

Île à Vache. The threatened paradise

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Here you've got the second chronicle about my second journey to Haiti. A story from an island, a natural paradise, threatened by misunderstood tourism: Île à Vache.

We sailed from Port-au-prince, with two hours delay (as haitian tradition mandates), on friday morning. Our party is made up of several militants from different social movements and haitian organizations, and a small international delegation, formed by three members from Dessalines Brigade*, and a north-american activist based in Haiti since 2008 *who wrote these lines*, in a journalistic mission. A total of 12 individuals who not only want to know first hand what's going on in Île à Vache, but also to show our solidarity with the island communities who are suffering the pressure from the State to carry out the project "[Destination touristique Île à Vache](#)".

Île à Vache is a small island of about 18 mi² located in south region of Haiti, a 5 hour car ride from the capital and little more than half an hour on a riverboat from Les Cayes. Between 10.000 and 20.000 people live there according to different sources and recounts (between 10 and 15 thousand according to the government, and more than 20 thousand according to the island population itself), mostly dedicated to agriculture, ranching and fishing.

As the little wooden boat, full to the top of the militant delegation in Île à Vache, is approaching the island, the interest for its turistic potential becomes evident. Turquoise and crystal waters, endless beaches of white sand and palm trees (more than 20 virgin beaches according to the government advertisement), mangroves and an interior with luxuriant vegetation.

The government describes it, in the [touristic development project](#) of the island, like this: "Île à Vache depicts one of the last true treasure islands from all of the Caribbean. Natural, nottrodden, not exploited and in everyway unique; it's a true paradise in its pure state, a rarity in nowadays world". On this account, they are not wrong.

The rowboat leaves us in Madame Bernard, where we have already found the project's first signs. The houses located by the dock have been marked for their imminent demolition. The families who live there say they don't know anything, that no one informed them beyond telling them that sooner or later they'll have to flee their homes.

With a half an hour walk we went into the island, through mud and red dirt paths. We arrived at La Hatte, where Kenold and Kettle's family took us in, and offered us their home for the three days we spent on the island. They weren't expecting so many people, but even so on the first night they improvised a delicious fish, yucca and banana dinner (which would be a constant in our diet for the three and a half days spent there). There was also the issue of water, not to be wasted, being aware that it is a finite resource on the island. We had drinkable water (we got some bottles and bags of water in Les Cayes) and water for general use, which is the one they collect when rain falls in their house's well, a pretty generous gift at this time of the year, every sundown.

In the meeting before bedtime they warned us: no exploration on our own on the island, we all go in a group. Repression escalated in the last months and made them push up the alert level. In fact the number of police officers in the island have quadrupled, from less than ten to more than 40 according to a report published by a [Haitian human rights organizations network](#).

On the following day, after a bread and mermelade of pomme-cajú breakfast, we go to La Hatte school, where more than a hundred people gathered little by little. Elders and kids, men and women, all interested in the information than people from KOPI (the farmer movement Île à Vache) and the militants coming from all parts of Haiti and the world to share with them. Also with some hours of delay, once the generator and the drums has arrived to cheer up the meeting, we started projecting a small film about the government strategy "[Haiti, open to business](#)", prepared by Ayiti Kale Je. To the people of the island is not hard to see the similarities between what is coming over them if they don't stop the government project and what happened to the 300 farming families expropriated from the north of the country for the installation of Caracol industrial park. The (not social) economic development goes above all, the right to land, housing or decent compensation.

KOPI colleagues explain how the government declared the island and its surrounding sea "reserved zone and tourism development zone" in May 2013, indicating that from that moment the occupation of spaces of the island will be decided by the public administration. On August

2013 a governmental delegation landed on the island, coinciding with the public presentation of the project, to put on the cornerstone of the airport and three comunitarian instalations (a center, a restaurant and a radio). The inhabitants of the island found out by the press. After less than a month machines from the Dominican company Estrella razed crops to start building the road, also without advance notice or explanation to the population.



