

Living between Hurricanes

MICHAEL CHANAN writes about his new documentary film on ecology and sustainable development in the face of climate change in Cuba

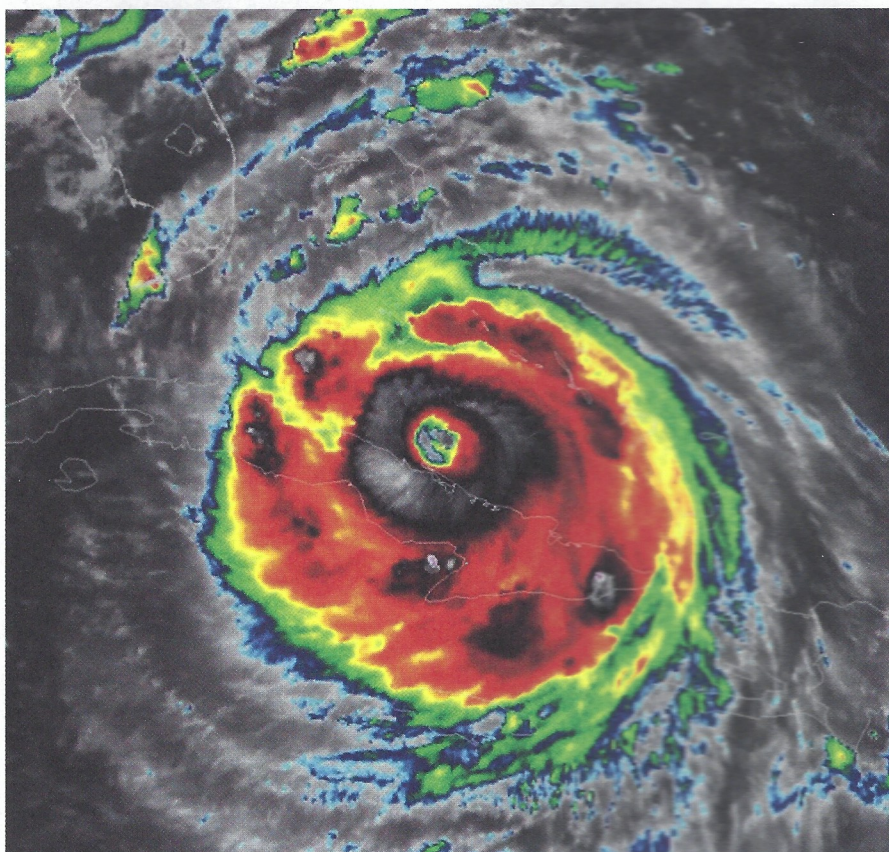
Cuba: *Living between Hurricanes*, which premiered in Havana last December, is a collaboration by a London-based team of academics with a Cuban NGO for the environment, the Fundación Antonio Núñez Jiménez. The film takes its title from a speech by Cuba's President, Miguel Díaz-Canel, to the meeting of 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." The film takes a step in this direction.

Taking our lead from recent work by historians and alive to the growing threat of climate change, we set out for Caibarién, a fishing port on the island's north coast which has seen better days, to investigate the effects of hurricanes down the centuries in shaping Cuba's agro-industry and the social formation that goes with it. We chose Caibarién because this is where Hurricane Irma, one of the most powerful ever to sweep the Caribbean, made landfall in the early hours of 9 September 2017. Initial research threw up a variety of footage of the event on YouTube, and we knew there would be more, but this would only be our starting point.

Our aim was the historical big picture, and the relation of hurricanes to other facets of climate and ecology in a vulnerable region whose economy was tied into global markets. According to recent research, the Caribbean has been shaped as much by hurricanes as by commerce or the legacy of colonial rule, and extreme weather has been much more closely connected than previously thought to economic and socio-political changes.

In short, the film aims at a wider investigation in which, as one reviewer puts it, "a small enclave in the Caribbean becomes a prism revealing... the complex dynamics linking human action and nature, which connect a point on the map with the rest of the planet." (Maria Luisa Ortega, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid).

The north coast of the province of Villa Clara is a region where forests and food



Hurricane Irma, one of the most powerful to ever hit Cuba, made landfall in the early hours of 9 September 2017

self-sufficiency gave way to cattle ranching, tobacco cultivation, and, increasingly during the nineteenth century, the sugar cane industry, with its railways and sugar mills, bringing soil exhaustion and pollution. Recent historians speak of this as the advance of commodity frontiers, a process in which the twenty-first century has brought the encroachment of a new commodity in the form of mass tourism, whose growth since the 1990s has gone some way to replacing the foreign earnings lost when the sugar industry collapsed after the fall of the Soviet bloc. But tourism is equally at the mercy of global markets, and also has serious ecological effects.

