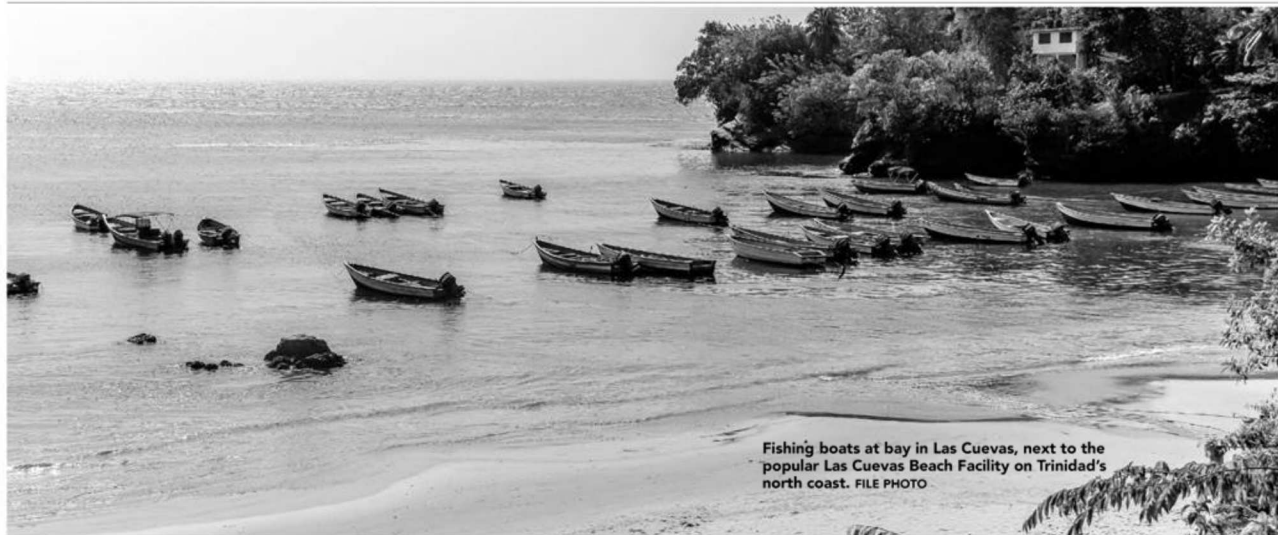


NEWS



Fishing boats at bay in Las Cuevas, next to the popular Las Cuevas Beach Facility on Trinidad's north coast. FILE PHOTO

Environment in focus

Sandals, ibis, and tough fines

The TT Field Naturalists Club presents the following summary based upon events that have been reported in the media during 2018. There are likely to be many more incidents which have gone unreported.

Perhaps the biggest environmental issue in 2018 was the construction of a five-kilometre highway from the Cumuto Main Road to Guaico Trace in Sangre Grande. The highway passes along the southern boundary of the Aripo Savanna Scientific Reserve and is expected to negatively impact the savanna and any wildlife that would have normally moved freely between the savanna and the adjoining forests. Following the grant of a certificate of environmental clearance (CEC) in 2017, work on the highway began in January 2018, but all major activity at the site was halted after a request for injunction was filed by Fishermen and Friends of the Sea (FFOS).

Work eventually resumed in October 2018 following judgement by the Privy Council, which decided that the Environmental Management Authority (EMA) was within its rights to grant the CEC.

Las Cuevas development

This was not the only matter gaining the attention of the FFOS who, following allegations that a Las Cuevas developer was



Scarlet ibis at Wild Fowl Trust.

illegally excavating sand from Las Cuevas Beach and modifying the course of the Las Cuevas River, called on the Government and the EMA to take legal action against the company responsible. FFOS filed a complaint against the developer with the EMA in January 2018.

La Brea drydock plan

The idea of developing a drydock facility to La Brea once again surfaced in 2018 (it was last promoted under the previous administration). Such a facility would bring much needed economic activity to the area, but the footprint needs to be closely

studied due to the proximity of mangroves and marshlands adjacent to the facility.

Tobago projects

While the La Brea drydock might be possible to implement without significant loss of terrestrial habitats, the same could not be said with any certainty about



TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

the proposed Sandals project in Tobago. The map which accompanied the CEC application was dismissed as being outdated and while there was a subsequent 'real' map, representatives have indicated that the footprint had not yet been determined. Serious environmental concerns had been expressed about the development, including the impact on water quality and consequential damage this could have on the already badly deteriorated Buccoo Reef. In January, Sandals announced that it had decided to pull out of the plan. There was more news in store for Tobago's natural environment when the Main Ridge was declared a protected national heritage site under Section 5 of the National Trust Act. The Ministry of Planning and Development (MPD) is now seeking to have Main Ridge declared as the country's first UNESCO World Heritage Site.

