Final Report:
A Weeping Earth – The connection between government corruption and environmental issues in Trinidad and Tobago

Investigative journalism is vital to sustain a robust democracy. In today’s society, investigative journalism has prospered and evolved tremendously thanks to large online databases and accessible archives of files that used to take days to find. However, reporters can do all of the online research they desire, but nothing compares to actually going into the field and seeing firsthand what problems are affecting the population. When we set out for our investigation in Trinidad and Tobago, our goal was to discover the extent the government’s inefficiency, lack of transparency, and potential corruption was leading to the country’s systemic environmental issues at the hands of powerful industry. Our research had made some strong claims about specific problems that were occurring, but nothing we could actually prove unless we went there.

As soon as we got settled in our hostel in Port of Spain, it was apparent there were definitely serious environmental problems in Trinidad and Tobago. The pervasive stench of garbage and sewage filling the air, the large amounts of litter along the streets and highways, and the visible hillside clearing along the country’s northern range were some of the most obvious signs of environmental damage occurring in Trinidad. Over the next four weeks, we traveled throughout both islands conducting interviews, photographing and filming examples of environmental degradation, and learning about Trinbagonian culture from those that knew it best. We interviewed environmental and energy professors. We talked to non-governmental
organization members. We visited a dump that residents refused to call a landfill because of its lack of efficient design and planning. And we met with government employees who pleaded that we tell this story so something would be done to save their country from itself.

There are numerous allegations regarding corruption within the government, but due to limited transparency laws, specifically regarding campaign contributions, it is often difficult to prove. Almost everyone we met with said they knew their government was corrupt but felt there was nothing they could do about it. Most importantly, we learned a large part of the resistance to curb environmental degradation stems from public apathy. Because gas and oil are so cheap in Trinidad (gas prices were about $1.80 USD), there is little incentive to change the status quo. When asked about what would be their source of income if the oil money dried up, residents had a difficult time admitting that their economy would be severely impacted, particularly because they basically abandoned their agricultural sector and give little thought to the country’s tourism industry.

Since returning to the states, we began organizing our information, transcribing interviews and editing photographs and film. We are sending freedom of information act requests to several government bodies waiting to see how difficult obtaining some pertinent records are and getting final statements from government agencies and ministers we were unable to meet with during our four-week stay in Trinidad and Tobago. We are currently pitching our story about the effects of the oil and gas industry money and the lack of government transparency on the country’s environment to several magazine publications that we believe would be interested, such as National Geographic and the Atlantic. Once we are able to sell the story, we will be able to produce our final project (a several thousand word investigative piece and accompanying photos and video interviews that further explain our story regarding the resource curse).