

Science
Vol. 312
June 9, 2006
www.sciencemag.org

Florida Law Bans Academics From Doing Research in Cuba

by Yudhijit Bhattacharjee
June 30, 2006

Beginning next month, Florida researchers won't be able to travel to Cuba to carry out any studies. Although the United States allows such interactions, the state has banned faculty members at Florida's public universities from having any contact with the island nation under a law enacted last week. "This law shuts down the entire Cuban research agenda," says Damián Fernández director of the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University (FIU) in Miami.

Cuba is one of six countries that the U.S. State Department has designated as a "sponsor of terrorism," although U.S. scholars can travel to Cuba for research if they first obtain a government license. The Florida measure, which passed the state legislature unanimously, essentially closes that loophole by disallowing state funded institutions from using public or private funds to facilitate travel to such countries. (The list include North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Libya, and Sudan.)

"Florida's taxpayers don't want to see their resources being used to support or subsidize terrorist regimes at a time when America is fighting a war on terror," says David Rivera, a Republican Cuban-American state legislator who introduced the bill. Florida researchers won't miss out on anything by not going to Cuba, he adds: "I don't think there's anything there that cannot be studied in the Dominican Republic or other Caribbean islands."

Rivera introduced a similar measure 2 years ago that failed. But political observers say the indictment in January of an FIU education professor and his wife, on charges of spying on the Cuban exile community for Cuba, made a big difference this time around. "The case showed that we need to protect the reputation and educational integrity of our universities, and that's what this law does," says Rivera.

Academics say the law will hurt efforts to learn about Cuba's agriculture, ecology, and marine environment — all topics that could have a significant effect on Florida's economy. Agricultural economist William Messina and his colleagues at the University of Florida, Gainesville, for example, have been researching citrus farming in Cuba, the world's third largest producer of grapefruit. "Their grapefruit yield has gone up in the past few years as a result of new policies that promote collaborations between Cuban farmers and foreign agricultural and food-processing companies," says Messina. Those collaborations, he says, have meant tougher competition for

Florida grapefruit growers trying to sell to Western Europe. Researchers in the state have been carrying out similar studies of Cuba's shellfish, sugar, and tomato industries.

Environmental researchers are also chagrined by the new law. FIU geographer Jennifer Gebelein, for example, is currently in Cuba looking at the impact on Cuba's coral reefs of land-cover changes around the island. The work is important from a conservation standpoint "because Cuba's coral reefs are a center of marine and biological diversity in the Caribbean," says Lauretta Burke, a geographer and senior associate at the World Resources Institute in Washington, D.C. Gebelein is scrambling to finish her fieldwork before the law goes into effect on 1 July.

Marine scientist Frank Muller-Karger of the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, says that Cuba's plans for offshore oil exploration make scientific exchange between Florida and the island more important than ever before. "Any major pollution event off the coast of Cuba may reach Florida, and many important fisheries in the Keys may be connected to Cuba, he says. Not all academics are opposed to the ban, however. Jorge Rey, a Cuban exile and a ecologist at the University of Florida, Vero Beach, says doing research in Cuba is a "scientifically risky proposition" because the Cuban government strictly controls what sites researchers can access. "There's also the danger of U.S. scholars being used by the Cuban government for propaganda," he says, echoing one of Rivera's arguments in support of the legislation. FIU's Fernández doesn't buy that line of reasoning. He says the new law will actually weaken U.S. national security instead of strengthening it. "The notion that you cannot study your alleged enemy goes against any strategic thought," he says. "It would be laughable if it weren't so serious."

Fernández and others are backing a plan by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Florida to challenge the law in court. ACLU officials declined to describe the basis for the suit, but Executive Director Howard Simon says the Florida law is troubling on many fronts. Not only does it inject politics into academic research, he says, "it may also interfere with the policies of the federal government" by affecting U.S. relations with another country.