

# A lesson in contrasts.

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**Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.**

GRAND TURK ISLAND, British West Indies... When young Chris Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492, his first landfall was Grand Turk, one of eight islands in what is now the British Dependent Territory of Turks and Caicos Islands. In search of the Orient and its treasure of spices, Chris pushed off and got as far as Cuba before Queen Isabella decided to back another horse.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Turks and Caicos Islands were home to famous pirates such as Francois L'Olonnais, Blondel, Cpt. Dulaien, Calico Jack Rackham, Anne Bonny and Mary Read. In the mid 1600's, merchants from Bermuda established a salt trade that thrived for two hundred years (till the advent of refrigeration).

### COTTON PLANTATIONS

Following the American Revolution, disgruntled Brits took advantage of land grants to establish cotton plantations on the two islands in the archipelago with some agricultural capability. Twenty five years later, the boll weevil, soil exhaustion and a major hurricane brought farming to an end. Some took their slaves to Grand Turk and entered the salt trade.

### SLAVERY ABOLISHED IN 1807

When slavery was abolished in 1807, hundreds of slaves were seized by the Royal Navy on the high seas and set free on the shores of Turks and Caicos. In 1873, TCI annexed themselves to Jamaica. In 1976, TCI formed their own government as a Dependent Territory of Britain.

Filing this column from Grand Turk poses predictable challenges! But these pale in comparison to the agricultural challenges that face this tiny island territory: with no organic matter (mostly saline limestone) and no water (it rains once a year in October), there is of course no agriculture; ALL food must be imported.

Despite this, there are a growing number of hotels, tourism is expanding by 11% a year, and ex-patriots — drawn by international banking centres that promise tax havens to the rich and playful, a new brand of pirate — make up 60% to 70% of the population. Twenty years ago, the population of TCI was 5,000. Today, an estimated 24,000 people inhabit 8 islands. Earlier this week, on the main island of Providenciales, international jets landed outside my window like snow geese in a Delta potato field.

I was sent here by CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) to do a social impact and gender evaluation of a project to introduce Canadian greenhouse technology; a spiffy little hydroponic number that extracts moisture from humid ocean air to produce water and vegetables.

No farmers to displace; there aren't any. Even on North Caicos (which has some soil and water) there are only a handful of subsistence farms. Why? Because to the locals, being a farmer is about as low status as you can get; a cultural throwback to when plantation slaves (the ancestors of many who live here) lived short lives of hard labour.

### ABRUPT END TO FOOD SHIPMENTS

Following September 11<sup>th</sup>'s terrorist attack, all international flights (and food shipments) to the Turks and Caicos Islands stopped, throwing locals into a panic. After a tense week or so, flights resumed. But because stocks were sufficient to carry them through this short period, community concerns about the vulnerability of their food supply were soon forgotten.

Sound familiar? It should. In Canada, we are becoming more and more dependent on foreign food supplies. We are losing respect for farmers as community partners. And consumers increasingly consider supermarkets (not farmers) to be the "food providers".

IN SHARP CONTRAST: CUBA...

Cuba is just a hop, skip and a jump from Turks and Caicos, yet it would be difficult to find two island communities that are more different. Cuba is a country of rich soils, ample climate and good water where farmers are respected, make more than doctors and enjoy the political clout that comes from one voice.

If you want to get away to someplace warm this winter, have more money than you know what to do with and want to avoid taxes, Turks and Caicos is for you. They will hide it where no one can find it and give you some sun and sand to boot.

But if you are a farmer that has a yen to see farming that works, if you want to stand in the fields of Cuban farmers and be amazed at how they have learned (overnight) to grow crops without pesticides and chemicals, if you want to see what can be accomplished with cooperation, extension and government support, join farmers from across Canada who are traveling with me to Cuba this winter as part of four delegations. But hurry, seats are going fast!

(If you make your primary living from farming, the cost of this trip is tax deductible!)

CBC TV COUNTRY CANADA NOVEMBER 3rd

Reg Sherrin, host of CBC TV's COUNTRY CANADA, came down to Cuba with our March 2002 delegation and filmed a special on the project. It will be broadcast across Canada on Sunday, November 3rd at noon.

AND DON'T FORGET THAT WATER RESOLUTION!

The water resolution appears below. Don't forget to bring it to your farm group, get it passed, and GET IT BACK TO ME. A special thank you to those who have already done so; standing shoulder to shoulder with farm groups across Canada is the beginning of voice and the beginning of change.