



'Artisanal charcoal' made from marabú can be used to light barbecues and generate electricity for the chronic energy deficit nation. AP

CUBA

It's a wonderful weed

The miracle of marabú, Cuba's wonderful weed

THE PESKIEST weed in Cuba sprouts a charming flower. Pink and wispy, with a bushy yellow tail, it looks like a cross between a Chinese lantern and a Muppet. Marabú, as Cubans call the leguminous tree, covers 2m hectares, about 18% of the country's territory. It spread unchecked during the "special period" of the 1990s, when the Soviet Union stopped subsidising Cuba and farms fell into disuse. Uprooting it is time-consuming and labour-intensive.

Recently, though, Cubans have begun to view marabú as an asset rather than an irritant. Since 2009 Cuba has exported 40,000-80,000 tonnes a year of "artisanal charcoal" made from marabú, which is used for firing up hookahs in the Middle East and pizza ovens in Italy. That could rise after the United States in January approved marabú as the first legal import from Cuba in more than 50 years. There it will compete head-to-head with mesquite to fuel American barbecues.

Heated in a process called 'thermal pyrolysis', marabú can become 'activated carbon', which is used for purposes like filtering water, decaffeinating coffee. In this form, it can fetch prices of up to \$2,400 a tonne, around five times its value as a barbecue fuel.

Some businessmen have bigger ambitions for marabú. Three tonnes of the stuff can produce as much electricity as a tonne of fuel oil, a commodity in short supply. Havana Energy, an Anglo-Chinese firm, has entered a joint venture with Azcuba, a state-owned company, to build five generators. Built next to sugar mills, they will be powered by a mix of marabú and bagasse, the residue of crushed sugar cane. Andrew Macdonald, Havana Energy's boss, calls the marabú fields "outdoor mines".

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Donald Trump is considering whether and by how much to reverse the opening to Cuba that took place under Barack Obama. It is not clear whether marabú will remain the only item on the United States' list of approved imports, whether it will be struck off or whether new products will be added, such as organic honey, which costs even more per tonne than activated carbon. Whatever Mr Trump decides, there is demand for the Muppet-flowered weed. Cuba has the makings of a maraboom.