

7TH INTERNATIONAL ENCOUNTER ON
AGROECOLOGY, SUSTAINABLE
AGRICULTURE & COOPERATIVISM



REFLECTIONS

NOVEMBER 2019



In partnership with Cuba's National Small Farmers Association (ANAP) and La Via Campesina, in November 2019, the Cuba-U.S. Agroecology Network (CUSAN), a project of the Caribbean Agroecology Institute, coordinated a delegation of fifty-seven US and Puerto Rican farmers, activists, and academics to attend ANAP's 7th International Encounter. The encounter focused on agroecology, sustainable agriculture and cooperativism. In total, 250 delegates from 19 countries participated in the biannual event. During this time participants visited agroecological farms, cooperatives, small processing plants and distribution centers throughout the country. The delegation was welcomed with gracious hospitality. The following pages document why these exchanges matter, what we learned, and some personal reflections from participants.



U.S. & PUERTO RICAN DELEGATION

COORDINATED BY CUSAN,
CUBA-U.S. AGROECOLOGY NETWORK



Comprised of farmers, food justice activists, and academics from San Juan to San Francisco, the delegation was welcomed with open arms by the Cuban people. The Cuban farmers exemplified how to cultivate an alternative movement within the food system by demonstrating the various ways in which the social, ecological, and political dimensions of agroecology can be woven into society. The delegation departed not only with a deeper understanding of the technical skills needed to foster integrated food and farming system invested in justice and food sovereignty but also with a strong sense of solidarity with the Cuban people.

WHY IT MATTERS

NOVEMBER 2019 CUBA



Global agricultural systems sit at a crossroads. Cuba's agroecological revolution offers a powerful example of an alternative way to feed an increasingly urbanized population, even amid the mounting challenges of mitigating and adapting to climate change. Our goal, by bringing the US/Puerto Rican delegation to Cuba, was to inspire and expand the network of agroecology advocates and activists, to learn from and show solidarity with the movement in Cuba, and to build connections between farmers, practitioners and academics, in opposition to the inhumane blockade, and in support of Cuba's sovereignty. We live in an era in which it is vital to restore a relationship of reciprocity with the land, by implementing resilient, local food systems that sustain livelihoods, provide nutritious food, and nurture the ecosystems we rely on for our survival. The Cuban people stand at the forefront of innovation and are a powerful example of collective resistance. From increasing soil fertility to crop production diversification the Cuban farmers demonstrate resourcefulness and exemplary regenerative farming practices. Walking through fields of polycultures exhibited the ways in which diversity promotes resilience, the Cuban cooperatives were an admirable manifestation of community, and the Cuban agricultural policies exemplified the capacity to make a paradigm shift within government institutions.

Participating Organizations and Farms

U.S. & PUERTO RICO

- Agroecology and Livelihoods Collaborative, UVM Burlington, VT
- American University Maryland
- Asociación Nacional Ambientalista Santo Domingo, DR
- Babilla Collective New York, NY
- Black Mesa Water Coalition Arizona
- Boricua Resistance New York, NY
- Campesinos Ecologicos de la Sierra Madre de Chiapas Chiapas, MX
- Children's Aid New York, NY
- Cooperation Jackson Jackson, MS
- Cornell Cooperative Extension Ithaca, NY
- Cultivando Justicia California
- Eastern Woodlands Rematriation Collective, Newmarket, NH
- Farm School NYC New York, NY
- Farmers of the Global Majority New York, NY
- Kitchen Table Advisors California
- MESA Multinational Exchange for Sustainable Agriculture California
- Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust New England
- Organización Boricúa de Agricultura Ecológica, Puerto Rico
- People's Agroecology Process, USA, Canada, PR
- Community Agroecology Network, California
- Rooted in Community, MA
- Sir Kesington's New York, NY
- Southeastern African American Farmers' Organic Network (SAAFON) Atlanta, GA
- The Farm School MA
- University of Vermont Burlington, VT
- UVM Farmer Training Program Burlington, VT
- UW-Madison Agroecology Program Madison, WI
- Vermont Caribbean Institute Burlington, VT
- Woke Foods New York, NY
- Desde mi Huerto Quebradillas, PR
- Finca Morada Miami, FL
- Freedom Farms Cooperative Jackson, MS
- Greene Acres Community Garden & Compost Brooklyn, NY
- High Hog Farm Grayson
- JSM Organic California
- Rabbit's Garden CSA New York, NY
- Taíno Farm Los Brazos, DR
- Troy Farm Madison, WI.



