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Jennifer Gebelein

# A Geographic Perspective of Cuban Landscapes

 Springer

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# Preface

This book was inspired by my travels and fieldwork in Cuba over the past 8 years. The first time in 2003, I was invited to speak at a conference in Havana sponsored, in part by the University of Havana and its Geography Department. From the moment I landed until the time I left, I was overwhelmed by the generosity of the people, the impressive knowledge presented by scientists about the myriad of ecosystems in Cuba, and the beauty of the island. And as I returned to Miami from that first trip, I was struck that while Cuba seems so far away in our typical American mindset due to politics; it is so close in terms of geographic distance, that it seemed a travesty to *not* become involved in scientific research on the island. On subsequent trips my first impressions were only strengthened as I explored the island with my student. Upon traveling across the island to many different preserves, conservation areas and World Heritage Sites, it became clear that the management of Cuba's natural resources was a complicated and monumental task. I wanted to better understand how the Cubans administered these very different areas with distinctive conservation strategies. However I found that this administrative framework was exceptionally complicated and my only hope for grasping the full implications of current laws and policies was to go back in time and appreciate the many stages of landscape evolution that Cuba has undergone. This was the impetus for this book.

This book is the culmination of research that gives the reader a nonfiction view of how Cuba's landscape has changed since the time when Columbus first set foot on the island and encountered the Indigenous peoples who lived there in 1492 to present day. I touch on several topics that are relevant to analysis of landscape change over time to help the reader understand the full complexity of Cuba's physical transformation. That transformation from a heavily forested island to less than (currently) 18% forest cover is quite drastic and during more recent decades the government has established a system of protected areas and strong governmental controls over environmental policies and the manner with which the island can be built upon by foreign investors, urban expansion projects, or natural resource exploitation. This complex structure that has emerged is closely linked to improve environmental monitoring by scientists both in Cuba and abroad and many national and international collaborations to assess a best way forward regarding

environmental policy. This book represents the first step in a long term project, so to that end it is wide ranging in terms of subject matter related to history, technology and geography. And while politics helped shaped the topics presented here, this is not a political book.

This book was completed by several trips to Cuba, many hours spent hiking, driving, informal interviews with Cubans in many welcoming homes during my fieldwork. The fieldwork itself involved long hours, generally extremely hot days and nights, and sore muscles from dragging heavy identification books, laptops and a cumbersome GPS unit through many hiking trails. It also required countless hours in many libraries retrieving out of print texts such as reprints of explorers' navigation logs and diaries, ancient atlases, and a constant hunt for digital GIS data as well as recreation of faded maps into new media.

There is no way to truly do justice to the many individuals who helped me with this enormous project. That help came in the form of helping me find my way when I was ridiculously lost in the field, kindly understanding that I really did *not* mean to stumble upon unmarked military land when traveling through remote areas. It also came in the form of wonderful colleagues who provided documentation of laws and policies and translations for them that I would have never found otherwise such as Dan Whittle of the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) and Doug Radar also of EDF. I especially want to thank David Guggenheim for his continued belief in me and my work; he is a positive light in this world and makes an enormous effort to bring people together for collaborative work in Cuba. Fernando Bretos has also made a positive impact on me during this process and I appreciate his collaborative work as well. The person responsible for bringing me to Cuba for the first time is Michael McClain who was a wonderful mentor for my early Cuba work and I will always remember his infectious enthusiasm for research in Cuba. I would also like to thank the Cuban Research Institute (CRI) for funding my travel to Cuba. The anonymous reviewers made great improvements on this work and later comments and edits by colleagues were also very helpful. I would also like to thank Liz Greb and the Dean's Office in the College of Arts & Sciences for being wonderfully understanding particularly during the final six months of writing. To my former student Susanne thanks for being a terrific travel companion and translator. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their wonderful support and especially my husband Jamie who was amazingly supportive during this entire process.

