

# Opinion & Analysis

## Different fates of three Caribbean countries tell a lot



**JOHN  
GIBBONS**

One of the happiest countries on the planet shows that protecting biodiversity has a lot to do with wellbeing

**H**APPINESS IS a state of mind, but if it were a place, it might well be the central American republic of Costa Rica. Located just a few hundred miles west of the benighted Haiti, Costa Rica is a corner of paradise here on Earth. Paradise, in this instance, doesn't mean a Caribbean playground for idle millionaires, but rather, as defined by the 4.5 million people who actually make their lives there.

There are many ways of calculating the happiness of populations, but by any measure, Costa Rica is among the happiest places on Earth. The World Database of Happiness, compiled by Dutch sociologists, ranks it first among 148 countries surveyed, with a score of 8.5 from a possible 10 in how people "enjoy their life as a whole" (Ireland rates a respectable 7.6, though the analysis largely predates our recession).

The emergence of this oasis of enlightenment in a region of climatic and political turbulence can probably be traced back to a bold constitutional decision taken by Costa Rica in 1949 to permanently abolish its armed forces. Resources were instead directed into education; this prescient choice of books rather than bullets has, in the intervening 60 years, paid off handsomely.

Improved education produced a more

stable, peaceful society, with high levels of gender equality, reduced birth rates and increased life expectancy. All these factors created a virtuous cycle for the country. The education dividend also paid off in terms of inward investment.

Yet perhaps the crowning achievement for Costa Rica (the rich coast) has been its outstanding environmental successes. Although the country accounts for only 0.1 per cent of the world's land surface, it is home and haven to 5 per cent of the entire planet's biodiversity. A quarter of the country is set aside as national parks and protected areas – themselves a valuable source of eco-tourism revenue.

Costa Rica has had a carbon tax in place since 1997 – 12 years ahead of us. The Environmental Performance Index, which tracks 149 countries across indicators including water resources, biodiversity as well as actions to combat climate change, is compiled by two major US universities. Despite its modest GDP of \$9,600 per capita, Costa Rica is ranked as the world's best country in terms of its "ecosystem vitality". Ireland is a dismal 90th on the same table, lower than Niger and Benin, and just ahead of Azerbaijan.

Yet another measure of wellbeing, called

the Happy Planet Index, analyses three key elements: subjective happiness, longevity and environmental impact. Yet again, Costa Rica tops the global list. What's different about this index is that it measures sustainability (ie future wellbeing) as well as current happiness.

The well-educated, democratic Costa Ricans (their president, Óscar Arias, has a Nobel Peace Prize) have chosen not to trample their children's legacy underfoot in pursuit of instant prosperity.

Wellbeing, both personal and environmental, has been largely decoupled from economic growth. Economic orthodoxy states that our needs as humans are best met by flinging ever more natural resources into the furnace of economic growth, spending more, consuming more and creating more and more waste.

If our most fundamental human need is to be happy, then Costa Rica suggests the economists are wrong, and we are wrecking the planet for no good reason. "One should never direct people towards happiness, because happiness too is an idol of the marketplace; one should direct them towards mutual affection," wrote Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. "A beast gnawing at its prey can be happy too."

Curiously, the country ranked second in the Happy Planet Index, the Dominican Republic, is also in the Caribbean. What is truly extraordinary is that this is the other half of the island of Hispaniola that it shares with Haiti.

Satellite imagery of Hispaniola tells a cautionary tale of two halves, one green and lush, the other brown and barren. Haiti is 98 per cent deforested. This has had devastating consequences for the 10 million or so Haitians packed into a country barely the size of Munster.

Disastrously, the country's population has trebled in just 50 years, adding hugely to poverty and putting immense pressure on natural resources.

Before the recent earthquake struck, Haiti was already weakened from regular environmental disasters such as floods and

mudslides. Few places on Earth more starkly illustrate the differing fortunes of peoples who either flourish or fail depending on their stewardship of the environments that sustain them.

These Caribbean examples are specific, but the lessons resonate widely. The world now faces "an ecological credit crunch caused by undervaluing the environmental assets that are the basis of all life and prosperity", according to the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

"Most of us are propping up our current lifestyles, and our economic growth, by drawing – and increasingly overdrawing – on the ecological capital of other parts of the world," said WWF director James Leape. Probably the most reliable measure of our planet's overall health and happiness is the state of its biodiversity.

"The question of biological diversity is on the same scale as climate protection," said German chancellor Angela Merkel at the recent launch of 2010 as the UN Year of Biodiversity.

The contrasting fates of Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica underline that environmental protection is the bedrock, not a roadblock, to lasting prosperity.

John Gibbons blogs at [www.thinkorswim.ie](http://www.thinkorswim.ie)

**ONLINE**

Have **Your Say** on  
this article at  
[irishtimes.com](http://irishtimes.com)