
Honduras: Garifuna communities threatened by palm disease

Palms are typical of the coastal landscape in the Pacific region of Honduras, inhabited by the Garifuna communities. They are descendants from Africans that were brought to the region after the Spanish Conquest and have developed a culture strongly related to their environment, of which palms are an essential component. Palms occupy an area of 6,000 hectares and about one million people depend directly or indirectly upon it.

A new disease originated in Jamaica, that quickly spread in the Caribbean region under the name of "lethal yellowing" is caused by a fungus and produces the death of a palm in a period of four to six years time. The Garifuna communities of Corozal, Zambo Creek, Armenia, Río Esteban, Guadalupe, San Antonio, Santa Fe and Trujillo are being strongly affected by this situation. The disappearance of the palm will have serious effects on the food security of the Garifuna, since most of their everyday food is prepared with products obtained from it, which have got a high energetic and nutritional value. Tourism, that has become an important source of income for them, will also decline in case the beauty that palms offer to the beach landscapes no longer exists. Cultural survival of the Garifuna is also menaced because palm products are used in traditional dishes and palm leaves are an essential part of their ceremonies.

No chemical control has been found to control the disease and the only solution put forward is the complete substitution of the species by a hybrid resistant to the pest. The government has reacted late and in a non realistic way to face this difficult situation: 5,000 hybrid plants resistant to the pest have been imported from Costa Rica but their high cost (US\$ 10 each) puts them out of the reach of the Garifuna communities. Additionally, no research programmes have been implemented in time, even knowing the risk of the arrival of the disease to the country -as it finally happened- and little research is being carried out to control it.

Article based on information from: "Muerte de cocoteros tendrá impacto en industria sin chimeneas", 29/6/1999, "La agonía fugaz de nuestras palmeras" por Marcial Quevedo F., 3/9/1998.