

# THE FAMILY PÉREZ – BRITO, REMNANT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF QUESQUEYA

## THIS IS THEIR ANCESTRAL LAND

Supposedly extinct; yet they are not.

Somehow, this family has maintained a traditional indigenous lifestyle under 500 years of colonial pressure.

Columbus and his men are supposed to have exterminated all the indigenous from this island. It even says so at the anthropology museum in the Capital. But a few recent textbooks declare the truth: *almost extinct*.

After the conquest, pockets of indigenous culture remained. Groups of families survived in remote areas. The north coast, the site of the first original settlements of Columbus, became a backwoods. It was abandoned to whoever still lived there, after the capital of colonial power was moved to the south coast. Of course there is admixture.

“Somos Indios” “We are Indians”, they affirm. They look like Indians (1); they live like Indians (2); their houses are completely traditional; they identify themselves as Indians. They know they have lived here “since forever”.

2,000 of this large and close family live in Boca Nueva – Los Cocos. This one extended family is more than half the population that now lives there. A synopsis of their personal history:

*There used to be a village at the mouth of the River Camu. Here was born Great-grandmother Dolores Brito, now 94. Her family is huge. She had four brothers and four sisters. She personally bore 21 children, including triplets, and twins both identical and fraternal. The number of her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren is now more than 200. They live in close proximity as a huge family in Boca Nueva – Los Cocos. Including relatives descended from sisters, brothers, aunts and uncles, the extended family numbers over 2,000.*

*About 50 years ago her village at the mouth of the River Camu was destroyed. The sea ate the land. This precipitous erosion occurred after the government permitted mining of the river sand near its mouth. The river sand feeds the beaches. Without it, the beaches were washed away, then the land. Even the cemetery; and who knows how old it was. The family gathered what bones they could, and reburied them further inland.*

*The refugees, poor and illiterate, ignored by the powers that be, resettled about one mile west, behind the dunes of the beach of Los Cocos. They built their traditional “Bohios”, cottages constructed of local, rough hewn wood poles, covered with palm thatch roofs and sheathed in petiols of the royal palm, or with planks of its especially hard and enduring bark.*

*Here they continued to live in their traditional style. Gathering nuts and fruits, fishing the ever diminishing(3) catch of the sea, hunting birds, digging for crabs and growing the native food roots, plantains, coconuts and bananas. And here they yet live. And wish to continue.*

*Narciso Pérez, Great-grandfather, also Native, was born at Los Cocos, just a bit east of the community of today. This was the land of his family. Oral knowledge of their names goes back 150 years. They have no stories or traditions or knowledge of ever having come from some other location. They believe they have lived here “since forever”.*

The Pérez-Brito family wishes to establish rights under the modern world to its ancestral lands. The family does not want to see the last natural area in this costal region destroyed. It does not want to lose its roots and its community in this, its traditional location. It is willing and able to work and to work hard to establish this right. They do not expect to be given their land, they want to buy it.

It is a miracle for the world that this group of Natives has survived, in just exactly the location where 500 years ago the destruction of all the native peoples of this hemisphere began.

It will require many more miracles to reestablish the right, in the modern world, for this remnant native culture to continue to exist, and to grow.

LET US BUY OUR LAND BACK, is what they ask.

HELP US BUY OUR LAND BACK, is what they need.

THEN WE CAN CONTINUE TO SHARE OUR KNOWLEDGE OF OUR UNIQUE MEDICINES, AND OUR SUPPORTIVE TRADITIONAL FAMILY WAYS, WITH THE WORLD.

(1) For phenotypic comparison, see “Contemporary Carib types from Dominica”, Reproduced from sketches by Hester Merwin, in “The Ethnobotany of the Island Caribs of Dominica”, by W.H. Hodge and Douglas Taylor, Webbia, vol. XII, n.2, 1957.