WHAT WE LEARNED

CUBA'S AGROECOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba lost roughly 80 percent of all of its imports and exports. No longer having access to fossil fuels, pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and/or heavy machinery, Cuba turned towards its ancestral agroecological farming practices and rich biocultural knowledge in combination with transdisciplinary science for answers. Today the island has a wide network of cooperative agroecological rural and urban farms. Research has shown how these small diversified farms are more resilient to the tropical storms that the island commonly faces.



This transition, born out of necessity came with great challenges, yet today Cuba's perseverance and capacity to restore agroecological farming practices serves as an inspiration to the international community. The Cuban people have fought hard for agrarian reform, an effort to decentralize land tenure post colonization. The undertaking to restructure land management, by centralizing small cooperative and family farms has greatly increased food sovereignty within the region. Today Cuba's government has various agrarian policies and institutional infrastructure that assist farmers in the transition towards agroecology.

Youth Leadership within the Movement

During the encounter a panel was held on agroecology challenges and goals for youth. The panel discussed a wide range of topics, including but not limited to;

- family agriculture and food sovereignty
- biodiversity and seeds
- agroecology and the environment
- agrarian reform, territory, and cooperativism
- gender, formation processes, and agroecology promotion.

Fifteen members of the Peoples Agroecology Process participated in the delegation including, Deric Campos and Nia Holley who represented North America on the conferences youth panel. The Peoples Agroecology Process is an international grassroots initiative led by farmers, farmworkers, fisherfolk and Native Americans in the U.S., Puerto Rico and Canada and seeks to use popular education methodologies to value, disseminate and build new knowledge around agroecology and food sovereignty. Deric was born and raised in Puerto Rico and works with the Boricua Organization for Ecological Agriculture. Nia Holley is a co-founder of the Eastern Woodlands Rematriation Project, and lives in Boston Massachusetts. These inspiring young leaders discussed the social, political, and environmental struggles that their communities face and the ways in which they are working to decolonize the current food system in order to assure food sovereignty and collective liberation.



Nia Holley



Deric Campos



"Aunque nos bloquean de manera económica, financiera y comercial, no nos pueden bloquear nuestros valores, nuestra sabiduría y nuestra solidaridad"

-Membro de ANAP

"Even though they block us economically, financially and commercially, they can not block our values, our wisdom, nor our solidarity"

-Member of ANAP



Finca Marta

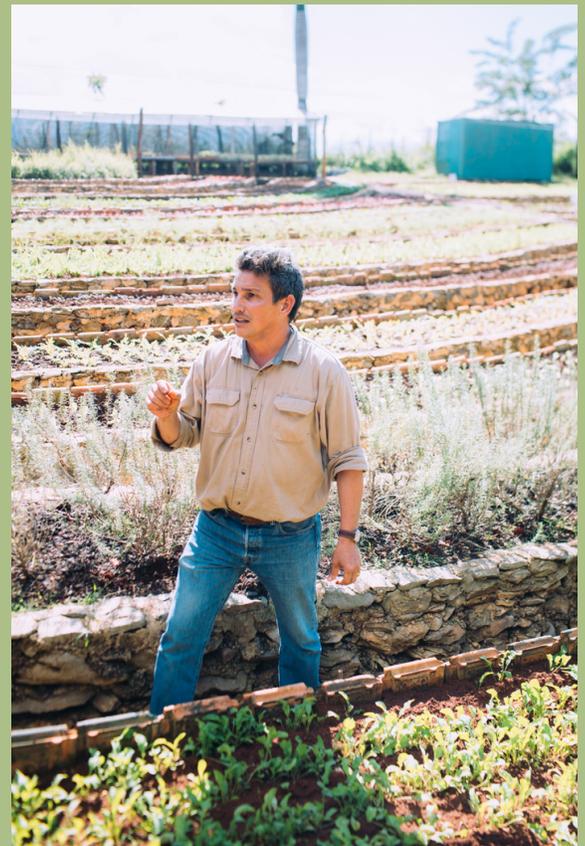
At Finca Marta we were taken away by the beauty of the farms biodiversity. We were graciously welcomed by agricultural scientist, community organizer, and farmer Fernando Funes Monzote. Fernando greeted us by sharing a delicious salad made with ingredients grown on the land. We were then given a tour of the farms biodigester, rotational grazing system, bee hives, market garden and infamous well.



With over 60 species of vegetables, Finca Marta demonstrates not only the ecological benefits of such extensive biodiversity but also its economic viability



Circled around the farms well, Fernando tells us the story of how he and his friend Juan Machado spent months to hand dig the well, a testament to their commitment, patience, perseverance, and trust.



