

A second visit to the Sustainable Sugarcane Initiative in Bahía Honda, Cuba

Last Friday, January 27, 2012, we left Havana at eight thirty in the morning. The plan was to reach the “Camilo Cienfuegos” cane coop in Bahia Honda at ten but, on the way, two things happened that delayed our arrival. When we finally got there, the coop’s president, Jose Antonio Espinosa (Nico) and its chief economist, Raul Rosa Rabeiro (Raulito), were just getting into their jeep to go to the nearby “Harlem” sugar mill to sign the yearly contract. The cane harvest or “zafra” had just begun.

The first “delay” was totally mine, as was the second. Approaching Bahia Honda, I spied three farm workers with machetes clearing a pasture full of marabu (*D. cinerea*). I stopped and got out of the car with my camera when the farmhands came over to the fence line and started talking with me. They were clearing the land for young heifers. I had my reason to mention the national feeding system for cattle considered in fattening, a controlled amount of protein supplement, together with a mixture of sugarcane and king grass, *ad libitum*, and asked, “have you seen that plot of cane just beyond town”? The tallest and thinnest of the three put his right hand to his mouth as if to blow a kiss, and said, “that’s some darn beautiful cane”. You can do the same thing” I replied, “how many hectares of cane do you need for your cattle?” “about four” he replied. “Go talk to Nico, see what he is doing, what you need you can produce in two rather than four hectares. I’m going there now to take some pictures, later when I see him, I’ll tell him”.

The second delay was longer than it should have been. This is Cuba, things break, or there’s no electricity when you need it, like to charge batteries, meaning I move with two cameras and almost two of everything else! However, moving with two cameras, means using twice the time to obtain, basically, the same amount of net material. So when we finally did get to the coop, at almost eleven, as previously told, Nico and Raulito were just leaving.

They left me with someone I had never met at the coop, the agronomist in charge of sugarcane technology, Ing. Luis Conde, the person responsible for the one hectare of SSI and the other 1062 hectares of non-SSI, non-irrigated (secano) cane, estimated to produce 51 t/ha this year. After drinking an infusion of *Moringa*, we walked out to the nursery, where Luis explained that that very day, the first cane field to be cut was for demolition, meaning the field would be taken down and replanted come next planting season. In the meantime however, because it’s after a field is harvested that they become aware that some 10% of the cane has never germinated, or subsequently died, they already decided to use SSI as a booster or head start program to fill in the “holes” of the other fields in order to improve future yields. Today, the day of my second visit to see and take pictures of the one-hectare SSI plot, the women responsible for the nursery would begin extracting buds to have seedlings ready within 42-45 days for the “holes” of the other harvested cane fields.

When the author came to Cuba 53 years ago, Cuba planted one stalk, then two, now three in one lineal meter row, presently signifying some 23 cane buds/metro lineal. One of the reasons Luis so favors SSI is that with the traditional method, one hectare requires, for seed, 13 tons of clean cane, a lot! Although he still hasn’t figured out what one hectare of SSI cane would require, he doesn’t care. The fact is, the oldest cane in his first SSI plot (9/2011) already has an average of 25 tillers. As I scribbled down some notes to send this article to Dr. Biksham Gujja, formerly a senior advisor with the Worldwide Fund for Nature in Switzerland, who so graciously provided Cuba with his first Manual on SSI, I became more and more fascinated with real farmers and their ability to what seems to come naturally to them: to always think ahead and improve what they’re already doing. Amazing! While Luis is experimenting with one hectare of SSI, and he’ll need 16 to 20 months to obtain conclusive data, he’s using the SSI planting methodology to improve, in five months (harvest period/yr), a considerable proportion of the other 1062 hectares. Luis can’t waste the planet’s precious time and energy!