

Currents

Newsletter of the Bahamas National Trust

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Unprecedented Expansion of National Park System

In an extraordinary announcement at the 43rd annual general meeting of the Bahamas National Trust in April, former Prime Minister Hubert Ingraham confirmed the creation of 10 new protected areas— doubling the size of the country's national park system at a stroke, an unprecedented event in world conservation history.

In a videotaped presentation to Trust members, Mr Ingraham recalled the obligation of signatories to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity to “step up protection of biodiversity within their own country.” In particular, he noted that the Biodiversity Convention calls on countries to protect natural resources and ecosystems where they occur.

“This ‘*in situ*’ conservation,” he said, “is recognized as the pinnacle, the highest and most important step a country can take to protect its biological diversity, its natural resources, its plant and animal and marine life.”

Calling the new

protected areas “significant for many reasons” Mr Ingraham noted that the new parks “are diverse in their features and values ... and they expand the degree of ecological representation within our national park system. Great expanses of wetlands, barrier reefs, forested areas, critical breeding and nesting sites, sites important to science and recreation, are now

designated as national park areas and will be protected in perpetuity.”

He also highlighted the “the viability of non-consumptive use of marine resources to the economy.”

Prime Minister Ingraham made special mention of the work of the Bahamas National Trust, referring to the organization as “a model of success, of innovative conservation at work, around the globe.”

The Trust, he said, had worked diligently for more than 40 years to protect the country's natural resources for the benefit of all Bahamians: “It has led and shaped the conservation movement in The Bahamas in an exemplary manner. It has similarly built and managed our national park system.”

“A point in case”, he said, “is the Trust's work



President

Macgregor
Robertson

Executive Director

Gary Larson

Small Wonder
Little Inagua

Remote, inaccessible, and with no fresh water, Little Inagua is by far the largest uninhabited island in the wider Caribbean.

The island exists in a natural, undisturbed state and the biodiversity implications and values of this are enormous.

Ocean currents flow through the Bahamas from the southeast to the northwest. As a result, Little Inagua is upstream of the rest of the country. Its surrounding waters contribute to the supply of fisheries eggs, larvae, and subadults that are swept into the remaining Bahamian marine territory. Park designation increases the percentage of marine ecosystem under protection for fisheries replenishment purposes.

Additionally, Little Inagua is a documented nesting location for critically endangered sea turtle species.

Great Inagua
Turk's Cap Cactus
Butterfly
Little Inagua

with the Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park. A dozen or so years ago the Trust recognized unsustainable pressures on our national fisheries resources. Under provisions of the Bahamas National Trust Act, by-laws for the Exuma Park were rewritten in 1986, making the entire 176 square mile park a no-take fisheries replenishment area, the first of its kind in the Wider Caribbean. Years later, the scientific community coined the term "marine fisheries reserve" for such areas and now, based largely on the success of the Exuma Park, promotes the establishment of such reserves as the best way to sustain fishery resources."

Scientific evidence supports Mr. Ingraham's statement. The concentration of conch inside the Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park is now 31 times greater than outside the park. It is conservatively estimated that the conch concentration in the park provides

several million conch per year to areas outside the park available to be harvested by fishermen. Additionally, tagged grouper from the Exuma Park have been caught off north and south Long Island, indicating that the park is replenishing grouper stocks in areas as far as 150 miles away. Tagged crawfish from the Exuma Park are found replenishing the marine environs of

New Parks
New Providence

Over 2,000 acres of wetland areas and a critical forest on New Providence have been added to the national park system.

The wetland areas of Harrold and Wilson Ponds and Bonetfish Pond provide between them habitat for more than 100 bird species, including the island's highest concentration of herons, egrets, ibises and cormorants, and an important marine nursery area, providing a protective, nutrient rich habitat for juvenile stocks of fish, crawfish, and conch. The Primeval Forest is a timeless, living laboratory for the study of Bahamian broadleaf forests.

A stop's throw from the nation's capital and tourism hub the educational and ecotourism values of these sites are enormous.

Red Mangroves
Bonetfish Pond
Wilson Pond
Primeval Forest
to Andros

Cat Island, which is 70 miles away.

"These extraordinary benefits to fisheries are coupled with a benefit to ecotourism. With marine and terrestrial life in abundance, the park is a popular mecca for tourists and an invaluable outdoor classroom for our youth," Mr Ingraham said.

The success of fishery resource replenishment in the Exuma Park led the government to announce a policy decision in 2000 to protect 20 per cent of the Bahamian marine environment.