(2) The close extended family structure; non-Latino values; native words mixed in the Dominican dialect of Spanish; traditional herbal medicine; hunter-gatherer with rudimentary agriculture; minimal clothing; intimate relation with the natural world in which they live; minimal involvement with the modern world. Many maintain non-“Christian” names of presumed native origin.

(3) Factory fishing boats, probably foreign, depleted the fish stocks about 20 years ago and they have not recovered.

# THE NATURAL AREA OF LOS COCOS, and WHY IT MUST BE PROTECTED

## THE BEACH

### SEA URCHINS

In the entire Caribbean and adjacent Atlantic, the sea urchins, *Diadema antillarum*, once abundant, are now nearly extinct. (5) Coral reefs, once vibrant and abundant, are also dead and dying. This type of sea urchin eats seaweed that grows on coral. Without the sea urchins to graze down the seaweed, new coral cannot find room to grow. (5)

In the water of the Los Cocos beach there are several expanses of rock that house abundant populations of *Diadema antillarum*. Somehow they escaped the great die off. They are reproducing abundantly, and could be harvested to recolonize other Caribbean areas.

Two Universities and three Marine Biology organizations in the United States have programs to conserve and recolonize these urchins. (5) Here we have a population ideal to harvest for these relocation programs.

If the beach is sold for typical tourist development, the developers will have to exterminate these sea urchins. They are venomous, and live abundantly in the rocks quite close to the beach. Any tourist walking in the water could easily be stung.

After the urchins are killed, the remaining live coral will also die, smothered by seaweed.

(5) "Wanted: Reef Cleaners", by Janet Raloff. Science News, vol. 160, August 25, 2001, pages 120 – 122.

## ENDANGERED SEA TURTLE – EL CAREY

The beach of Los Cocos was a main reproducing beach for the sea turtle they call the Carey. This is the Hawksbill turtle, *Caretta caretta*, considered endangered worldwide. In times past many Carey came to this beach to lay their eggs.

This year, 2001, for the first time in ten years, one Carey returned to the beach during the nesting season. She did not leave her eggs, but it is a sign that it is possible for this fairly remote and still natural beach to once again become a sanctuary for Carey reproduction.

The Carey is protected by severe law in the Dominican Republic. However, people still kill them and steal their eggs. When found, the eggs are sold and eaten; the meat is eaten and the fat is rendered into oil, which is sold. In times past, this was an important resource.

Our non-profit organization “MAMA D.O.C.” has explained the importance of conserving the Carey and any nests. We have contracted with the Pérez-Brito family to guard the Carey and her nest, when she returns.

General tourism would destroy the possibility of the Carey returning to reproduce here. They need a tranquil beach, or they will not leave their eggs. Even if a Carey made her nest safely, and the eggs were not disturbed, when the hatchlings emerge, since they are disoriented by artificial light, they would not move in the right direction to the sea, and would be eaten by birds or other predators while they are vulnerable on the beach. (6)

There is no other beach without tourist development in the entire North Central region. From Puerto Plata to Sosua, this is the only beach in the whole bay that remains a possible nest site. If it is lost to development, the entire bay will lose the possibility of seeing the return of this rare and endangered sea turtle.

(6) “Sea Turtles” by Lorraine A. Jay. Our Wild World Series, NorthWood Press, Minnetonka, Minnesota, 2000.

## **ECO ZONES OF THE LAND THE DUNES – TREES, PLANTS and BIRDS**

Very little natural area remains along the entire North Central Coast. Not a single bit of beach nor dune area is protected at this time, nor is any scheduled for protection. Not a single bit of dune ecology is protected on the entire island. Despite the work that has been done by botanists cataloging some of the ecological richness of the dune zone. (7)

Here, in the large bay from Puerto Plata to Sosua, tourist development has destroyed all the dune ecology, except for this beach at Los Cocos.

The dune ecology is anchored by great trees of Tropical Almond and Sea grape. There remain not the giants of times past, that towered 40 or 50 feet above their roots and shaded the beach even at mid-day. Yet remain many large trees, up to 30 feet, many over 100 years old. Under this canopy grow an uncounted number of species of small plants, and many vines. These are almost all medicinal in the native tradition, and insufficiently investigated.

