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Haiti grass restoration project has Tallahassee roots

By St. Clair Murraine
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Not long after meeting a visitor that he had been waiting for, Tawainga Katsvairo flipped the cover of his laptop. He is an agronomist but there was no telling that this man does his best work in a lab.

He was really convincing as he meticulously went through details of everything on his computer to make his point about the need for grass in some areas of Haiti. The Zimbabwe native and Cornell University grad is seemingly on a passionate mission to see more grass grow on the island.

So for about two years now Katsvairo has been



Tawainga Katsvairo is using his background in agriculture to plant grass on some terrain in Haiti.

Photo by St. Clair Murraine

pushing the Haiti Grass Project in Tallahassee through a non-profit organization he calls Better Universe and Citizens. Some members he's recruited through his laptop presentation. Others have known him for years as church members, professors and business people.

He's also been able to recruit the likes of Tom Cellucci, a laser physicist who worked for presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Their mission is to fix some of the man-made and natural damage done to the terrain in Haiti, Katavairo said. They hope to cover five different locations on the island.

Thus, the reason Katsvairo is calling on Tallahassee for financial help. He's even set up a go-fund-me account (<https://www.gofundme.com/keep-haitis-soil-amp-feed-its-people?member=2061732>).

"The intent is to reduce soil erosion on Haiti," he said. "What we are trying to do now is get awareness. When we do this, we don't involve the government. We deal directly with the villagers and farmers"

Surprisingly Katavairo said getting the seeds to Haiti hasn't been a problem. He's taken two suitcases filled with seeds to the island without fees or tariffs, he said.

Katavairo estimated that it cost about \$1,000 to pur-

chase a large batch of the seeds that took on his last trip.

However, volunteers are finding it difficult to get to the island because of travel restrictions, he said. At least a group of South Florida Rotarians has been unable to assist.

Katavairo hopes that the travel issue is worked out by the fall, the next rainy season when it's best to plant seeds.

Another of the humanitarians supporting the Haiti Grass Project is Bud Fennema, a managerial accounting professor at FSU. He also is involved with his church's mission to supply goats to Haitian farmers.

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"Everything is dysfunctional in Haiti and if we can make anything function -- even a little bit better -- I want to do it.

"Tawainga is driven and he has good ideas. He has the drive to get them through. It's easy to get on board with it because he is so passionate about it."

The need for grass in Haiti has been at a critical stage for years. The ero-

sion around the island of 11 million people is one of the biggest man-made disasters that stems from the people's custom.

That practice allowed natives to cut down trees to produce charcoal. Photos that Katsvairo shows in his presentation illustrate how much the hillside has been devastated -- stones have replaced the tree and every rainstorm means trouble for residents in the lower terrain.

Dams are flooded and eventually flow into the ocean. FAMU professor Robert Taylor could relate to the issue. A soil scientist and dean of FAMU's College of Agriculture, Taylor said he saw similar situations in Alabama and Montserrat in the Caribbean.

In both cases, Taylor found that the best grass in bare land is Bermuda grass. He saw how robust the grass could grow, espe-

cially in areas several years after an eruption of the Soufrière Hills volcano in the late 1990s.

Taylor, who is a supporter of Katsvairo's mission, said it will take years to see the benefits of the grass.

"You have to try different grass," Taylor said. "If you get the right grass in a matter of two years you'll start seeing if it covers."

Cellucci and Taylor praised Katsvairo for taking on the project, pointing

to eventual environmental benefits.

Cellucci said Haiti could eventually have a better economic presence in the Caribbean much like Vietnam has in the Pacific. The country has survived a war and several environmental damages to become one of China's biggest economic competitors.

But first the grass had to grow.

"Grass helps prevent erosion but it also gives peo-

ple the self-worth of doing something to better their country," Cellucci said. "It also is an opportunity for people that have philanthropic budgets and ideology to help this (and) also generates future economic security.

"I'm someone that very much believes that we are all global citizens and we need to help one another."

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