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Historical Background of Cuban Land Cover Change</b> .....	1
1.1	Introduction .....	2
1.1.1	Uniqueness of Cuba .....	3
1.2	Landscape Influence of Early Indians in Cuba .....	4
1.3	Summary of Land Cover Change from Spanish Conquest to 1950.....	7
1.3.1	People’s Impacts – 1950.....	7
1.3.2	Livestock Impacts – 1950 .....	9
1.3.3	Precious Wood Impacts – 1950.....	11
1.3.4	Tobacco Impacts – 1950.....	11
1.3.5	Sugar Impacts – 1950.....	13
1.3.6	Other Impacts .....	15
1.4	Evolution of Land Cover from 1950 to Present Day.....	15
1.5	Where Was the Greatest and Least Change?.....	18
1.5.1	An Acknowledgement to Past Classification Efforts .....	18
	References.....	21
<b>2</b>	<b>Linking Causal Factors to Areas of Highest Change</b> .....	23
2.1	Introduction .....	24
2.2	Reasons for Significant Landscape Changes.....	24
	References .....	30
<b>3</b>	<b>Governmental Organization and Control Over Environmental Policies</b> .....	31
3.1	Introduction .....	32
3.2	A Specific Focus on Conservation Management, and Protection of (Flora/Fauna) Species .....	32
3.2.1	Ministry of the Fishing Industry .....	35
3.2.2	Ministry of Agriculture .....	35
3.2.3	Ministry of Sugar .....	36
3.2.4	Ministry of Economics and Planning (Previously the Ministry of Planning).....	36



3.2.5	Ministry of Tourism.....	36
3.2.6	Ministry of Informatics and Communications (MIC) .....	36
3.3	Human Health Links to Environmental Policies.....	37
	References.....	39
<b>4</b>	<b>Establishment and Description of Current Park/ Protected Areas System</b> .....	<b>41</b>
4.1	Introduction.....	42
4.2	Establishment of Protected Areas and History.....	43
4.3	Different Levels of Protection (and How Are They Designated?) .....	45
4.3.1	Marine and Coastal Protected Areas .....	47
4.3.2	Differences Between Land and Marine-Based Management Protection System.....	49
4.3.3	How Are Parks (or Any Protected Areas) Maintained?.....	51
4.4	Examples of Native/Exotic Species of Flora and Fauna .....	52
	References.....	54
<b>5</b>	<b>History of Remote Sensing and GIS as It Relates to Assessment of Land Use and Land Cover Changes Over Time</b> .....	<b>55</b>
5.1	Introduction and Historical Context.....	56
5.2	Remote Sensing.....	57
5.3	Cuba's Participation in Space Science .....	61
5.4	Brief Remote Sensing Technical Background .....	63
5.5	What Makes a Good Interpreter? .....	63
5.5.1	Personal Aside .....	64
5.6	Digital Image Processing .....	66
5.7	Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Overview .....	67
5.8	GIS in Cuba.....	69
5.9	Mapping Agricultural Favorability and Productivity Using GIS.....	70
5.10	Impacts of Urban Expansion and Development Using Satellite Imagery and GIS Data.....	71
	References.....	74
<b>6</b>	<b>Cuban Environment, the Past, Present and Future</b> .....	<b>77</b>
6.1	Introduction.....	78
6.2	Influential Factors on Cuba's Lands and Coastal Waters.....	79
6.2.1	On Land.....	79
6.2.2	Green Revolution.....	79
6.2.3	The Special Period.....	80
6.2.4	Reanimation of the Economy .....	81
6.2.5	Climate Change and Indicator Species on Land.....	82
6.2.6	Waters (Influential Factors) .....	84
6.3	Current Actors Impacting Cuba's Landscape and Coastal Waters .....	85

6.4	Current Plans to Protect or Develop?.....	86
6.5	Cuban Attitude Towards Environmental Conservation Issues? .....	88
6.5.1	Reflections on Preservation.....	88
6.6	Summary of Positive and Negative Elements Influencing Natural Land Cover and Future Possibilities .....	89
	References.....	91
<b>Index</b>	.....	<b>93</b>