And in several of the newly designated parks the boundaries extend seaward to 100 fathoms, moving the country closer to this goal. The Bahamas is a 124,000-square-mile archipelago between Cuba and Florida. Only 5,300 square miles of the country is land, the remainder is marine territory.

By his actions, the prime minister doubled Bahamian national park holdings from approximately 320,000 acres to over 650,000 acres, and foreshadowed other areas to be conveyed to the Trust.

The new parks include: extensive land and sea areas of Central Andros; Harrold, Wilson & Bonetfish Ponds and the Primeval Forest on New Providence; the entire island and coastal area of Little Inagua; Moriah Harbour Cay and its marine environs at Great Exuma; Pasture and O'Brien Cays in the Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park, and the Walker's Cay marine area off Abaco.

The wild side
Walker's Cay

The northernmost island in the Bahamas, Walker's Cay is fringed by its own barrier reef.

The stunning coral formations and surrounding marine environs host majestic schools of pompano and amberjack, large marine predators, such as sharks and barracudas, multitudes of colourful tropical fish, turtles and eagle rays.

Renowned for underwater cathedrals teeming with unprecedented concentrations of fish, visibility that reaches 100 feet, and an endless variety of marine life, this underwater paradise is a mecca for divers.

Although less than 10 square miles, Walker's Cay marine area makes important contributions to biodiversity and to the tourism industry of the island, highlighting the viability of non-consumptive use of marine resources to the economy.

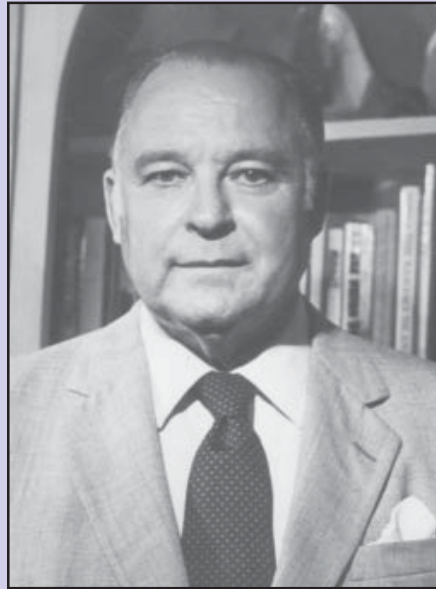
Abaco Island
Walker's Cay

In Memorium

Oris Russell, OBE, a founding member of the Bahamas National Trust, a former president, and a life-long member of Council died May 14 at his Woodland Road Home in Nassau.

Mr Russell retired in 1983 after a 42-year career in the civil service. He was one of the first Bahamians to go abroad on a government scholarship when in 1947 he attended the University of Florida in Gainesville, completing a bachelor of science degree with honours in agriculture in 1950 and a master's degree in agriculture in 1951.

He returned to Nassau and in 1954 became agriculture director. During his time as director he introduced more than 300 varieties of new and improved plants, including fruit, vegetables and ornamental trees and shrubs, and selected a better breed of sheep and swine for Bahamian farmers. After the transition to ministerial government in 1964, he was appointed permanent secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. His last



Founding Member Oris Russell, OBE

appointment was in 1973 as permanent secretary to the Ministry of External Affairs.

He was official correspondent in the Bahamas to several scientific organizations and contributed

to many scientific journals and and reference works, including the Encyclopedia Britannica.

Mr Russell will be remembered by the Trust for his great interest in gardening with special emphasis on the flora of the Bahamas. He was a member of the scientific expedition that surveyed the Exuma Cays in 1958 to recommend that a national park be established under the authority of a proposed national trust.

He was recognized by the Society of Caribbean Ornithology in 1996 at their annual general meeting in Nassau for his contributions to Bahamian ornithology and conservation. His scientific contributions were numerous but few people know that he coined the name of the BNT's annual Arts and Crafts Festival saying one day that we should hold a "jollification" during the pre-Christmas season. This annual event is now one of the Trust's chief fundraisers. Mr Russell loved the Trust and seldom missed an event or public meeting. He will be missed by all of us.



Gala Ball Congratulations

The BNT Gala Ball held at Sandals Royal Bahamian Resort in April was a huge success. Over 250 ballgoers dined sumptuously and danced the night away to the tunes of the RBDF Jazz Band and Modern Vintage. The BNT recognizes with thanks the tremendous efforts of the Ball Committee: Colin Lightbourn, Susan Larson, Beth Bethell and Robin Symonette in making the evening such a success. Thanks are also extended to Sandals for their terrific support of the evening. Pictured are Colin Lightbourn (right), Ball Committee Chairman presenting Liz Christiansen with one of the door prizes.