Rare wild and native birds feed in this zone. There are unusual insects, such as an immense boldly striped black and yellow caterpillar with bright red head that has just been discovered this year. There are many species of crabs, frogs and lizards.

The dunes and the trees that stabilize them are the only protection the land has against increasing erosion. Wherever the dunes are cleared, sea erosion eats the land. Three feet a year is the rate in these areas.

For the people that live here, the dune ecology provides a significant part of their native diet. The Almonds provide protein in their delicious nuts. The Sea Grape gives its fruits, which are very high in calcium. People come from as far away as Monte Llano to collect Sea Grapes in season. Icaco is a native beach plum that grows in the under story and give both fruit and nut. And the crabs are dug for and eaten regularly.

Medicinal roots, generically called “Bejucos”, are abundant in this zone. Their value is just coming to the notice of the world market. Natural medicinals are being sought and investigated worldwide. (8) Knowledge of the use of these plants resides in the Indigenous people who live at Los Cocos. A plan to cultivate and distribute the most useful and rare of these plant medicines is part of this proposal. (9)

(7) A book on the endangered ecology of the Dune zone has recently been published by the National Botanical Garden in Santo Domingo. Protection for any remaining intact Dune zones is strongly recommended.

(8) "Endocrine Enhancers: the Bejucos of Quesqueya", Cheryl Kolander, "MAMA D.O.C." Educational brochure, 2000.

(9) See Part II: The New Industries.

## **WETLANDS – SALT WATER MARSHES**

Inland from the Dune zone is a zone of wetlands. Much of this is salt water marsh. It may be dry for weeks, or be under three feet of water after heavy rains.

Many rare native birds frequent this zone. Crabs breed abundantly, and are food for many of these bird species.

The crabs of this area are famous. The village along the River Camu is called "Sabaneta de Cangrejos" after them. In times past, during their season of reproduction the land was blanketed by them and people came from Monte Llano and as far as Puerto Plata to feast on them.

Today, while they no longer grow in such abundance, yet they contribute a major part of the protein of the native diet.

And the rare indigenous bird the Kwaco (or Guaco) subsists on a diet of nothing but crab. This bird is beginning to recover its numbers, now that there is a sanctuary of trees at the airport, across the River Camu from the Los Cocos area. But these trees grow on rock, there is no wetlands in the airport reserve, no soft muddy soil that is the habitat of the crabs. To survive, the Kwaco must hunt its food in the wetlands of Los Cocos.

If all this land is turned into cement for hotels, this rare and exceptional bird, which is surely endangered, could go extinct.

## **MANGROVES**

The Canal of Boca Nueva, called Cano de Cana, or canal of sugar cane, passes between the village of Boca Nueva and the natural area of Los Cocos. Its entire length here is lined with mangrove. This mangrove wooded area is quite deep in some stretches.

All four types of mangrove grow here: Red; Black (Mangle Yagua); White; and Button (Botoncillo).

The mangroves provide shelter for a large array of species of native birds including Gorreon, Gallereta, Guaco (Kwaco), Sama Raguyon, Martinete and Tortula, as well as the non-native Garza, or cattle egret. Many kinds of frogs love here, including Macopinpin, Maco Toro and Rana. Many species of crabs, including Sumba and Dicotea. And lizards and insects in abundance.

There is also a rare indigenous mammal, the Urón. It looks like a white haired water rat, with a furry tail.

**IT IS PROHIBITED BY DOMINICAN LAW TO CUT MANGROVE TREES OR TO DESTROY MANGROVE WOODS.**

(However, this did not stop developers at the Playa Dorada resort complex just a few miles west of Boca Nueva from cutting and destroying Mangroves, both to build the resort 20 years ago, and to expand the golf course, this within the last three years.)

