2-11-2019

After Irma, Disaster Capitalism Threatens Cultural Heritage in Barbuda

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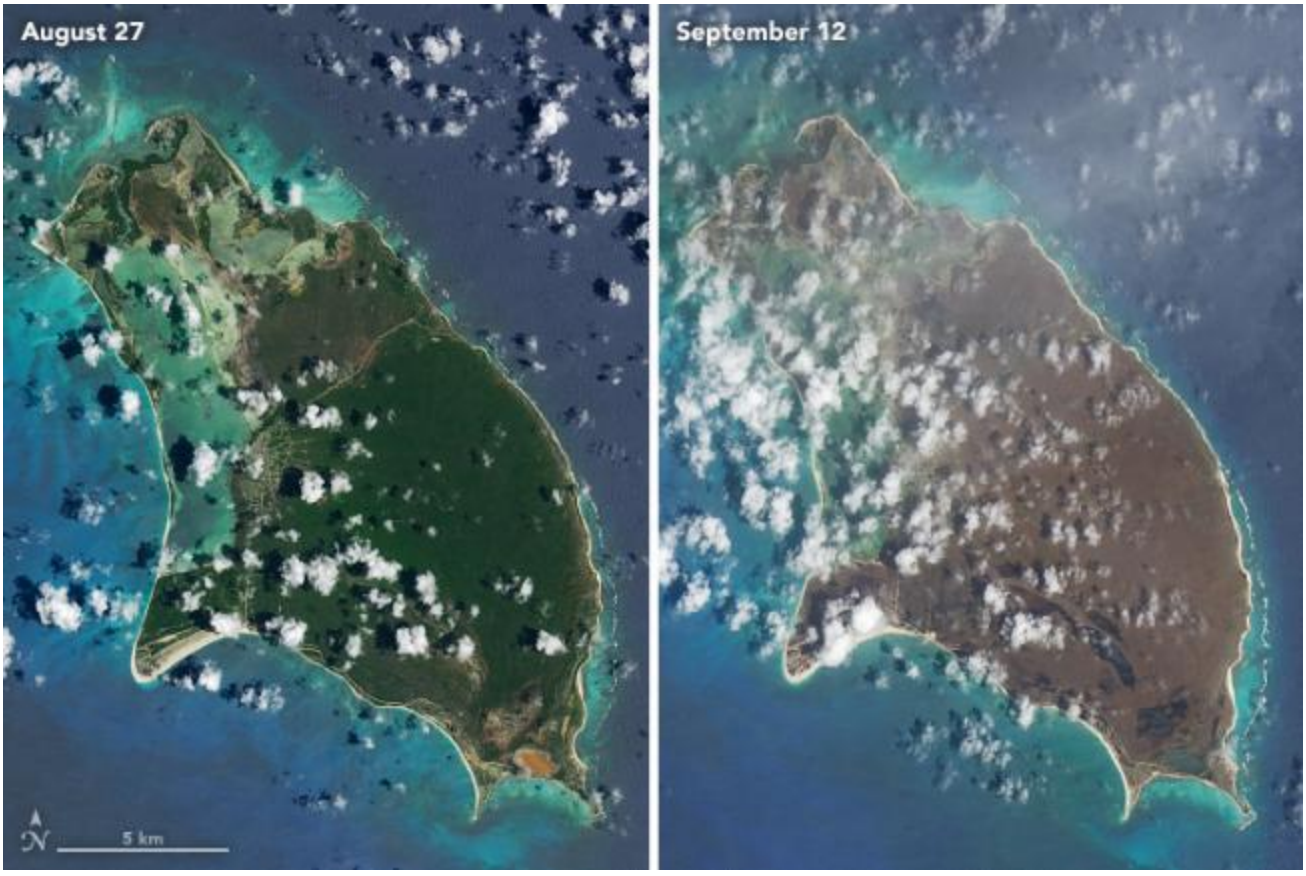
https://nacla.org/news/2019/02/12/after-irma-disaster-capitalism-threatens-cultural-heritage-barbuda

After Irma, Disaster Capitalism Threatens Cultural Heritage in Barbuda

A year and a half after Hurricane Irma, efforts to exploit Barbuda to benefit the rich and powerful threaten to erode culture, identity, and traditional land relations in the name of "development."

