

Veve of Afa: A Case Study For Development Options and Progress, Palma Soriano, Cuba

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Place incarnates the experiences and aspirations of a people. Place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning. (Yi Fu Tuan, *Space and Place*, [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997], 149)

DURING THE PAST SIX YEARS, THE VEVE OF AFA COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT, IN THE protected area at the confluence of the El Cauto and Yarayabo Rivers in Palma Soriano, Cuba, has had many challenges in terms of financial support and project development. Needless to say, sheer determination has been the only motivating factor keeping this project standing. From lack of transportation to water supply for the nurseries, the uphill battle manifests itself on a daily basis. The acquisition of a grant is crucial in reaching the primary goals and later expansion. The Grupo Taller Experimental Ennegro (the leading entity) will request funds from the COMPACT program of United Nations Development Program for the year 2012. Presently, this is the only available option for funding. So far, private donations have provided for a very limited budget that assists in some tasks. Some basic portable agricultural equipment has been obtained through private donations, but there is great need for more equipment, a vehicle for transport, and primary infrastructure on the site, like water wells.

The project is not far from a world heritage site, as stipulated by the guidelines of the COMPACT program. The site of the project is relatively close to the Archaeological Landscape of the First Coffee Plantations in the southeast of Cuba, located between the Santiago and Guantanamo provinces, in a region where the impact on biodiversity has been great due to the deforestation for agricultural purposes, and later economic stagnation that left much of the land fallow, thus increasing the chance of soil degradation and erosion. There is a strong association in theme and context of the project with the world heritage site, since Grupo Taller Experimental Ennegro's ethnic background is Haitian, and relates to the ethnicity of the world heritage site population. Although the project is not going to include the agricultural cultivation of coffee, there are other agricultural uses that are deemed more appropriate in terms of topography and economic value to the city of Palma Soriano. They include the cultivation of medicinal plants, in addition to the harvesting of fruit crops like mamey, mango, and avocado among others.

It is very important to consider the site's proximity to Palma Soriano, and the opportunity it

Citation: Weber, Samantha, ed. 2012. *Rethinking Protected Areas in a Changing World: Proceedings of the 2011 George Wright Society Biennial Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites*. Hancock, Michigan: The George Wright Society.
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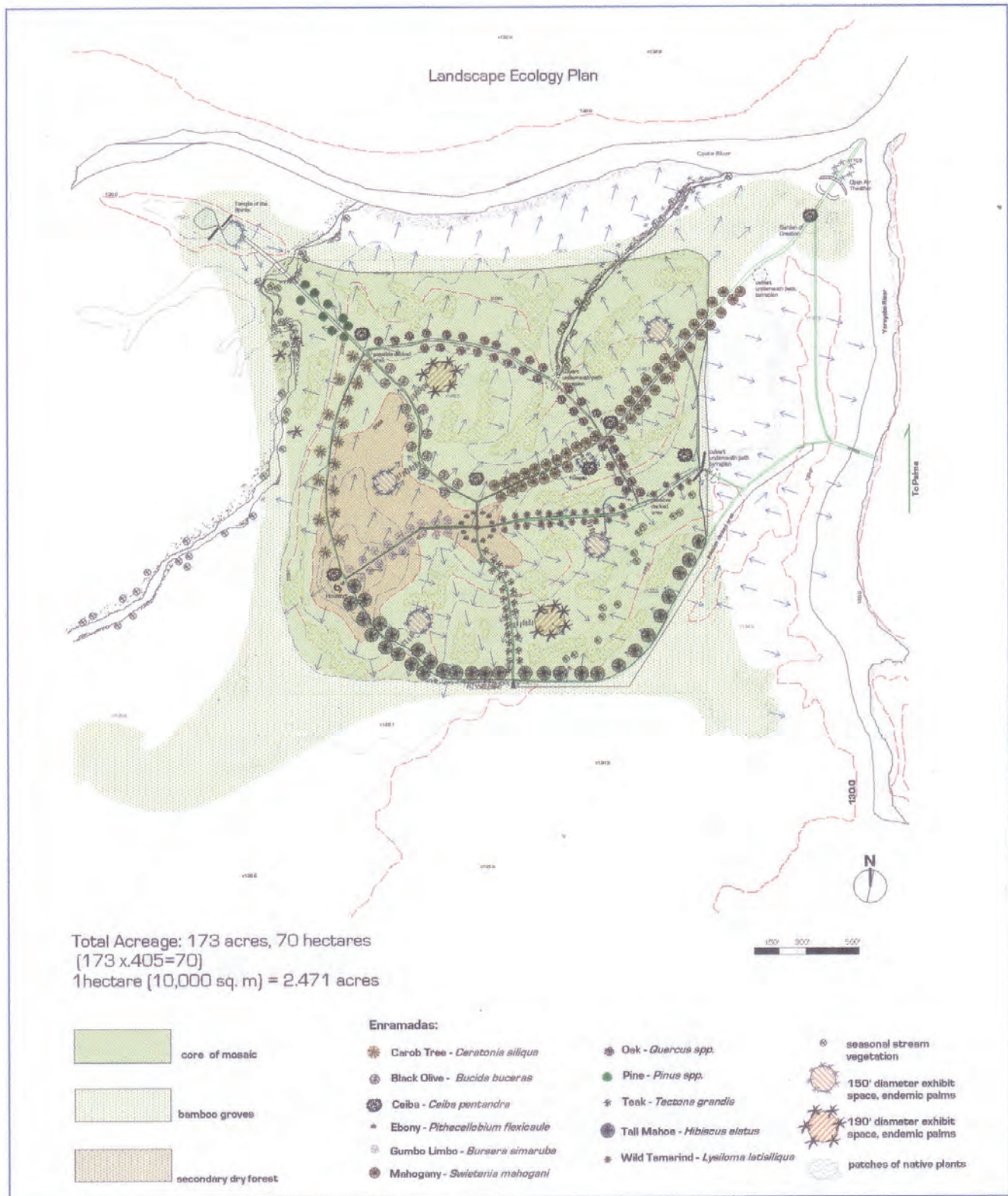