## **ORGANIZATIONS THAT MAY HELP WITH THE PRESERVATION OF THE LOS COCOS NATURAL AREA**

**WE ARE ASKING THE CENTRAL BANK TO GIVE US THE DATE OF MARCH 22, 2002, TO PRESENT THIS PROPOSAL IN PERSON, AT THEIR OFFICES IN SANTO DOMINGO.**

At that time we will present a list of the organizations we have contacted, who have offered to help.

## **PROBLEMS WITH THE IDEA OF DEVELOPING THIS AREA FOR GENERAL TOURISM**

### **DANGEROUS BEACH**

#### **HUGE WAVES**

It is not possible to swim at this beach.

There are big waves. All the time.

Most of the time the waves are so big even a good swimmer could not swim here. Certainly not tourists.

Tourists like lovely tranquil waters, like at the Playa Dorada beach. There are no waves at all there. Tourists like to lie calmly in the water, to play beach ball, to lie on air rafts, to engage kites and boats and personal crafts, none of which could possibly happen at this beach.

There is not a single stretch without waves. And usually there are four tiers of waves, with six or eight tiers not uncommon. Breakers extend out at least a quarter mile; it is not possible to swim out past them to tranquil water.

The only thing tourists can do at this beach is to drown.

#### **FIERCE CURRENT**

Even when the waves calm enough to invite a strong swimmer, there are fierce currents. These dangerous currents can carry any would-be swimmer out to sea and sure death.

#### **ROCKS**

There are rocks hidden in the ocean at all parts of this beach.(10)

Waves tumbling tourists on the rocks would crack heads. This beach is nothing but an insurance liability to any resort development.

One notes that right next to Playa Dorado (the resort a mile to the west of Boca Nueva) there is a stretch of lovely deep sand beach, with quite gentle waves. But no one swims there; no tourist development has sprung up there. Why?

because there are hidden rocks in the water. If that beach, so inviting and so accessible is unused, because of rocks, then surely it's clear that the Los Cocos beach will be avoided by all, because its waves and hidden rocks are really dangerous.

(10) The standard map of this area was prepared in 1927 and marked as revised in 1984. It shows "sand" in the water for much of the Los Cocos beach. It is in error. It is possible some of the error is due to erosion subsequent to its publication.

## **SEA URCHINS**

Venomous sea urchins infest almost all the rocks on this stretch of beach (see: Natural Area – Sea Urchins).

With one touch of a spine, one is in immense pain for days. The venom is strong enough to paralyze an arm or a leg. It can kill a child or old person.

No developer, aware of this danger, would risk it. The liability insurance to cover this kind of a risk would be very high.

## **JELLYFISH**

As if all this weren't enough, any time the sea is relatively calm, jellyfish approach.

A jellyfish sting can paralyze a leg or arm. If stung on the mouth, one will die. Even bit parts of a jellyfish brushing against a person will sting.

## **GARBAGE**

Added to the natural problems are the man made ones.

This beach is filthy. There is garbage everywhere.

Every time it rains, mountains of garbage are washed up on the beach. This garbage comes from Monte Llano and Sabaneta de Cangrejos, via the River Camu and the Canal of Cane. It consists of mostly plastic, including millions of bit of broken up styrofoam. There is also glass bottles and broken glass, old clothing, shoes, nylon fishing line, and the scariest of all: used syringes.

With one look at a used syringe sticking up out of the sand, the tourists will all leave the beach and demand their money back!

## **CONTAMINATION**

There may be as many as a thousand outhouses discharging their effluent into the River Camu and the Canal of Cane. The people of Monte Llano and Sabaneta de Cangrejos throw their garbage and waste into the depressions of mostly dry stream beds. Then, when it rains, all that garbage and filth is washed into the rivers and then into the sea.

It is then a health hazard to enter the water. It becomes both dirty and toxic.

They say that a treatment plant will eventually be constructed at Monte Llano. Even after that, the problem for the beach will be unsolved, because there are many outhouses downstream from the proposed site of treatment.

