A Weeping Earth

The connection between government corruption and environmental issues in Trinidad and Tobago

It's beautiful. The warm sand catches the sparkling, cobalt waves and playfully tosses them back toward Buccoo Reef—the underwater kingdom filled with the likes of sea turtles and manta rays. Tourists snorkel through the sun-pierced waters, gently plying the water with their plastic fins. Trinidad and Tobago really is beautiful.

Unless you look past what little the tourists actually see. There’s nothing beautiful about the Tobago rainforest tainted by toxic fluid leaking out from a garbage dump. There’s nothing beautiful about Wayne Kublalsingh starving, three weeks into a hunger strike, protesting a highway that many allege is meant to put money in the pockets of big business at the cost of the environment. There’s nothing beautiful about the sea swallowing the southwest coast of Trinidad, industrial discharge in the Caroni River, bleaching of the coral reefs, pollution from offshore drilling spreading through the Gulf of Paria. But even though America invests billions of dollars in Trinidad and Tobago’s oil and gas, we’ve never even heard of these related issues. The ugly truth is that many sources allege corruption in the Trinidad and Tobago government plays a major role in allowing environmental issues to persist. There’s nothing beautiful about that.

Our goal for this project is to investigate the extent to which the government’s inefficiency, lack of transparency, and potential corruption leads to the country’s systemic environmental issues of pollution and coastal degradation at the hands of powerful industry.

To tell the story of Trinidad and Tobago’s environmental struggles, we plan to write a print article accompanied by sidebars in a multimedia package. The long-form text story will be the centerpiece of the package and will contain some of our photography to provide more detail. We will use this piece to document our findings on how the government’s corruption and lack of transparency is affecting environmental issues throughout the country. Additionally, sidebars will be created in the course of our reporting in order to add additional context and interesting but smaller stories to supplement the print story. While the direct focus of these shorter stories will be decided in Trinidad and Tobago based on our ongoing reporting, we have preliminary ideas: a video profiling Essie Parks’ (an environmental activist) mission to clean up Tobago’s leaking garbage dump, a video chronically the highway controversy and alleged government payoffs, and a photography slideshow depicting the industry forces polluting the Caroni River. We will look to publish the completed multimedia package in publications such as National Geographic or Smithsonian.

As journalists, we strive to hold the government accountable and to cover underreported stories. The American media fails to report important issues in Latin America and the Caribbean; regarding our topic, there have been almost no American articles published in the past decade remotely related to the environmental problems facing Trinidad and Tobago. According to CIA World Factbook statistics, its GDP is 33 percent bigger than the next largest economy in the Lesser Antilles—the island chain comprising the eastern Caribbean. Despite the robust economy, Transparency International consistently ranks the 3,186 square-mile, dual-island nation as the most corrupt in the region, on par with countries such as China. Additionally, several of our sources hinted at corruption in the Environmental Management Authority (EMA)—the government organization in charge of fixing environmental problems—a claim that we will further investigate in country. What separates Trinidad and Tobago from other Caribbean nations is the country’s huge industrial and chemical sectors that provide a majority of its economic production. Although it is a popular vacation spot for tourists, tourism is not as important domestically as in other Caribbean islands. The energy industry is the backbone of Trinidad and Tobago’s economic development, thanks to one trade partner in particular.

The U.S. has invested more than $1 billion in the country’s energy industry in past years and imported 128.6 billion cubic feet of liquefied natural gas (LNG) last year, according to the U.S. State Department and Energy Information Administration. With natural gas expected to overtake oil as the Caribbean country’s main source of revenue, the American people need to be informed about the environmental consequences of our trade relationship with this vulnerable economy.

After years of weak environmental responsibility throughout the government, Trinidad and Tobago created the EMA in 2000 to tackle these problems. In 2006, the EMA released its National Environmental Policy, outlining the problems plaguing the country’s air, land, and water and marking
specific remedies and potential solutions. According to the report, major waterways are polluted with discharges from industrial activity and offshore petroleum and LNG exploration. In addition, landslides, soil erosion, and flooding due to hillside clearing and deforestation in the course of development is occurring throughout Trinidad, aggravating an already deteriorating environmental condition.