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Protecting sensitive species

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Another national icon receiving attention in the year was the "double" chaconier, which was officially designated as the national flower of Trinidad and Tobago as opposed to the "single" chaconier.

Quarries rehabilitation

Further positive developments in the year included a project for the rehabilitation of quarries which was launched at the National Quarries site in Turure in May 2018. The Integrating Water, Land and Ecosystem Management in Caribbean Small Island Developing States project was funded by the Global Environment Facility and was aimed at rehabilitating abandoned or exhausted quarry pits in the north-east area of Trinidad. Led by the IAMovement, volunteers planted a total of 4,000 vetiver plants and 75 trees.

Volunteers also undertook a mangrove replanting exercise at the Brickfield mudflats in June 2018, which was spearheaded by the MPD and the Institute of Marine Affairs.

Plan to ban Styrofoam

More good news included the Government's approval of a ban on polystyrene foam products, such as Styrofoam, to be implemented by the end of 2019. And while the country eagerly awaits the new Beverage Container Bill, at least one private corporation, Massy Stores, took the first tentative steps towards reducing plastic pollution when it initiated a plastic bottle return programme. Massy also made news when it initiated a charge on plastic bags in a bid to reduce the consumption of single use plastics.

Protecting sensitive species

Turning to the conservation of our wildlife, the EMA actively pursued the designation of the scarlet ibis as environmentally sensitive species (ESS) during the year in order to offer greater protection to the species. The law was finally amended in October 2018 so that the national bird is now a recognised ESS.

Despite the media attention, there were instances of ibis poaching.

In early October, two Chinese and one national were arrested during a roadblock exercise in El Socorro area after being held



The double chaconier replaces the single chaconier as the national flower.



Iguanas may be spared the hunter's gun for a longer period as the agriculture minister considers restrictions on hunting to protect its nesting season.

with the carcass of a young scarlet ibis.

The ESS designation, unfortunately, had not yet been gazetted at that time so that the individuals had to be charged under the Conservation of Wildlife Act. Thereafter, in November, two people were held with five scarlet ibis carcasses (and eight iguanas) at the Caroni Bird Sanctuary.

The issue of poaching of the scarlet ibis in Trinidad was even featured by the National Geographic during the year.

In the story, a former poacher indicated that, "Big leaguers slaughter the birds en masse and sell them in sets of three for about \$15... Some poachers are everyday fishermen and crabbers, he continued, but others are influential people." And, "...I know customs officials coming in here and doing it."

In July, an 18-year-old man of Ste Madeleine appeared in court charged with possession of 54

protected animals and clipping the wings of 51 birds. During a search at house, game wardens found white-eyed parakeets, blue and gold macaws, black-headed parrots, a capybara, red-footed tortoises and other protected species.

In September a 41-year-old man of Guayaguayare was arrested after he went hunting with an unlicensed firearm.

Officers on patrol along Guayaguayare Road stopped the suspect and allegedly found a 16-gauge double barrel shotgun with 25 rounds of 16-gauge ammunition, as well as the carcasses of a tattoo and a lappe in his possession.

In November, a joint exercise by members of the EMA police unit and the wildlife section of the Forestry Division responded to a report of a Trinidad Piping Guan (pawi) being held in a cage at a residence in Cumana Village, Toco.



The pawi is an environmental sensitive species.

The pawi is a designated ESS. The suspect was charged and is liable on conviction on indictment, to a fine of up to \$100,000 and imprisonment for two years.

Stiffer penalties

These and other breaches of the Conservation of Wildlife Act over the years no doubt contributed to the decision by Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries Clarence Rambarat to increase the fines for such breaches, as part of the Finance Act 2018. Effective January 1, the fines for breaches were increased significantly, including the fine for hunting protected animals without a special game license which increased from \$1,000 to \$10,000.

Conservationists and bona fide hunters alike have repeatedly called for such an increase over the years.

Further action on wildlife management has been alluded to. According to a ministry release, the minister was "committed to monitoring activities during the hunting and closed seasons to determine what further actions are required to strike the balance between hunting in the open season, as well as the need for the

sustainable management of wildlife resources and public safety issues."

Earlier in 2018, the minister indicated he was considering placing restrictions on hunting in urban areas – a move specifically targeting iguana hunters. Furthermore, he was also considering whether the hunting season on iguanas should end on December 31 and not February 28, out of concern that the season extended into the iguana's nesting period.

These are all positive developments for our natural environment and are to be commended. However, we as a nation must continue to remain aware of our collective impact on our country's limited natural resources; from the trees to the streams. We must hold ourselves accountable for keeping Trinidad and Tobago the ecological wonder it is for generations to come.

*** For more information on our natural environment contact the TT Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org or visit the website at www.ttfnc.org and our Facebook or YouTube pages.**