## **NO BEACH**

The beach, that is, the sandy beach that attracts tourists, is very narrow at Los Cocos. There is no place for plastic lounge chairs. There may be 10 to 15 feet of sand at low tide, but almost nothing at high tide. In many places there is dune erosion and no beach at all.

## **SUMMARY – PROBLEMS WITH THE BEACH**

The ocean here is cold, dangerous from waves and rocks, and often contaminated.

Tourists want a gentle sea, not garbage and big waves.

When Playa Dorada with its perfect beach can't attract enough tourism to be profitable,(11) how could anyone think about building another resort, virtually next door, on a beach that is nothing but an insurance liability?

(11) In November 2001, mid day, beautiful day, beginning of the tourist season, there were less than 200 people on the Playa Dorado beach, which stretches for about a half mile and can accommodate thousands. The resort complex itself appeared to have an occupancy rate of perhaps 5%.

## **LAST BEACH FOR DOMINICANS – RITUAL OF HOLY WEEK TO BE LOST**

This is the last beach left that Dominicans can use.

Isn't this their country? Shouldn't they retain the rights to at least one beach?

All the rest of the beaches on the North Central coast have been sold to foreigners for tourist development. Dominicans are barred from using them.

The Constitution says that the Dominican land shall not be given over to foreign sovereignty. (12) But that is exactly what has happened to all the beaches in this region. This is the last beach. And, ironically, that is the reason the government bank gives for offering it for sale. It expects to make a lot of money, because it is the last beach.

But what will be lost is more than just an important natural area and the last beach for Dominicans to use.

Every spring, at Holy week, that is, the week before Easter, this beach is the site of an important, socially crucial, Dominican ritual. It is the site of a great week long gathering and celebration for all the Dominicans of the North Central coast.

This ritual is pre-Columbian in origin. Families, especially young people, from all over flock to the sea. It is the time for young people to congregate and meet. Romance happens; many marriages begin. It is the equivalent of European Beltane, of Midsummer Night in the north. It is a religious ritual of pre-Columbian times that has survived to this day, because it still functions and it is still needed.

The families here are huge. As noted earlier, the Pérez – Brito family, for example, comprises over 2,000 people out of the 3,000 who live in Boca Nueva – Los Cocos. Cousins do not marry. The population is not mobile. People live where the family has lived “since forever”. There is no transportation, no jobs, no reason to go anywhere nor means to do so. How are eligible young people to meet?

Holy week at the beach provides this opportunity. This type of gathering is part of almost every known indigenous culture on the planet. It is an integral part of the survival of the race. It is a cultural inheritance and a still current social necessity.

We believe the Dominicans have a constitutional right to this ritual. (13)

If this beach is sold to foreigners and developed for foreigners, this important ritual and element of life for Dominicans will be lost completely.

(12) Constitución de la Republica Dominicana, Titulo I, Seccion I, Art. 3.

(13) Constitución de la Republica Dominicana, Titulo II, Seccion I, Art. 8, Num. 8.

## **OTHER PROBLEMS**

A brief outline of some of the other serious problems that stand against any regular tourist development of this parcel :

### **AIRPORT**

Large international airliners bring in tourists from Europe and the United States to the Puerto Plata airport. Their “pattern of approach” takes them right over Boca Nueva – Los Cocos. They regularly fly over at 500 to 300 feet as they descend to the runway just across the River Camu.

The sound is immense. It is not possible to talk when they fly over. It is loud enough to be very disturbing, not the tranquility that a tourist is paying for. The crash possibility adds another risk that will up the insurance for any regular type tourist development here.

### **ECOLOGICAL ZONES**

It is illegal to cut mangrove. And to disturb the Carey, the endangered sea turtle that is returning to nest at the Los Cocos beach. However with bribes all permissions are given, and no enforcement is made.

There is no protection for the wetlands, the dune ecology, nor the Indigenous people.

It may be possible, with an outside lawyer and money, to challenge permits to cut, fill, displace, etc.; but this is a country where people are known to be willing to come in at night and cut illegally, with impunity. It is the physical presence of the Los Cocos community that has helped preserve the Natural Area from much of this type of outside plundering.