A LOOK at The New Parks

CENTRAL ANDROS

Andros is a remarkable island that makes enormous contributions to the collective natural resource wealth of the Bahamas.

It is guarded by one of the world's longest and best-preserved barrier reefs and houses the highest known density of blue holes in the world. Its extensive wetlands are of national, regional and international importance and it boasts the "best bonefishing in the world". It provides critical habitat for endangered birds, crabs and iguanas. It is our country's largest reservoir of fresh water.

A naturally functioning giant ecosystem, the component parts of the island of Andros are as breathtaking in their beauty as they are significant in their value. This first phase of park designation focuses on Central Andros — North Bight, Fresh Creek, Blanket Sound, Young Sound, and Staniard Creek. These areas contain pine forests, blue holes, coral reefs, wetlands, and mangroves. Their designation paves the way for additional protection in the north and south of Andros.

HARROLD AND WILSON PONDS

Located in south central New Providence, Harrold and Wilson Ponds encompass 250 acres. More than 100 avian species, including the island's highest concentration of herons, egrets, ibises and cormorants, have been identified there, providing confirmation that the area is an indispensable habitat for bird

life on New Providence. An exceptional educational and ecotourism site, a stone's throw from the nation's capital and tourism hub, these areas are an invaluable addition to the country's national park system.

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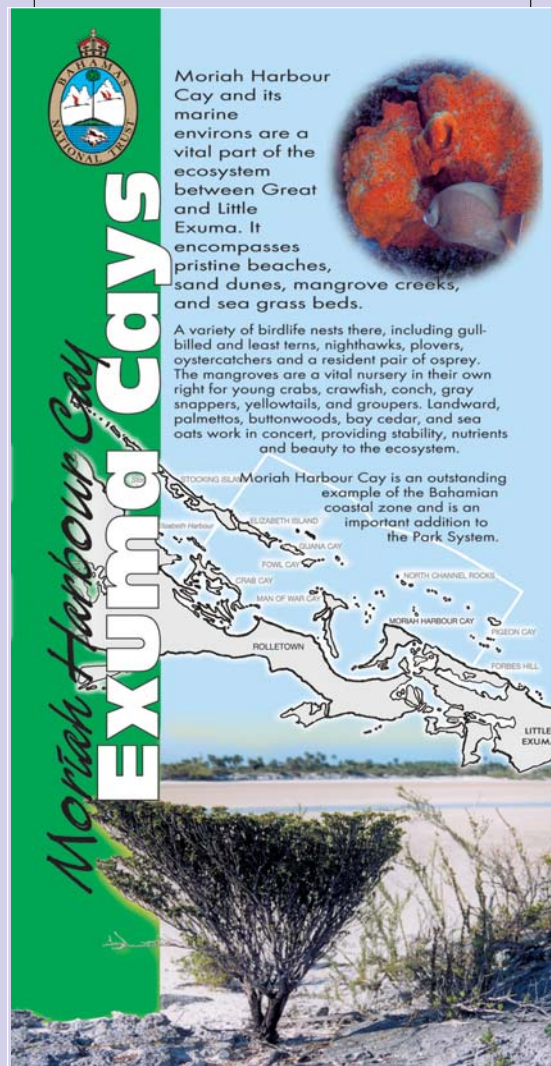
Ocean currents flow through the Bahamas from the southeast to the northwest. As a result, Little Inagua is upstream of the rest of the country. Its surrounding waters contribute to the supply of fisheries eggs, larvae, and sub-adults that are swept into other parts of Bahamian marine territory. Park designation increases the percentage of marine ecosystem under protection for fishery replenishment purposes.

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WALKER'S CAY MARINE PARK

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LITTLE INAGUA

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New BNT President

Chartered accountant **Macgregor N. Robertson**, managing partner of Deloitte and Touche in the Bahamas and Caribbean and regional partner for Deloitte & Touche International, was elected president of the Bahamas National Trust recently, succeeding John F. Bethell whose term ended at the Trust's annual council meeting on April 20.

Mr Robertson attended Queen's College and St Andrew's School in Nassau. He attended Fettes College in Edinburgh, Scotland and McGill University in Montreal, Canada (where he studied organic chemistry and marine biology). He articulated to Peat Marwick Mitchell in Nassau and qualified as a member of the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants in 1965—the first Bahamian to do so. He is a founding member of the Bahamas Institute of Chartered Accountants.