Working with the Fundación gave us the opportunity to get away from the iconic imagery of a Caribbean paradise

caught in an anachronistic time warp – the very imagery associated with the tourism industry. Our camera offers an alternative and unvarnished perspective, as we film the streets of the town and surrounding countryside, and visit one of the new hotels on the nearby keys, connected to the mainland by a 60km causeway constructed in the 1990s.

The film combines archive footage from the Cinemateca and newsreels released by Cuba's film institute every week from 1960 to 1990, which provide glimpses of hurricanes and their aftermath, as well as various aspects of agro-industry. The independent filmmaker Giselle García Castro kindly gave us drone shots of Caibarién filmed for her documentary *Lista Quinta*.

Our participants in front of the camera fall into two main groups. First, the historians and others who gathered for a symposium hosted by the Fundación in Havana. Second,

LEADING IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

ACCORDING TO the Sustainable Development Index (SDI), Cuba is the most sustainably developing country in the world. The index (designed by the anthropologist Jason Hickel) corrects the established Human Development Index (HDI) in which the most developed countries come out on top. The HDI ignores the problem of environmental impact, which is nearly always highest in the most developed countries and which should perhaps on this account be called over-developed. The new index turns the old one on its head. If you take the statistics on life expectancy, schooling and income, and then take account of the per capita carbon footprint, then Cuba comes at the top of the list, far outperforming advanced capitalist

countries like Britain (which ranks at 131) and the United States (159).

How Cuba comes at the top of the SDI is not a simple story, but it is the result of a particular conjuncture. In the economic crisis following the collapse of communism in Europe, when Cuba's economy contracted by almost 40 per cent over four or five years, a beleaguered communist system nevertheless managed to protect the well-being of the population through universal health-care and education, as well as measures like food rationing. At the same time, agriculture was forced – through a lack of accustomed fertiliser – to adopt organic methods, small-scale farming was encouraged, and new food markets appeared. Today, following various

economic reforms, there have been significant moves towards sustainability. These are some of the initiatives we look at in the last part of the film, along with the problems created by the huge growth of tourism since the 1990s to replace foreign earnings lost by the collapse of the sugar industry.

One should always be cautious about statistics and the way they're compiled, but the SDI seems like a nice affirmation of the argument Castro made in his Rio speech that it is the consumer societies of the old colonial metropolises and their imperialist policies that are fundamentally responsible for the atrocious destruction of the environment, while the vast majority of humanity is plagued by backwardness and poverty.



Finca Marta, a model of sustainable farming run by Fernando Funes

the people we met in Caibarién, who were well aware of being caught between the past – which has bequeathed problems like soil exhaustion and contamination – and a future threatened by rising temperatures and sea levels combined with ever more intense hurricanes.

Our guide in Caibarién is a local ecological activist, Pedro González. In the last part of the film, Reinaldo Funes from the Fundación takes us to the eco-tourist installation at Las Terrazas, near Havana, and not far away, Finca Marta, a model of sustainable farming run by his brother Fernando Funes.

The result, showing a picture of Cuba very different from what is normally seen abroad, will support the work of the Fundación within Cuba and connect it to an international audience geared up to thinking globally and acting locally. Viewers from outside Cuba who have seen it are moved to comment on how it makes them think about local issues in their own countries. A Spanish viewer mentions the vulnerability

of tourism-dependent areas of Spain such as the Canary Islands, another in Argentina speaks of the problems of small towns in the interior, and an English viewer talks of the threat of rising sea levels around the British coast. In the words of Concha Mateos (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid): “Living between hurricanes can mean many things. Cuba has always lived between hurricanes, of different kinds. One can have quite varied debates after watching this film.”

Cuba: Living Between Hurricanes is open access and comes in two forms: the complete film (69 mins), or in three parts which can be viewed separately (and thus more easily incorporated into teaching and meetings). Find it, along with background information, at livingbetweenhurricanes.org.

★ If you're interested in putting on a screening, the film is available without charge, and if you'd like one of the filmmakers to come for a Q&A, you only need to provide expenses. Inquiries to info@livingbetweenhurricanes.org

LOCAL SCREENINGS

This is a fascinating film for anyone interested in the effects of climate change on an island like Cuba, and in how Cuba has survived some devastating hurricanes in recent decades. If you or your local CSC group are interested in organising a free screening of the documentary, please get in touch with the director or the CSC office.

The film can be viewed, with English subtitles, on the website at livingbetweenhurricanes.org and we understand it will be available on DVD shortly.

Cuba: Living between Hurricanes
(UK/Cuba, 2019, 69 mins)
livingbetweenhurricanes.org
Directed by Michael Chanan
Written and produced by Jonathan Curry-Machado and Jean Stubbs