### **THE IMMENSE COSTS OF RELOCALIZATION**

It is hard for Americans to imagine that a government would plan to move a community of 3,000 people for no good reason except to take money for the selling their land. Usually this type of displacement is reserved for projects such as dams, that will benefit the larger population of the country. Yet another overbuilt tourist development does not benefit the general population, as virtually all the money earned goes to the overseas owners. (See also “No earnings for Dominicans”, below.)

In this case an entire long established village of 3,000 or more people is expected to be happy about being annihilated for a few more holes of a golf course.

The people in the Capital don't think much about those who live outside it. The people at the bank think all the inhabitants of Boca Nueva live in tin shacks and will be happy and grateful to move to a nice big town and live in cement shacks.

If we establish nothing else with this proposal, it will be to draw notice to the true facts, which are that most of the houses of Boca Nueva are well built, well finished, completely modern houses of many rooms. Exteriors are beautifully finished with porches, curved bays, shuttered windows, etc.

Each of this type house costs \$10,000 in materials alone to build. With 500 houses of this quality, the materials bill alone will be \$5,000,000

In addition, residents are adamant that the law requires replacement of all fruit trees. There are approximately 10,000 fruit and nut trees in Boca Nueva – Los Cocos, all owned and used for family sustenance. It would be a physical impossibility to replace even a tiny fraction of these. Nor does the government expect to, because their cement shacks come with no yard, no trees, no garden space to grow food for the family. Nothing.

Nothing but bills, that is. For in Boca Nueva - Los Cocos there is no charge for electricity nor water. According to residents, this is by agreement with a soda pop bottler up river who uses some of the water, generates electricity, and pays for the privilege by sharing excess. Electricity is not available all the time, but when it is, it's free. Where they would be forced to move, both electricity and water cost. It's still intermittent, but would no longer be free.

This presents a problem for residents (see below, Social Costs of Relocalization).

For the government to adequately compensate the dislocated according to law, the following costs would apply:

Land 500 tareas minimum @ 9,000 per tarea	= 4,500,000
Houses, material only 500 @ 10,000	= 5,000,000
Labour @ 5,000	= 2,500,000
Houses, lesser quality 500 @ 5,000	= 2,500,000
Labour @ 3,000	= 1,500,000
Trees 10,000 @ 100 each	= 1,000,000
Moving expenses 1,000 households truck rental & drivers @ 100 each	= 100,000

**TOTAL HARD COST TO THE GOVERNMENT TO MOVE THIS COMMUNITY:**

**17,000,000**

### **SOCIAL COSTS OF RELOCALIZATION**

The destruction of a long established community. The destruction of the extended family system of proximal living. It is a system that supports it young people to develop responsibility for the group. When this system is destroyed the result is high rates of juvenile delinquency.

Also, this village has drawn to it many people of poor capacity to exist in the modern world. Their intelligence is very low, their abilities are limited. In Boca Nueva – Los Cocos they are accepted as part of the community and looked after. They could not function without this and would end up on the streets of any town they might be moved to. They would then become destitute, and a visible **burden to the state.**

### **CONTAMINATION OF THE CANAL WHICH RUNS THROUGH THIS LAND**

This is a serious health hazard. Mosquitoes breed by the billions every season after the sugar mill dumps its cleaning acid in the river.

### **THERE ARE NO TOURISTS!**

Tourism to this area had been decreasing even before the events of Sept 11. Now it is almost nonexistent. Who would spend the immense amount of money to buy the land and develop it, when there are no tourists for the resorts that already exist nearby, and in better locations?

### **NO GAIN FOR THE DOMINICANS**

Tourism does not benefit the locals. Even for those who are employed in the industry. The reality is many who work are rarely or never paid, or are paid wages so low no one could survive.

### **EROSION**

Much of this beach is eroding fairly rapidly. Clearing of the dunes for tourism would result is the land being eaten by the sea in a surprisingly few years.