Mr Robertson has been an active member of the Trust for many years



Mr Robertson has been chairman of the board of St Andrew's School; treasurer and president of the Rotary Club of East Nassau; assistant district governor of Rotary International District 7020; commodore of the Bahamas Air Sea Rescue Association, and the Bahamas Yacht Squadron; a director of the Bahamas Chamber of Commerce, the Bahamas Institute of Chartered Accountants and the Nassau Tourism Development Board; a member of the Airport Advisory Committee and chairman of Bahamasair Holdings Ltd. He is currently chairman of the Bahamas Development Bank.

organization and invaluable practical experience in conservation issues and leadership. A skilled photographer, his pictures of native flora and nesting seabirds have been used in several BNT educational presentations.

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Also elected were Colin Lightbourn as Deputy President, and Hugh Sands as Honorary Secretary.

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BONEFISH POND NATIONAL PARK

Bonefish Pond lies on the south central coast of New Providence. It is an important marine nursery area for the island, providing a protective, nutrient rich habitat for juvenile stocks of fish, crawfish, and conch. The loss or degradation of nursery habitats contributes to depletion of these valuable marine resources. Encompassing 1,800 acres, Bonefish Pond supports a wide variety of waterfowl and an important variety of Bahamian flora. The wetland itself provides critical protection from storm surges to communities along New Providence's southern shore. The educational and ecotourism potential of this wetland area is significant.

MORIAH HARBOUR CAY PARK

Moriah Harbour Cay and its marine environs are a vital part of the ecosystem between Great and Little Exuma. It encompasses pristine beaches, sand dunes, mangrove creeks, and sea grass beds. A variety of birdlife nests there, including gull-billed and least terns, night-hawks, plovers, oystercatchers and a resident pair of osprey. The mangroves are a vital nursery in their own right for juvenile crabs, crawfish, conch, gray snappers, yellow-tails, and groupers. Landward, palmettos, buttonwoods, bay cedar, and sea oats work in concert, providing stability, nutrients and beauty to the ecosystem. Moriah Harbour Cay is an outstanding example of the Bahamian coastal zone and is an important addition to the park system.

THE PRIMEVAL FOREST

Entering this area is a step back in time. Remarkably undisturbed, this old-growth forest is a representation of the early evergreen tropical hardwood forests of the Bahamas. Located in the southwest portion of New Providence, this area features dramatic sinkholes—unique limestone “caverns” up to 50 feet long, 30 feet wide, and in some cases 30 feet deep. Similar features elsewhere in the Bahamas have provided fossil and subfossil remains of Bahamian fauna as well as Indian and Bahamian artifacts. The Primeval Forest supports a diverse collection of plant life, as well as various species of wildlife.



BNT Brings “Wetlands are Wild” to Great Exuma Students

Over 450 students on Great Exuma now know why mangrove wetlands are among the most biologically productive of all marine ecosystems. BNT Education officers Lynn Gape and Monique Sweeting traveled to Great Exuma in April to give nine performances of the regionally acclaimed “Wetlands are Wild” puppet show for local school children.

The puppet show is one of the educational outputs of the West Indian Whistling Duck Wetlands Conservation Project of the Society of Caribbean Ornithology. The show was written by Mrs Gape and Mrs Sweeting in conjunction with Karen St. Cyr of the Ministry of Education. The puppets were recently redesigned by Mrs Sweeting.

The Trust was able to perform the show for 10 local primary schools at the Exuma Resource Centre in George Town. The Centre handled all the scheduling and transportation of the students for the shows.

The puppet show seeks to make students understand the importance of wetlands as habitat for the West Indian Whistling Duck, an endangered species, and other wildlife. Students also learn that the mangrove’s maze of roots produces a living seawall that protects the coast from storm surges and provides nurseries for economically important species such as crawfish, conch and grouper.

“This was a great experience for us,” said Mrs Gape. “We were very impressed with the interest and enthusiasm demonstrated by both the students and the teachers in Great Exuma and we are especially grateful to the Exuma Resource Centre for logistical arrangements.” Teachers were given fact sheets on the mangrove ecosystem and other educational materials. Students who responded correctly to questions at the end of the show were rewarded with the West Indian Whistling Duck Coloring Book illustrated by Bahamian artist Melissa Maura.



Trust Launches Important Bird Conservation Initiatives

This spring the Bahamas National Trust entered into a three-year partnership with BirdLife International to coordinate and implement the Important Bird Areas Programme for the Bahamas.

BirdLife International is a global partnership of non-governmental conservation organizations with a focus on birds. The partnership works to support biodiversity by conserving important bird habitats. BirdLife International operates in 103 countries and territories worldwide.

BirdLife International established similar partnerships earlier this year with groups in Jamaica, Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, with financing from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP).

The threat of long-term population declines of migratory songbirds, shorebirds, seabirds, and wading birds in the Caribbean is well known. The causes are complex, but most scientists say habitat loss and degradation are the major factors affecting breeding grounds, migratory stopovers and pathways and wintering areas.