Specifically, the National Environmental Policy said, “The rich biological resources of Trinidad and Tobago are being overexploited, degraded and diminished. Species of animals, plants and ecosystems are at varying levels of risk; some pest populations have increased significantly….The removal of coastal wetlands has diminished the services provided by these ecosystems in the form of nursery for fishes, water purification, flood control, and protection from storm surges and winds.”

Since the beginning of the millennium, Trinidad and Tobago has attempted to turn the tide on its environmental woes and has implemented several policies such as the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Rules; Air Pollution, Water Pollution, Hazardous Waste Rules; and the Beverage Container Deposit Bill. In 2009, the EMA was designated 12 police officers by the government to help enforce the policies it was mandated to create.

Right now, the story of the Trinidad and Tobago environment is suddenly back to the forefront of newsworthiness. British Petroleum just discovered an estimated 1 trillion cubic feet of gas off the coast (the largest discovery since 2005) and Shell announced just two weeks ago that it will invest billions of dollars in the country’s LNG market. In light of the recent and widely publicized hunger strike by Kublalsingh against the controversial highway, these business transactions take on new meaning. For example, we have heard through our sources that the government is potentially buying millions of excess barrels of tar for these roads in order to appease the oil companies.

By traveling to Trinidad and Tobago, we will investigate the difficult balance confronting this nation. On one hand, the country has a rich supply of natural gas and oil deposits, providing it with valuable goods for the world market. On the other hand, by drilling and extracting these resources, Trinidad and Tobago is exploiting its greatest commodity: its environment. The negative effects of industrial development and other environmental negligence are being felt across the country, but since the economy is so dependent on this money, there is little incentive to change and risk serious damage to fiscal stability. By investigating the enforcement of the EMA’s policies, particularly its strategic plan that began in 2010, and meeting with non-government and community-based organizations, we will be able to determine how exploited Trinidad and Tobago’s environment truly are and to what extent the government is responsible, as sources claim.

Our purpose for reporting in Trinidad and Tobago is to investigate the ways in which government corruption and inefficiency are proving detrimental to the environment. Are the sources of pollution we are chronicling truly being ignored by the government? Are public works such as the controversial highway commissioned for the public’s need or for business kickbacks? How much say does the oil industry have in government policies? Are lax government regulations leading to industrial pollution? Is the National Environmental Policy Act of 2006 being implemented? With these questions and others, we will expose what environmental issues result from a distracted government.

Prior to reporting in Trinidad and Tobago, we will take a week stateside to finalize our source list, interview schedule, and reporting plan. After returning, we will take three more weeks to finish writing the text stories, edit the multimedia components, and fact check. Once in Trinidad and Tobago we will travel through both islands for four weeks to interview sources and document the physical manifestations of industrial pollution and coastal degradation. Concurrently, we will be investigating the claims our sources have made about the government’s potential corruption. We will arrive in the capital, Port of Spain, and begin interviewing government sources from the EMA, Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, Ministry of Trade, Industry and Investment, and others. We will begin with our pre-contacted sources—Mr. Videsh Maharaj from the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Investment and Dr. Joth Singh, CEO of the Environmental Management Authority--and branch out to related ministries. In addition, we will interview normal citizens using snowball sampling through our source Kyle De Lima who is an environmental activist in charge of the online environmental forum Trini Eco Warriors. From Port of Spain, we will travel south to document the industrial discharge in the Caroni River, construction of the highway in western Trinidad, pollution in the Gulf of Paria, and destruction of the Icacos coastline. Among these stops, we will be interviewing Dr. Reia Guppy, an environmental studies professor at the University of Trinidad and Tobago; Ms. Linda Hutchinson-Jafar, an environmental reporter at the
Trinidad and Tobago Guardian; Mr. Marc de Verteuil, media contact for Papa Bois Conservation NGO; Mr. Sheldon Daniel, VP of Government and Public Affairs for British Petroleum in Trinidad and Tobago; and other related sources. We will continue our investigation east across Trinidad until we travel to Tobago where we will report on the Tobago garbage dump and the effect hotel construction has on its coastline. As we return to Port of Spain, we will finish interviews with local scientists, NGOs, concerned citizens, and the energy industry.

