

Peter Bacon (1938-2003) — Consummate Naturalist

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The Caribbean natural-history community lost one of its stalwarts in February 2003 with the passing of Peter R. Bacon at the age of 64. At the time of his death, he was Professor of Zoology at the Trinidad campus of the University of the West Indies (UWI). Originally from England, he spent most of his adult life in the Caribbean. His time in Trinidad was divided into two periods, an early one (1963-1980) in which he did his PhD at UWI and then taught there for many years, and a later period (1993-2003) as Professor. In between, he spent 11 years at the Jamaica campus of UWI.

To characterize Peter as an academic scientist would be correct, but perhaps misleading. To be sure, he had become a widely respected expert on the ecology of wetlands and the coastal zone, adept at both the pure science of the subject and its applications, so that his expertise was much sought after both in the region and abroad. He was also regarded as a powerhouse in the classroom. At the same time, he was by no means narrowly specialized, nor had he left behind the enthusiasms of his early years. In his maturity, Peter remained what he had always been, a keen, infinitely curious—and by now very experienced and knowledgeable—naturalist.

It was always a pleasure to show Peter curious specimens that one had encountered in the wild, and one learned not to be surprised if he could readily identify a particular plant or animal and knew the key points of its natural history, whether it lived on land or in the water. A walk in the field with him was always an education. We have often had the experience of pointing out something curious and finding that he, too, had noticed and thought about it. As a naturalist he was an all-rounder, personally familiar with organisms across a broad taxonomic and habitat range.

Peter was not only a long-time member of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club but a firm believer in its mission. He joined in 1964, soon after his arrival in Trinidad. The following year he was brought onto the Management Committee, where he remained for several years, including three years (the statutory maximum) as President.

Nor did he stand apart from the public aspects of biology and the environment. On the contrary, Peter was very much engaged in promoting the conservation of habitats, species and natural resources. Two examples, from his early Trinidad period will serve to illustrate this fact.

The first of these relates to the protection of the Caroni Swamp. The following account is condensed from the 1990-91 issue of this journal (pp 9-10). Up to 1973, the Trinidad and Tobago Field

Naturalists' Club was known as a very conservative organization. It was forced out of this stance and into political activism by a move to allow the Shell oil company to transport one of its products by barge from a refinery to the bottling plant by way of Canal no. 9 in the swamp. This came to the attention of the conservation community when the canal was widened and deepened through cutting of mangrove trees and dredging.

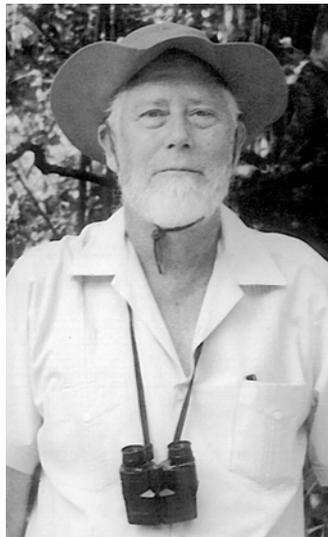
The community was not just concerned but outraged at such an attack on an important habitat. The Club, with Peter in key roles, took the leadership in forming the Blue River Action Committee (BRAC) to oppose this deal between the government and the multinational company. The BRAC's vigorous protest campaign included leafletting, public meetings, a motorcade around the Red House, representations to the prime minister and other public officials, and a boycott of Shell products. In time, the government gave in to public pressure, and the plan to use Caroni as a shipping route was withdrawn. It is fair to say that in this case Peter had a large hand in changing the nature of the Club and the future of the Caroni Swamp.

During this time Peter first showed a special concern for sea turtles, which in time came to transform the conservation status of these charismatic beasts within Trinidad and Tobago. It

was in his capacity as an officer of the Club that Peter became an activist in sea-turtle conservation. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Club's sea-turtle group undertook both data gathering and protective patrols of the beaches. This combination of theory and practice strengthened our hand in presenting recommendations to the government for the protection of sea turtles, recommendations that were accepted, implemented and have produced the much improved situation that we have come to take for granted a generation later. Peter wrote the document that resulted in the Turtle and Turtle Eggs Regulations of 1975. As far as we are aware, all of the Club's recommendations contained in this document were enacted into law.

At the same time, he had the sense to know that a legislative measure without backing in public opinion would have little force, so that he and other activists engaged in a campaign to raise general awareness of the question. The existence today of effective local organizations in the communities around nesting beaches in Trinidad is a tribute to the rightness of this approach.

The Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club is pleased to dedicate this issue of the *Living World* journal to the memory of our past President, Peter R. Bacon.



Peter Bacon



Peter Bacon (at right) with students in Caroni mangrove for est. Photo: Terry Sampson