Figure 1. Landscape ecology plan.

offers as the only nearby natural preserve (i.e., the forest component of the project) both terrestrial and aquatic in character, and so close to an urban center. At a regional scale, there are no parks or preserves near to the Palma Soriano; this is mostly an agricultural region for coffee and

minor crops, with some limited cattle ranching in the flat lands. The land use for the project is agricultural, cultural, and recreational, with a significant ethnic historical background.

After the financial support issue, the most important concern that remains is water supply—either through a system of wells, the harvesting of rain water with cisterns, production of water through the condensation of humidity from the atmosphere, or some combination of these methods. The project needs more than one system to come into play, since reliance on one way of sourcing water is not going to be successful for the primary operations of the project and the needs of the population living in the site. The experimental concept of photovoltaic panels is being considered as a good alternate option for water production that is appropriate in such an open site.

As far as the architectural component for the project, the main emphasis is on building materials that can be sourced straight from the site, with minimal transportation expense. The two types of construction methods that are best suited for the project are adobe-timber, with rock/concrete foundation and bamboo for the structures of the forest area. A series of workshops starting July of this year for working with bamboo will be given by Professor Juan Manuel Pascual Menendez and his team, from the Department of Architecture at the University of Oriente in Santiago. The workshops will address bamboo planting and harvesting, cutting, storage and treatment of the bamboo culms, and the techniques of building with this material. A great deal of work has been done with bamboo in Latin America, mainly in Colombia, Mexico, and Costa Rica, through techniques implemented by such architects as Simon Velez, Marcelo Villegas, and Jules Janssen. At the site, the species *Bambusa vulgaris* (possible species for construction) is readily available, and timber can be brought from plantations in the Sierra Maestra.

For the outlying structures, adobe and timber construction with either a rock or concrete foundation has been suggested. This type of construction, using rammed earth, mixed with some aggregate to give it body and pliability, has been successful in projects in Central America. The foundations need to be rock or concrete since high humidity and rainfall are considerations in such climates.

The main endeavor for the year has been the treatment for the existing gullies due to soil degradation and subsequent erosion. A series of low rock walls and vegetative fencing have been erected to stop water runoff, and soil transport from higher elevations, away from the site during the wet season. This also halts possible downstream river sedimentation.

With the acquisition of more financial support, this project can fulfill its development goals, while fostering to a greater degree, a unique historical legacy that benefits both urban and rural communities in the surrounding areas in the province of Santiago.



Figure 2. Building materials sourced from the site.