



COCONUT CONCERNS


The coconut industry is in danger, and its decline has global effects.

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Coconut is a global industry that supports the livelihood of 10 million families, and is the raw material for a wide variety of popular products, from lubricants to cosmetics to edible products touted as “superfoods,” such as coconut water, milk and oil. According to Yaima Aro-

cha Rosete, researcher at the Toronto firm Sporometrics, the production of coconut worldwide is currently under threat from a disease that strikes the trees and is likely caused by the cicada-like insect *Haplaxius crudus*, whose territory has expanded due to climate change. Much like the threat to



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Canadian lumber posed by the pine beetle, coconut farms in Africa, Central America, and the Caribbean have seen rapid decline in production due to lethal yellowing disease, which kills the palms in four to six months. The only reason we lovers of coconut have not noticed the problem is that coconut prices are artificially low so as to compete with other plant oils that are cheaper to produce, such as soy bean oil. Although it hasn't occurred yet, Arocha Rosete predicts that decreased production of coconut means that “the very little that there is will attract a very high price.”

Sporometrics has recently identified the pathogen responsible for lethal yellowing in Côte d'Ivoire and is involved in the search for varieties of coconut that are resistant to the disease. My interview with Arocha Rosete revealed the chilling details of a threat to coconut that has the potential to drive the species to extinction.

The scope is staggering. 11.16 million hectares are currently planted with

coconut, but large swathes of this area have been destroyed, leaving only the dead trunks of the trees, known as “telephone poles”, to mark the landscape. Nigeria has lost 98% of its “West African Tall” varieties of coconut and Ghana has seen the complete collapse of its coconut industry in the last 20 years. Researchers foresee a similar situation for the coconut plantations in Côte d'Ivoire.

I asked Arocha Rosete what the road to recovery might look like. “The only way to recover is to discover varieties of coconut that are resistant to the disease. This is absolutely about climate change. All these phenomena we have now, like El Niño, and global warming, have a remarkable effect on insect populations, expanding their territory.” The discovery of resistant varieties of coconut is a very long process that may take at least nine or ten years, she said. And what will happen if we don't find resistant varieties in that time? “That's it. No more coconut.” ☹