Rebecca Boger and Sophia Perdikaris
February 11, 2019



After Hurricane Irma, satellite images indicated a widespread death of vegetation in Barbuda. These natural-color images were captured by the Operational Land Imager (OLI) on the Landsat 8 satellite on August 27 and September 12, 2017 (NASA/Wikimedia Commons).

When Hurricane Irma hit Barbuda in early September 2017, the Category 5 mega-storm decimated much of the island's landscape and infrastructure, and the physical damage was widely publicized. In the aftermath of the storm, however, multinational developers and the central government in Antigua—which has jurisdiction over the Barbudan governing council—have inadvertently perpetuated the devastation by focusing on tourist ventures rather than local recovery. The international press has claimed that the foreign investors seeking to embark in tourism development post Irma are taking advantage of traumatized and vulnerable people under the guise of acting as "benevolent benefactors," without an understanding of what constitutes local culture, ethnicity, and tradition.

The relationship between Antigua and Barbuda is tense; although Barbuda is part of the nation of Antigua and Barbuda, Antigua's economy, like most of the Caribbean, is fueled by large-scale tourism, while Barbuda's governing council sets itself apart by being very selective about which development projects it allows on the island. After the hurricane, Barbuda has relied on the larger Antiguan government as well as international funding to recover, giving it less autonomy in following its own path of development. The Antiguan Antigua and Barbuda Prime Minister Gaston Browne is trying to mirror Antigua's development strategy in Barbuda.

Maintaining and restoring cultural heritage and traditional lifeways should be a key component of recovery efforts.We have conducted seven and 12 years of field research in Barbuda, respectively, through the Barbuda Research Complex (BRC). From the information we've gathered—through interviews with Barbudans, collection of environmental data, and analysis of satellite imagery—we fear that opening Barbuda to the same development path as Antigua will have massive economic and environmental effects on the island. But it will also cause irreparable and ongoing damage to the island's tangible and intangible cultural heritage, something that has attracted far less media attention. Tangible heritage refers to historic buildings, museums, monuments, documents, and other artifacts, while intangible heritage includes traditional artistry, festivities, and religious rituals. These structures and practices ground people in their landscape and create a sense of identity and resilience. Maintaining and restoring cultural heritage and traditional lifeways should be a key component of recovery efforts. Yet unfortunately, reconstruction and recovery in Barbuda has been culturally insensitive and politically driven. For the first time in 400 years, Barbudan culture is under imminent danger of becoming a memory of the past.

Barbuda Before the Storm

Barbuda is unique in the Caribbean because it did not follow the development path of most other Caribbean islands. Its landscape is relatively pristine with extensive forests, beaches, and coral reefs that have not been transformed by sugar plantations or 20th-century large-scale tourism. This is in part due to Barbuda's unique laws, which allow for communal land ownership. Communal land ownership passed down through generations is central to Barbudan identity. In 2007, the Barbuda Land Act codified communal ownership by stating "all land in Barbuda is owned in common by the people of Barbuda" and required major developments over $5.4 million to be approved through majority vote of the elected Barbuda Council.

Barbudans are unlikely to reap significant benefits from new tourism developments. Instead, they face the threat of losing control over their traditional way of life.In 2016, the value of major developments that do not require popular approval was increased to $40 million, opening up more possibilities for development. This increase led wealthy developers to explore creating high-end tourism destinations, with names like Paradise Found and Peace, Love and Happiness. Developers tout sustainable tourism practices, but the concept of sustainability for wealthy investors is not the same as what sustainable living means for the people of Barbuda. The end products that the tourists see may use sustainable practices: the resorts may have solar power, composting food waste, and recycling water. However, the development process is harmful as it affects wetlands, animal habitats and cultural heritage due to haste that bypasses appropriate environmental and cultural assessments. A large reverse osmosis tank has been installed for what used to be Coco Point, which is three or four times larger than the one the Barbuda Council uses to serve the entire local population needs, indicating that these large amounts of water will be used for the resorts. Given that Barbuda is a semi-arid island surrounded by coral reefs, a desalination process, which involves dumping salt back into the ocean, will destroy the reef life.
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Building materials for new development projects in Barbuda (photo courtesy of Rebecca Boger and Sophia Perdikaris).