Finca La Burgambilia

The native non-stinging melipona bee hives are the great pride of this farm. Hand painted with love, each hive represented a different historic building in Cuba. We learned about how these bees are sacred to the neighboring Mayan people and how it is believed that the Mayan temples were designed to replicate the bees honeycomb, which takes on a pyramid like shape. He then proceeded to share his honey with us by directly opening a hive and inserting a straw.



During our visit we toured the farm's vermiculture composting system, greenhouses, natural bamboo structures, small livestock, and beekeeping productions. To the left is a picture of the interior of a greenhouse, the greenhouse floor is being used to produce lettuce and the vertical space is being utilized for cucumbers.



Left to right: Hand painted hive boxes, rich medicinal propolis produced by bees, drinking honey directly from the hive

Visiting Cuba reinforced young Puerto Rican farmer Roberto with pride for his agricultural history and roots. He is featured below wearing his "Jibaro Soy" (jibaro I am) shirt. "Jibaro" was a derogatory term used to refer to Puerto Rican peasants for many years. Today the term is being reclaimed with honor, recognizing the resistance and wisdom of those who tend to the land.



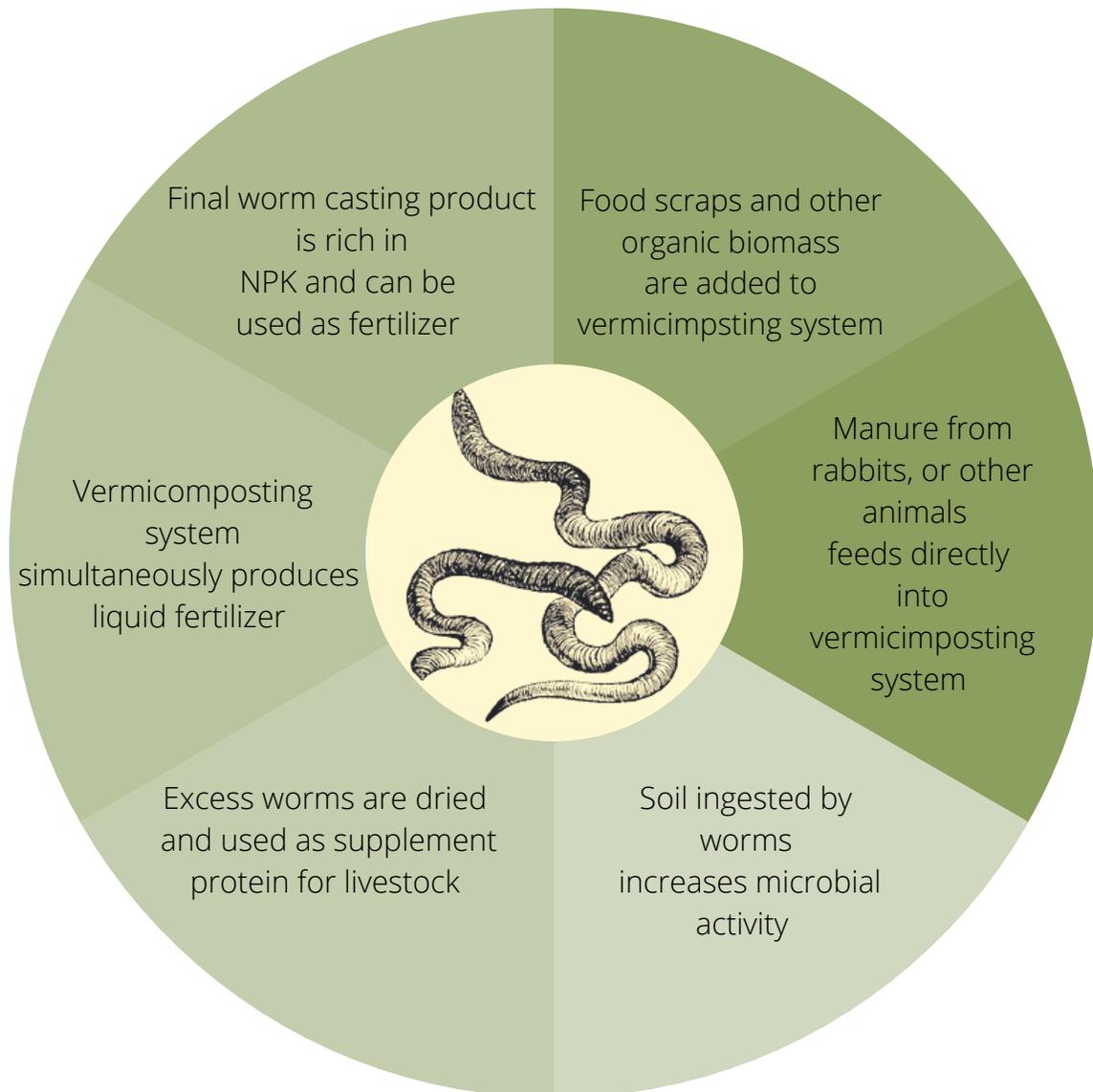
"Jibaro, Guajiro, Campesino... lo que aspiro a ser. Un fuerte abrazo a nuestra resistencia jibara que lucha día a día para proteger, conservar y amplificar estos conocimientos ancestrales. Quienes siembran, quienes cocinan, quienes sanan con plantas, quienes hacen arte, quienes cantan, quienes bailan, quienes organizan. Gracias a todes que de una forma u otra obran para que nuestra cultura jibara siga viva, rescatando y compartiendo los saberes que nos trajeron hasta aquí."

