



THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

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Senator the Honourable Ganga Singh
Minister of the Environment and Water Resources
Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources
Level 26, Tower D,
International Waterfront Complex,
Wrightson Road,
Port-of-Spain

May 18th 2015

SUBJECT: Important measures the government can implement now for conserving our wildlife

INTRODUCTION

The Trinidad & Tobago Field Naturalists' Club, a society for the study of natural history, is one of the oldest clubs existing in Trinidad and Tobago, having being founded on 10th July 1891. We are a volunteer based, non-profit organization and our main objectives are to bring together persons interested in the study of natural history, the diffusion of knowledge thereof and the conservation of nature and natural resources. The club operates under a constitution and set of rules and traditions. As part of the club's 100th Anniversary Celebration, it was incorporated by an Act of Parliament (Act No. 17 of 1991).

We would like to draw your attention to several issues and recommendations which we have publicly identified with respect to protecting the nation's biodiversity.

FORESTRY, PROTECTED AREAS AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION BILL 2014

The draft bill now has to be reviewed and approved by the several stakeholders including the labour unions, Chief Personnel Officer and the Forestry Division. All of this is scheduled to take place in May 2015. If all goes well there, then the bill may be taken to Cabinet as soon as June and then to the Attorney General for the legislation to be drafted. The legislation then has to run the gamut of the Legal Review Committee, Cabinet and finally the Parliament. With national elections quickly approaching, concerns have been raised by stakeholders about the fate of the drafted bill. This should not be allowed to happen. The new law (at least according to the draft bill) would result in several long awaited changes to our wildlife conservation laws.

This opportunity must not be lost.

IN THE MEANTIME

As the draft Forestry, Protected Areas and Wildlife Conservation Bill 2014 indicated concern over certain species, this amounts to the government recognizing a valid threat, regardless of whether or not the final legislation is in place. Remember, the National Wildlife Policy was passed by Cabinet since 2013 so that the mandate for sustainable wildlife management is undeniable.

It is fully within the Minister's powers to declare certain measures **now** to help address these threats. Action does not have to wait for new legislation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The draft bill indicates that the sale of "wild" meat, unless it is farm-raised, will not be permitted under the new legislation. Clearly this means that the government acknowledges that the sale of meat from animals caught in our forests and swamps is not sustainable or desirable. To this end, we strongly suggest that **a moratorium on the sale of wild meat be implemented** as this will serve as a useful measure for curbing commercial poaching until the new legislation and controlled wildlife farming can be brought on-stream. As you may or may not be aware, many hunters also agree with the banning of all wild meat sales. Additionally, the current spate of bushfires has increased the pressures faced by wild animals in several areas. A ban on commercial sales would help to alleviate the pressure from commercial hunters and poachers.

Freshwater habitats have disappeared quickly since the collapse of the rice industry and the pressures faced by freshwater birds are significant. While some species were included in the draft Fourth (protected) schedule, we strongly believe that all ducks should be removed from the draft Fifth Schedule and be granted full protection. The Minister would be well advised to **implement an indefinite moratorium on hunting of all waterfowl (ducks) and other large marsh birds such as herons and the limpkin given the aforementioned loss of wetlands**. This can remain in place until the new legislation is complete. Waterfowl hunting is not very popular in Trinidad and Tobago so the fallout would be minimal.

The draft bill indicates that several of our seedeaters and seed finches are critically endangered. This sad state of affairs is directly as a result of the state not moving quickly enough to save these species over the last

forty years or so. To this end, a **moratorium on the possession of our native seedeaters and seed finches (which have been identified as critically endangered in the draft bill) ought to be implemented.**

The following species of seedeater should receive immediate protection via a moratorium on their capture and possession.

1. Picoplat or Grey Seedeater (*Sporophila intermedia*)
2. Chat or Lesson's Seedeater (*Sporophila bouvronides*)
3. King Chat or Lined Seedeater (*Sporophila lineola*)
4. Tobago picoplat or Wing-barred Seedeater (*Sporophila americana*)
5. Silverbeak or Yellow-bellied seedeater (*Sporophila nigricollis*)
6. Twa-twa or Large-billed Seedfinch (*Oryzoborus crassirostris*)
7. Robin or Ruddy-breasted seedeater (*Sporophila minuta*)
8. Brazzo or Slate-coloured Seedeater (*Sporophila schistacea*)

For practical purposes, it may not be feasible to ban possession of the bullfinch (Chestnut-bellied Seed Finch, *Oryzoborus angolensis*) which is the most popular native cage bird and, in any event, all bullfinches are smuggled into the country anyway as no viable local population exists anymore. This way, the moratorium would be met with much less opposition than if bullfinches were to be included.

Nonetheless, the Minister can offer much needed protection to the other threatened species kept as cage birds.

CONCLUSION

In closing, although we trust that the passing of the draft bill into law will be prioritized in the coming weeks, in the meantime we at the Trinidad & Tobago Field Naturalists' Club feel that the simple measures outlined above would have far-reaching benefits for our wildlife without triggering significant dissention. To this end, we hope that you consider these measures.

1. A moratorium on the sale of wild meat.
2. A moratorium on the hunting of all waterfowl (ducks) and other large marsh birds.
3. A moratorium on the possession of our native seedeaters and seed finches (save and except for the popular bullfinch).

Feel free to contact us to discuss these measures in greater detail as needed.

Yours Respectfully,

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Kris Sookdeo
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