

features

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The venusta metalmark butterfly has only been recorded in TT from Pointe Gourde.

The fate of Pointe Gourde

KRIS SOOKDEO

POINTE GOURDE is a picturesque limestone headland projecting off the Chaguaramas

peninsula. It's that piece of bush behind Anchorage if you are unsure. Beautiful bush.

A rough unsurfaced trail snakes its way through the area, leading to a radar outpost at the westerly end. Looking at it now, you might not be able to tell, but Pointe Gourde actually used to be the site of a limestone quarry.

Now the forest is slowly reclaiming what it can.

It's a portion of our natural environment enjoyed by many citizens — bikers, rock-climbers, bird-watchers, butterfly collectors, fishermen, fitness enthusiasts and many others.

It is also home to some special wildlife.

Pointe Gourde contains one of the only examples of dry xerophytic vegetation on mainland Trinidad (these dry forests are typical of the Bocas islands).

It is the only location on Trinidad that the beautiful venusta metalmark butterfly (*Calydna venusta morio*) has been found and is also a reliable place to see the white-tailed emerald (*Elvira chionura*), a hummingbird typically associated with the Bocas islands and dry forests.

Another special bird in this

area is the streaked saltator (*Salinator striatipectus*) which, while relatively common on the Bocas islands, are only consistently reported from Pointe Gourde on Trinidad.

Tufted capuchins (*Sapajus apella*) roam the headland. These monkeys are not native to Trinidad but became firmly established in Chaguaramas (and are spreading westward).

Pointe Gourde is a good place to see them as they frolic in the trees along the trail.

Red howlers used to be found here as well but they haven't been reported by TTFNC members from the headland in a while. There's even a few agouti (*Dasyprocta leporina*) about, scouring the forest floor for fruit and seed during the day. At night, bats roosting in the sea caves along the rocky shore emerge to hunt.

The Chaguaramas Development Authority's master plan had, and perhaps still has, the potential to change all of this.

"Perhaps" because it is unclear whether the new board of the CDA intends to proceed with this version of the master plan.

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Pointe Gourde as it stands today.

FEATURES

Why destroy the natural environment?

POINTE GOURDE from Page 1B

Why the concern? According to the existing plan, much of the periphery of Pointe Gourde will be 'developed' for commercial, residential and recreational uses. A luxury resort, residential condos, facilities for water sport and fishing, and a waterfront are all part of the plan. Roads will be built, trees will be cleared and the various accompanying infrastructure installed.

What then happens to the wildlife of Pointe Gourde? The centre of the headland will be set aside as a protected space, notwithstanding a road that runs right through the centre of it according to the available maps. Of course, given that this protected space will be surrounded by development, its utility as a reserve is diminished regardless of buffers as, invariably, human disturbance will take its toll.

The situation on Pointe Gourde reflects the wider development plans for the peninsula. The mandate of the CDA is the monetising of assets. And while this in itself is not a bad thing, the prime concern is that monetary gain in this instance entails unnecessarily degrading the natural environment.

Plans for the rest of the Chaguaramas peninsula included the clearing of some of the forest



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at the golf course so that the course can be widened and a few upscale residential properties constructed. Clearly worth chopping down trees for.

Chaguaramas is a gem in that here we have a relatively well-forested natural environment a mere stone's throw from the capital and several population hubs. It provides a weekend escape for many people seeking a break from the concrete jungle and looking forward to the cool green trees and waters of the peninsula.

Do we really need a luxury resort so badly that we have to destroy forest cover on Pointe Gourde? Do we really need more luxury residential properties so badly that we have to destroy forest cover around the golf course?

If we do need them, can't we use land space on the peninsu-



Pointe Gourde if the current master plan is implemented.

la that is already degraded to house these ventures rather than destroy 'new' forest? Are resorts and residences the best use of what is, for many urban citizens, the most easily accessed forests on the island? Other areas of Chaguaramas have already been "developed" as seaside attractions. Is it necessary to destroy the natural environment on Pointe Gourde too?

Natural spaces are continually under attack in Trinidad and Tobago. Our growing population gnaws away at whatever greenery stands in its path.

Land use planning is perhaps the greatest threat to our natural environment and hopefully its location under the Ministry of Planning and Development (MPD) can help empower environmental management. The CDA also falls under that ministry.

The ministry has indicated that it will have to decide if the current master plan fits into the vision of the present administration. Even then, the plan has to get approval from the Town and Country Planning Division and go through the requisite approv-

als, consultations etc. Perhaps, there is still a chance to save Pointe Gourde.

For more info on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@tfncc.org or visit our website at www.tfncc.org and our Facebook or YouTube pages. The club's next monthly meeting will be held today at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain. Lecture: "Ecology of the Crab-eating Raccoon in Caroni Swamp" by Laura Baboolal.

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