"Jibaro, Guajiro (name for Cuban farmers), Peasant...What I aspire to be. A strong embrace to our Jibara resistance, which fights day by day to conserve and amplify ancestral knowledge, who seeds, who cooks, who heals with plants, who makes art, who sings, who dances, who organizes. Thank you to all whom in one way or another work so that our Jibara culture continues to be alive, reclaiming and sharing the wisdom that brought us here"

Vermicomposting Systems

On Farm Nutrient Recycling

A very common soil management practice in Cuba is the local production and use of vermicomposting. The rich humus produced through vermicomposting increases water retention, provides binding sites for plant nutrients, controls plant disease, and stimulates growth while also creating a rich liquid fertilizer as a byproduct.



Featured to the left is one of Cuba's many innovative vermiculture operations, in which rabbits are raised above the worm bins. Their excrement directly feeds the worms.

ROBERTO NUTLOUIS

Black Mesa Water Coalition

Roberto Nutlouis is Dine (Navajo) and works out of Black Mesa Water Coalition field office in Pinon Arizona. In his position he oversees the Restorative Economy Programs. He is actively involved in rebuilding regenerative food systems on the Navajo Nation using ancestral practices, advocating for Just Transition and developing fair value market access for local wool producers. His experience includes work in environmental justice, food sovereignty, energy efficient housing, and youth leadership development.



Inspired

"My time in Cuba was very inspirational and rejuvenating. It was a blessing to be among amazing people working on different aspects of food sovereignty in the US. Their collective energy was healing and rejuvenating. Our visit to local farms was so inspiring, they have proven that local food systems can be strengthened and regenerative agriculture can produce food for their Nation. Some of their methods of production and social organizing is inspiring. "

BRANDON KING

Cooperation Jackson

brandon king describes himself as a "farmer/DJ" originally from Hampton Roads Virginia where he currently resides. brandon moved to Jackson Mississippi in 2014, where he worked for six years as a cultural organizer, cooperative developer, and program coordinator for Cooperation Jackson, an organization of which he is also a founding member. Cooperation Jackson is working to create economic democracy by creating a vibrant solidarity economy in Jackson, Mississippi, that will hopefully help transform Mississippi and the South. brandon served on the executive committee and was an anchor of Freedom Farms Cooperative, a federated cooperative of Cooperation Jackson striving to create conditions for food sovereignty. brandon is currently serving as a board member for Cooperation Jackson and is a member of Cooperation Jackson's advisory committee.



Resiliencia

"i took back an understanding of what could happen if a government actually supported farmers and provided resources they need in order to farm in more sustainable ways. it's very unfortunate that the U.S. government prioritizes farming based on making profits, in contrast to Cuba, which from what i saw and experienced, prioritizes meeting the needs of people first. i took back a deeper understanding of their robust infrastructure they have in place to do this. campesino to campesino, learning about different farming techniques, about soil remediation, processing and distribution, all of those things were really helpful. campesino to campesino ideology and principles around organizing and farming --like start small, start slow, anything that happens too fast probably isn't going to last. it was helpful to hear that farmers were moving slow and iterating as they sharpened their techniques, way back from 1956, all the way til now!Cuba is going to have it's share of contradictions, i mean, every place does. but i'm completely encouraged by a revolutionary spirit among the people and the farmers on the ground. there was a sense of sharing and community that's not like any other place i've experienced before! everywhere we went, they filled our bellies and made sure we were comfortable and taken care of. even with the language barriers, they were very aware of how we were doing and wanted to make sure we really enjoyed and learned a lot during our stay.