Exploiting the Crisis

After the hurricane, disaster capitalism took an immediate hold in post-Irma Barbuda. Disaster capitalism describes how wealthy elites exploit crises, such as major natural disasters, to reap profits and deepen inequality, while affected populations are still in shock. Barbudans were particularly vulnerable because they were evacuated to Antigua. During and immediately after the storm, Barbudan people tried to find refuge in caves. But even when residents wanted to stay, authorities forced them to evacuate to Antigua, where they were placed in shelters or scattered among friends, relatives, and Antiguan homes. Their evacuation mandate was not lifted for weeks but then prolonged for six weeks because the health officials did not give clearance—even though the military, aid organizations, and airport developers were on Barbuda immediately after the hurricane. Initially, it was primarily the men and clean up crews who returned, and it was not until four months later that families were allowed to return and sleep there. The Antiguan government justified this due to health concerns, citing that Barbudans would be more vulnerable to disease on the island after the hurricane and could infect Antiguans. Undoubtedly, the destruction in Barbuda was extensive, particularly to agriculture and built infrastructure, with a death toll of one child. The majority of vegetation was completely stripped of its leaves, inundated by salt water, or completely broken and uprooted. The absence of people as they remained displaced triggered further destruction as damaged properties were left to rot in the rain and sun, destroying family memories and belongings. Family dogs roamed in hungry and feral packs, while livestock was left to fend for themselves with meager vegetation.

Four months after Irma, when Barbudan families were allowed to return home, many opted to remain in Antigua to allow their children—who make up half of the original population of Barbuda—to attend school, given that Barbudan schools did not restart until early February 2018. Over a year after Irma, about 75% have returned home, according to estimates by members of the Barbuda Council.

What role will land ownership play in defining what development and reconstruction will look like in post-hurricane Barbuda? Which voices will lead such efforts? While there was pressure from the government to pick away at the communal ownership before Irma hit, the hurricane provided the opportunity for quick action. In 2018, there was an effort to dismantle the Barbuda Land Act entirely in order to open the door for privatization and development. Barbudans are fighting back and lawyers are working to reinstate the act, although the national government and land developers are moving ahead with their plans for a privatized Barbuda. Between all the resort projects, most of the Caribbean Sea side of Barbuda has plans for development. Construction has begun near Coco Point and is expected to soon start at other resort locations.

The focus on building a large airport intended to service high-end tourist resorts, backed by wealthy business interests—even though two existing small airports were still functional after Irma—is also problematic. In the rush to move the airport project forward, the government and investors bypassed concerns about the project's environmental and cultural impacts. Lacking appropriate formal assessments, the first excavation for the airport bulldozed the 25-acre large historical site of Plantation, but was ultimately abandoned because caves discovered beneath the surface rendered the plot of land unsuitable for an airport. There were two other attempts before settling on the final location. In the fall of 2018, even that site—which is now more than 150 acres—flooded and suffered major cave-ins at its northern border. Located partially on wetlands, the airport construction has destroyed prime hunting and farming areas. Mining for limestone to

be used for filling in the airport strip caverns resulted in the destruction of an additional 50 acres of landscape and animal habitat loss, according to satellite images and drone photography.

Ruins in Barbuda in the wake of Hurricane Irma (Photo courtesy of Rebecca Boger and Sophia Perdikaris).

