

Earth Today | Fallen but not forever

Efforts afoot to restore Jamaica's forest cover, public urged to partner

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Trees offer a variety of ecosystem services.

JAMAICA'S FOREST cover has been hit hard by the rampage of Hurricane Melissa, its many offerings — from food to shade to storm surge protection and the sense of well-being that trees provide — now diminished by the Category 5 event.

But the battle to preserve the diverse ecosystem benefits of trees and to regreen the island is not lost. Conservator of Forests and Chief Executive Officer of the Forestry Department, Ainsley Henry, said there is an opportunity in every crisis and the experience of Hurricane Melissa — while devastating — is no different.

“Melissa has come and taken out a significant portion of our trees. We recognise that. We also recognise that, even in a catastrophe, there is opportunity,” he said, adding that plans to reforest the country are even now being refined and will be expedited in the New Year.

“One of the things that we were to do is to transition from pine forests into native forests, which we know can stand the ravages of hurricanes much better than pine forests. We now intend to immediately transition into native species, (including) Mahogany, Cedar, Santa Maria, and Blue Mahoe. We also intend to move into mixed plantations, because we recognise that a heterogenous specie is also way more resilient than a homogenous specie,” he added.

Some 40 per cent or so of forest cover in western Jamaica, for example, has been compromised, with felled or otherwise damaged trees peppering sections of the island worse affected by the pummelling from Hurricane Melissa. The hurricane entered the island as a Category 5 storm on October 28, packing winds of up to 185 miles per hour.

ASSESSMENT ONGOING

Henry said data collection to determine the full extent of the damage continues, even as the team at the Forestry Department and their collaborators work through how to access and clear the affected sites; and their seedlings count grows. They have also issued a call for volunteers to support replanting and, within two weeks of that call, made via their social media pages, they had yielded responses from more than 1,200 people.

“We have already contacted them (the volunteers) by email to ensure we have got their interest and are cataloguing them to see where they are from, etc. We have [also] already received some 2,000 seedlings from the Trees that Feed Foundation — 1,000 breadfruits and 1,000 assorted fruit trees,” he explained, noting that they are also progressing repairs and improvements to their nurseries.

The intention, Henry said, is to put their team of volunteers to work even as they roll out a massive tree planting programme, come February and into March 2026.

“We intend to return Jamaica to the beautiful green it was before Melissa and to enhance our reputation as the land of wood and water,” he said, adding that they are also keen to give space to Jamaicans and other stakeholders who are willing and eager to help to make that happen.

According to the conservator of forests, it has never been more important than right now to make best efforts to restore the island's trees, given prevailing climate realities.

“The temperature is increasing. The impact and scale of climatic events are also increasing. In the last two years, we have been touched by two major hurricanes. Melissa was a Category 5. Beryl was a Category 4. Both of them did not do anything like move across the whole country like [Hurricane] Gilbert. It is now up to us to ensure resilience,” he said.

According to the Forestry Department boss, Jamaica can do this by giving priority to planting appropriate trees in urban centres that will, among other things, reduce the heat island effect; planting more fruit trees to help with food supply; and restoring mangrove forests to help to solidify support against storm surges. Those with lands inside watersheds, he said, are encouraged to also plant trees to filter runoff and stabilise soil, and for clean water security.

At the same time, enhanced forest cover provides the added benefit of carbon sequestration, which is essential as global temperatures continue to rise, associated with the human consumption of fossil fuels such as oil and gas that produce carbon dioxide which drives greenhouse gas emissions and warms the planet.

This warming produces impacts, such as Hurricane Melissa, together with other extreme weather events, including droughts; as well as sea-level rise and coastal erosion, together with impaired food and water security and undermined public health.

“The value and function of trees cannot be overstated,” Henry insisted.

“People like to say that dogs are a man's best friend, but I would like to say that trees are humanity's best friend,” he added.

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