, Hurricane Irma brings damage to the causeway which leads to the hotels on the neighbouring keys. Mass tourism arrived following the economic crisis of the 1990s, but far from being 'an industry without chimneys', it also has its costs, social as well as economic and environmental. Caibarién remains vulnerable while the new tourist installations on the nearby keys draw in investment and generate jobs.

However, Cuba has also been developing alternatives in the form of eco-tourism, like the installations at Las Terrazas, near Havana, where a major reforestation project was initiated in 1968. Environmental consciousness has grown since Fidel Castro's speech to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and the economic crisis of the 1990s has also encouraged new models of sustainable farming. Solutions like this are not just important locally. The challenge of climate change is global.