TAMARA HARRIS

Southeastern African American
Farmers' Organic Network
SAAFON

Tammy Harris is the Georgia Network Coordinator for the South Eastern African-American Farmers Organic Network (SAAFON) organization. Tammy comes from the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service. She has been a long-time advocate for environmental conservation, traditional homesteading practices, and cultural heritage projects. She co-founded a nonprofit historical cultural heritage museum called This Old Farmhouse, GA. The museum also serves as an agritourism attraction exploring the daily lives of small-scale West GA farming families during the early-mid 20th century.



Unity

"While visiting Cuba I was struck by the sheer magnitude and size of the agricultural cooperatives. The level of member engagement needed to organize and maintain a cooperative long-term, was really eye-opening to me! Of the many things that I learned, one of the most fascinating observations were that Cubans are deeply committed to "working with what they have been given" and their resourcefulness was very admirable. The pride that the Cuban people exuded with regard to their country, culture, and traditional agricultural practices were felt throughout each location that we visited. I left Cuba feeling inspired to share with our farmers in our network, the level of resilience and ingenuity Cuban farmers have demonstrated and the obligations they have made to the work and to one another, in the struggle for food sovereignty."

GARRET GRADDY- LOVELACE

American University

Born and raised in a farming community in Kentucky, GGL researches and teaches agricultural policy and agrarian politics at American University School of International Service in DC. A cultural geographer, she co-founded Agroecology Research-Action Collective which advances community-partnered scholarship on and for food, farm, and land justice.



Land Based Life

"Even as the US government was tightening its crusty blockade, Cuban farmers and cooperatives welcomed our US-based delegation so generously last fall. They invited us to their farms, homes, and general assemblies, offering us bountiful meals of food they had grown and raised. They shared with us their valuable knowledge of the journey toward agroecology--and the cooperative structure this journey requires--particularly in the throes of climate crisis. Against great odds, Cuban farmers hold an abiding commitment to nourishing 'el pueblo'--the people--and to doing it together, with joy, music, family, and community. Meanwhile, our delegation brought its own brave wisdoms; I was honored to travel with the 'queer brigade'--indigenous, African-diaspora, Latinx youth campesines fighting against racism, patriarchy, coloniality, and hate--all through land-based life and love and solidarity. A glimpse of the future."

KASE WHEATLEY

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Kase is a graduate student in the Agroecology Master's program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is deeply interested in efforts toward agroecological transition and is especially intrigued by the interpersonal dynamics of those involved.



Persistence

"The Cuban people are incredible role models who have demonstrated not only how a transition to agroecology can occur but also how to do so in the face of insurmountable odds. Life in Cuba is not perfect; the economic blockade by the United States has limited access to so many basic supplies that we take for granted daily. Yet, for over 60 years, the Cuban people have pursued the creation of an alternative society based in the principle of cooperation. The Cuban people remind us that agroecology is so much more than alternative cropping systems; it is a commitment to joy and to living well, it is an invitation to dance and to celebrate one another fully. I am incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to attend the ANAP gathering, to learn from farmers, and to witness the unwavering commitment to food sovereignty."

"El pueblo unido jamás será vencido"

...

"The people united will never be defeated"



In an era where political forces attempt to divide us, our time in Cuba was a reminder of unity and solidarity. Creating bridges across cultures, we were united by our commitment to be humble stewards of the land, to nourish our communities, and to fight for justice, equity, and food sovereignty. The deep seated systematic cooperation, the unmanageable innovation, and overwhelming hospitality, demonstrated the ways in which the Cuban people are protagonist in the struggle to dismantle industrial farming and seed an agroecological revolution. Upon our return we submitted the following letter to the US Congress, condemning the unlawful blockade of the Cuban people.



CUSAN

CUBA-U.S. AGROECOLOGY NETWORK

A project of the Caribbean Agroecology Institute, CUSAN connects people, institutions, and movements in Cuba and the US to build more ecologically resilient, socially just and economically fair farming systems through agroecology.

We do this by raising awareness about Cuba's agroecology advances and facilitating connections amongst stakeholders through participation in exchanges, courses, conferences and workshops. In addition, we work to amplify Cuban voices internationally, and to channel resources and opportunities to our counterparts on the island.

Our work is made possible by generous support from our funders:



www.caribbeanagroecology.org
www.agroecologynetwork.org