Mark: I have an eclectic set of talents and passions: investigative, international, and environmental reporting and photography. In order to experience all of these while in Medill, I decided to create my own path. I took classes such as “Database Journalism” and “Journalism & Technology” in which my team created HamTracker, a website that follows earmarked spending in Congress. In North by Northwestern I recently published a feature investigating the price of higher education, and I work for the Medill Watchdog where I investigate local political corruption. I have travelled several times to Nicaragua for service work and am strongly considering working there after graduation—hence my interest in Latin America—and I will be reporting this spring at The Star, a newspaper in Johannesburg, South Africa. On the environmental front, two other stories I am currently reporting concern fracking in South Africa and the politics behind cleaning up the Great Lakes. I am a print reporter, but I try to put photography in as much of my work as possible and am experienced with the DSLRs I’ll be shooting on in Trinidad and Tobago. Post-graduation I want to work at National Geographic; it’s my dream. I want to be an international investigative reporter focusing on environmental issues, so this story could truly be a springboard for my career. We’re trying to sell the story to my favorite publication, and this could put me well on my way to living my dream before I even graduate.

Fritz: Over the past year, I have developed a passion for investigating the implementation of public policy and the inner-workings of government. Currently, I am a business reporter and photographer on Capitol Hill for the Medill News Service where I have investigated the effects of the sequester and learned to sort through the political rhetoric and find the truth behind the talk. When I return to Evanston this spring, I will be taking a broadcast presentation class and producing weekly video packages to hone my skills as a broadcast reporter. My interest in politics and love of the great outdoors made the story appeal to me when Mark approached me to work on this project with him. Although I do not have a direct connection to Trinidad and Tobago, I found the story extremely enticing given the complexities of the country’s economic dependence on oil and the difficult balance between the power of the industrial sector and the environment concerns that linger as the nation continues to develop. Covering a story that combines my interests of public policy and video skills is exactly what I want to do with my journalism career, and investigating the environmental problems in Trinidad and Tobago could provide me with the first of many potential tries at making a difference in a part of the world about which Americans rarely.

What Mark brings in investigative, international, and environmental reporting, Fritz compliments with government and business reporting. These skills will allow us to report a story that is too big and complex for one reporter. Because we plan to make a multimedia package, we need Fritz’s experience with video, and it helps that we both have experience with photography. While Mark is focusing on the environmental reporting and connecting us with NGOs and experts, Fritz is focusing on making contacts in the Trinidad and Tobago business and political worlds. Mark’s investigative skills helped us define a reporting plan and methodology. When we were on campus together, we created a news site called The Post. That working relationship will carry on to Trinidad and Tobago to this story that means so much to both of us. It will provide us with valuable experience and bylines that employers in our field find attractive while we refine our print and multimedia skills. In addition to our advisor Stephan Garnett, we have a support network of faculty including Rick Tulsky—director of the Medill Watchdog—and Craig LaMay—Medill professor and faculty associate at Northwestern’s Institute for Policy Research—who have helped guide us in our work.

This project is big. It’s something not reported in the American media even though our country is directly involved through the billions of U.S. dollars heading to Trinidad and Tobago every year in exchange for oil and gas. Neither of us would be able to cover all the facets of the story by himself, both because of the magnitude of the story and also the knowledge and skill sets required. Together, we have the training and dedication necessary to deliver this story to an American audience.

Thank you for your time and consideration of our proposal.