Interviews with Barbudans indicate that they feel removed from the decision-making process. Through traditional governing practices, development projects would be brought to the Barbuda Council for a vote; this did not happen here. The lack of community participation, in addition to the destruction of the landscape, is greatly affecting the Barbudan way of life and how they define themselves. A legal case initiated by John Mussington, a school principal and marine biologist, and Jacklyn Frank, a social worker, highlighted the airport's destruction of forest and other ecological and cultural concerns and temporarily suspended the airport's construction, but it has since been dismissed.

Long-distance networks with the Barbudan diaspora have been a source of resilience in difficult times, and piecemeal support has poured in for rebuilding homes, clean-up of debris, generators, and water despite bureaucratic obstructions. Diaspora communities have helped with the continued cleanup efforts and assisted along with humanitarian efforts by Samaritan's Purse, the Red Cross and the UN, among others with the rebuilding of homes in Barbuda.

Damage and Preservation of Tangible and Intangible Heritage

At risk in the wake of the hurricane are the numerous archeological sites dotting the island of Barbuda. Barbuda is one of the few localities in the Caribbean with undamaged sites covering more than 5,000 years of human history. After Irma, UNESCO commissioned a preliminary impact assessment report to provide an evaluation of built heritage, museums, archives, collections, the Barbuda Research Complex, and archaeological sites. While some historical buildings were structurally affected and might not be salvageable, other structures survived the hurricane intact. Waves during Irma decimated the coastal archaeological site of Seaview in northeast Barbuda, requiring an urgent survey and emergency excavations to recover four exposed burials. The sites at Spanish Point were significantly eroded, while the lime kiln by Salt Pond was also damaged. The Amerindian site of Indian Town Trail, located in the northeast, survived intact, as did the petroglyphs at Indian Cave. The Barbuda Museum housed at the Interpretation Center survived unscathed, but the Children's Museum was destroyed and must be completely rebuilt. The structures housing archaeological collections were damaged, but the collections themselves survived. They will remain at risk without safe storage.

The longer the displacement, the more difficult it is for people to reconnect to their landscape, traditions, and culture.The longer the displacement, the more difficult it is for people to reconnect to their landscape, traditions, and culture. In Barbuda, traditions like horse racing, hunting, camping, living in caves, beach festivities, traditional healing, and construction of traditional houses are endangered. This past year, the Annual Barbuda Caribana Festival—five days of festivities including the Caribana queen show, talent and calypso competitions, a food fair, dancing in the streets, beach games and festivities, and horse racing—had to be canceled.

Disaster Capitalism vs. Barbuda

Over a year after the storm, the debris has been removed from Codrington village and carried to the dump site. The looming danger is that sheets of aluminum roofing could become dangerous projectiles in another storm if not disposed of properly. We've observed that about half of the people living there have electricity and reverse osmosis running water, but aid organizations are starting to move out because they have reached their limits of support. The rebuilding process has been slow and government workers are often not paid or paid long after the completion of the job. The island still does not have a fully functioning hospital or bank. While many of the 500 or more people still displaced might return to their island as conditions improve, we can expect that many more will not. Families with children have found jobs in Antigua and children are attending school there. With limited money and time, the repairs of their homes are being done in a piecemeal fashion.

Raw materials to maintain handicraft traditions are unavailable—there's no salt from the salt pond, no honey, no famous Barbudan pink sand, no mangoes, and no tamarind. No sea grapes or berries for food and winemaking. The few shops where the crafts were sold remain severely damaged.

As people move or pass away, the intangible heritage that defines what it means to be Barbudan is also at risk. In the context of displaced populations and social instability, has disaster capitalism taken precedence over social well-being and cultural survival? Barbuda Silent No More is a local resistance movement where community activists are fighting against all odds in an attempt to maintain Barbudan identity, but it remains unknown how much power local grassroots movements will have against elite economic interests trying to take over the land.

For Barbuda, the disaster is still unfolding.

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Sophia Perdikaris is Professor and Chair of the Anthropology Department at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln (UNL). She is an environmental archaeologist. She is interested in people-environment interactions and how heritage work can inform sustainability questions for the future. She has been working in Barbuda for over 12 years and is the Director of BRC.

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