

# Star Profile: WYCLEF JEAN



Christopher Columbus said he had “never beheld so fair a thing” as Haiti’s forests when he sailed across the Atlantic to the so-called New World. He called the land “fertile and beautiful” and “most suitable for the planting of crops and for raising cattle.” Sure enough, in the 18th century it produced 40 per cent of the sugar and 60 per cent of the coffee consumed throughout Europe.

But now both the trees and the wealth are a distant memory. Environmental destruction has devastated the country. Ninety-eight per cent of its tree cover has been felled and two-thirds of its farmland destroyed.

“Haiti is the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere,” the two-time Grammy Award winner, Wyclef Jean, told *Our Planet*. “A mere 200 years ago, it was the richest. Think of that.”

Jean – born the son of a minister in Croix-des-Bouquets near the country’s capital Port au Prince 33 years ago – moved with his family to Brooklyn, New York, at the age of nine. At 15 he joined a rap group that became the award-winning Fugees, named for the slang for Haitian refugees. After a world-beating career, both with the group and as a solo star, “the time came to give back to my home country.”

Seven years ago he set up the Wyclef Jean foundation, which raised money for the country. Then, in January this year, he created Yéle Haiti – Yéle means freedom – to work for sustainable development in education, health, humanitarian assistance, and the environment.

“Really the environment affects everything,” he said. “People are so poor there, many even have to eat dirt. If we build up the land, people can farm and earn a living. We need to plant trees.”

Yéle Haiti has been a catalyst in launching a new national association of NGOs called Vert Espoir (‘green hope’) to undertake a major tree planting campaign in Haiti, joining with the Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize winner, Wangari Maathai, and her pioneering Green Belt Movement. Yéle Haiti’s direct project will be to set up 50 community-based tree nurseries and to reach some 600,000 young people through hip-hop music.

“The idea is to combine music and development,” he said. “It’s a new way of doing things. No-one else is doing it like this. We have to invest in the kids – they are the future of the country. Because music is my life, because I was blessed with this talent, because I am in a position to make a difference for Haiti, music is the central element for the projects.”

So, for example, Jean has enlisted hip-hop musicians from the communities to distribute food in two gang-controlled neighbourhoods – “said to be the most dangerous in the world” – that outsiders cannot enter. He has written songs for them to promote the importance to public health of cleaning up rubbish, and he is planning a ‘Hip Hop Caravan’, where musicians will attract crowds for HIV testing.

“I have seen my country in a state of emergency all my life,” he said. “My dream for Haiti is to get it out of the level of poverty that it is in. Haitians have so much pride, so much to give, but right now there’s little support for them in any form.

“Haiti was not really on the world’s radar. Because I’m a celebrity, it brings more attention and awareness to the situation in the country. I’m committed to Haiti. I’m committed to Yéle Haiti and I’m willing to do everything I can to make things better for my country.” **GL**