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# TROPIC LIFE BELOW THE WATER

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Ayiti Nexus' Owners Regine Zamor & Nathalie Brunet at [Haiti Cultural Exchange's](#) An Pale Event. Photo credit: [Francesca Andre](#)

By Melissa Ternier

Tropic Life Below the Water

What do you do when you come across something magnificent, aesthetically beautiful and a valuable factor to the livelihood to people in that region? Some people may opt to hoard their findings. Others may choose to share their discovery in such a way to preserve their treasure for the benefit of all. The latter is what two Haitian women chose after coming across photographer Nick Hobgood's lively images of the marine life in Haiti which he took while diving off the country's northern coastline from 2007-2010.

What surfaced were hundreds of images of the marine biodiversity. "I never knew this existed in our waters, [prior to this]" explains Nathalie Brunet. Brunet's interest and work experience in a nature conservation project bringing agricultural producers to environmentally sustainable practices propelled her collaboration with development expert Nick Hobgood on the production of a coffee table book called Haiti from Below.

Through thorough research Brunet gathered a wealth of information about the impact and history of the marine life including the state of the coral reefs which make up 70% of Haiti's coastline. Several areas



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affected by the health of the coral reefs include the island’s food supply and economy, particularly the livelihood of the fishermen who “are barely scraping by”. The health sector utilizes coral reefs in numerous medicinal applications such as in the production of morphine and treating leukemia, other cancers and ulcers. Finally the draw of tourism, particularly that of the cruise industry, benefit from a healthy coastline.

As result of those factors and the current diminishing state of the reefs, the need for urgent marine conservation efforts became very apparent to Brunet and Hobgood and resulted in producing Haiti from Below in support of the Reef Check Foundation. Hobgood donated the photos for the cause, while Regine P. Zamor worked extensively in the development of projects and community outreach, joined hands for the promotion and sales of the book. The book captures the marine life in over 100 vibrant photos from the northern coast of Haiti. The two women held a book signing and candid discussion hosted by Haiti Cultural Exchange in NY last Thursday on April 18th.

As much as the two women want to see immediate conservation action through the implementation of temporary fishing bans in certain regions, in order to increase marine life to optimal levels, they understand more critical provisions and collective collaborations need to be rooted beforehand. “You can’t simply tell the fisherman not to fish anymore”... “There needs to be alternatives for them [as well]” as Brunet reminds the attendees. Piers and ports utilized by the cruise ships can be built to environmental standards. There is also a cultural factor; marine education and marine recreation are not widely popular among the Haitian population. Some cultural ties have limited much of the population from going in the water, “many Haitians do not know how to swim ... [much less] snorkeling”, explains Brunet. And if nothing is done and everything continues as is, overfishing, pollution, and sanitation issues will become the winning culprits in eliminating the natural habitat.

Questions on how pertinent environmental sustainability alongside other heavier national issues such as infrastructure, economy, health, and education often pushes conservation on the side, especially after the earthquakes of ‘11. These challenges continue to be address to Haiti’s Parliament members and various ministries on an ongoing basis. “It has to start with conversations [like these]” and cultivating hopefully a deep rooted “appreciation and respect” once the population understands the the value.

Regine and Nathalie launched their consulting firm, **Ayiti Nexus**, in 2012 offering strategic development services to clients who are “promoting sustainable development in Haiti.” Zamor hopes the current book that has quickly been selling can be a primary communication tool for environmental education surrounding the issue for raising the awareness among and outside the Haitian population and for encouraging positive action, such as swimming and snorkeling that will facilitate a broader appreciation for the biodiversity along Haiti’s shores.

A few of the successes that Ayiti Nexus has come across include engaging conversations with Haiti’s government officials and raising funds for **Reef Check’s** EcoDiver Program which has trained and certified over two dozen divers from the islands top universities.

Whether above ground or in the water below; each one plays a vital role in effecting the overall conditions of the region’s ecosystem. Ongoing discussions and educational campaigns will be key for maintaining efforts and making sustainable improvements for Haiti’s marine biodiversity. Hopefully words and actions can make a combat in restoring and preserving this natural habitat.

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