As stated in the report made by the advocacy [network of human rights](#) "different rumors and speculations about relocation of the population or the expropriation of properties gave birth to a climate of fear". According to the same report, in November 2013 some members of ACI (Île à Vache Citizen Action) meet with the Tourism Minister Stephanie Villedrouin, which in less than 10 minutes presents the project expeditiously and without taking questions. "This attitude contributed to increasing the population's anger towards the project".

Since then the population has demonstrated on several occasions between December 2013 and March 2014. Demonstrations that have been heavily suppressed by security forces recently arrived to the island. The people speaks about militarization of the island. In February 2014 the local police officer Jean Matunès Lamy, leader of the community and very active on the local community radio, and in the demonstrations against the project. There are no clear charges against him and months later he's still in jail without being able to see a judge. His father, who everyone calls "Papa Maltunès", told me at the end of one of the meetings that he simply wants his child to have a fair treatment, if guilty should be judged as such, but now they have him retained because of his opposition to the project.

Talking with two activists of KOPI in the island, Lain Marcdonald and Antoine Pierre Lean, confirming me that the problem for them is not the tourism. "We know that tourism can get schools and hospitals" (the island, abandoned for decades by the administration, has only one health center and two schools financed with private resources from NGOs). But they want to be taken into account in the design and development of the project. Rumors about expulsions and displacements of people (although there was no official information about it) don't stop. Lain had a meeting with the Tourism Minister where she stated that the island will be split into three, one part by tourism and hotels, a sequel to infrastructure (including the airport and golf course) and the third by the inhabitants and their agriculture. "They want to made us agricultural laborers in the service of the hotels, and we are farmers!" says Antoine. There's also a rumor which only five farmers families and five fishermen families from each locality will be selected to work for hotels, the rest will have to leave. As I say, none of this has been confirmed publicly by the government, but the reality is that government information is conflicting and drabs, as population and the media are claiming.

Although at the beginning it was said that there wolud be no expropriations, now they are talking that yes, a hundred houses will be displaced. The first marked to be demolished have no information on where to go once this happens. Lamothe, the prime minister, said recently in an [interview in 2012](#) that the Île à Vache project had less difficulty than others in Haiti because there are no property titles. "Farmers and fishermen of the island will not allow being evicted from their house and lands" claims Lain, "if we dispossess of agriculture and fisheries, how are we going to live? Is a cultural genocide and a collective suicide to accept the project". They claim that the declaration of public utility of the island must be retired, the withdrawal of police and releasing Maltunès to start talking with autorithies. The agressive tone when referring to the government becomes an exciting tone when we talk about community tourism projects.

Meetings are vindictive and cheerful. A special song is sung over and over again "nou gen patat, nou gen pweson, nnou pa bezwen pwojè sa!" We have potatoes, we have fish, we don't need this project!

Now from Port au Prince, I go into find more information about the project. The case of Île à Vache has everything. There are more rumors circulating about the personal involvement of [President Martelly in one of the businesses on the island](#). The issue of environmental impacts, it seems very undervalued by the government. And especially the hypocrisy of [a project in which states](#) "before the end point of development, we always make sure to consult the immediate neighbors and start a constructive dialogue", but the population remains completely outside any defining or consultative process. Or maybe they are leaving the dialogue for "before the end".

Soon I will publish a slightly more extensive report, here's a quick chronicle urgent from a paradise under threat.

In less than a week I'll be back home, let's see if I get a new chronic before coming back.

* Dessalines Brigade is an international solidarity group formed by militant peasants from MST linked groups, Via Campesina and other organizations from "Alba Social Movements". They are in Haiti since 2009 and although they have become up to 30 people accompanying the Haitian peasant, now 4, a Brazilian couple from MST, a Cuban from Martin Luther King Center and an Argentinian from Dario Santillan's Popular Front. You can find information on [Dessalines Internationalist Brigade on their Facebook](#)

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