A key step in conserving bird habitats is the identification of those places that provide the greatest habitat value and support significant populations of an exceptional diversity of birds. These so-called Important Bird Areas (IBAs) are critical strongholds of avian abundance and diversity.

The Bahamas held its first IBA National Workshop in April at the Trust's headquarters on Village Road. Among those taking part were representatives from Bahamian government agencies, local ornithologists and scientists conducting research on birds in the Bahamas.

Participants identified 90 key areas throughout the archipelago, citing 45 of

those as "vital" to maintaining bird populations and habitat diversity. A listing of the areas will be published as a blueprint for bird conservation in the Bahamas.

Work will continue over the next three years to complete conservation assessments for the highest priority sites and to initiate sustainable use activities. Information gaps will also be identified and filled through monitoring and surveying activities in the field.

"This is an exciting program for the Trust," said BNT education officer and birding enthusiast Lynn Gape, "as well as an important effort undertaken with national and local support to conserve birds and their habitat in the Bahamas."

Immediately following the IBA National Workshop, BirdLife International convened a strategic planning meeting at the Trust to evaluate the existing national partnerships in the Caribbean and build a stronger and more coherent regional bird conservation programme.

This was the first opportunity for the BirdLife network in the Caribbean to

discuss regional issues face to face. Taking part were government representatives and BirdLife partners from Jamaica, Cuba, the Bahamas and the Dominican Republic.

Bird Studies Canada, currently working on a project in Jamaica, was also present, as were regional institutions such as



David Wege, BirdLife International Caribbean Program Manager gives an overview of the IBA programme.

UNEP's Caribbean Environment Program, the Society for Caribbean Ornithology, the West Indian Whistling Duck and Wetlands Conservation Project and the North American Waterbird Plan.

To obtain additional funding to strengthen the IBA programme in the Caribbean (through public outreach, training and capacity development), workshop participants developed a proposal for submission to the Global

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Pictured from left: Eric Carey, Department of Agriculture; Erica Gates, Grand Bahama; Neil McKinney, BNT Ornithology Group; Lynn Gape, BNT Education Officer; Colin Higgs, Ambassador of the Environment; William Hayes, Loma Linda; Paul Dean, BNT Ornithology Group; David Wege, BirdLife International.

BNT Recognizes Outstanding Volunteers

The Trust annually recognizes volunteers who, through their dedication and expertise, contribute to biodiversity protection and environmental education in the Bahamas. This year two individuals and one corporation were recognized for outstanding service.

“These volunteers put in many unpaid hours to help the Trust achieve its conservation goals,” said Executive Director Gary Larson. “We are indebted to them in many ways and we want to express our appreciation publicly.”

Cadrington Coleby was cited for his coordination of the Native Flora Group. His enthusiasm and interest have helped

promote the use of native trees and plants in the built landscape and he has encouraged many BNT members to increase their knowledge of native vegetation.

Dr Ethan Freid, lecturer at the College of the Bahamas, is a plant taxonomist who has used his expertise to help strengthen the Bahamas National Herbarium and produce plant lists on a variety of islands for the Trust and the government. Dr Fried is leaving the Bahamas soon to take a position at the University of Tampa.

The Ardastra Gardens Conservation Centre is often called on by the Trust to help with wildlife rescue and rehabilitation. Recently there has been an upsurge in the smuggling of Bahamian wildlife and the introduction of potentially invasive species, making the Ardastra’s contributions even more important.

As the nation’s only ‘zoo’ the Ardastra has generously cared for many confiscated species—sometimes temporarily, sometimes perma-

nently, but always willingly. Curator Robyn Howard received a certificate on behalf of Ardastra Gardens.



Robyn Howard (left) receiving her certificate from past president John Bethell.



Cadrington Coleby (left) receiving his certificate from past president John Bethell.



Dr Ethan Freid (left) receiving his certificate from past president John Bethell.

Continued from page 7

Environment Facility, the financial mechanism for the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity.

“This regional project offers great opportunities for training in conservation techniques and identification of sites where sustainable tourism practices can be implemented with community support,” said BNT Deputy Director Susan Larson. “The Bahamas National Trust will be a key participant in this important international initiative.”

The birdwatching industry is a growing economic force, and conserving birds carries economic benefits. Birds are indicators of biodiversity and environmental health. Some 560 species of birds occur in the wider Caribbean area. It is estimated that 9 out of 10 of the several hundred birds that have become extinct in recent centuries were island species. They are more vulnerable because of their limited habitat and lack of defence against introduced predators.

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