

Wildlife and the law

By KRIS SOOKDEO

*Hunting for a wildlife solution
Part III*

LAST YEAR, the Government produced a very important document by way of the draft Forestry, Protected Areas and Wildlife Conservation Bill, the product of extensive work on several policy statements (the National Wildlife Policy, the National Environment Policy, the National Wetland Policy, the National Forest Policy and the National Protected Areas Policy).

The intention of all this hard work is to replace several outdated acts, including the Conservation of Wildlife Act (1958) and the Forestry Act (1915). The final bill has been drafted by Ministry of Environment lawyers but the process of turning it into law is still far from complete.

According to the Council of Presidents of the Environment (COPE), 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



WATERFOWL and other marshbirds should be fully protected by law.

the legislation to be drafted. The legislation then has to run the gamut of the Legal Review Committee, Cabinet and finally the Parliament.

This is quite a lot that must be done, especially when you consider the potential delays and objections that might be raised.

With national elections quickly approaching, concerns have been raised by stakeholders about the fate of the drafted bill. If there are delays there is the danger of it

being placed on the back-burner to the point that it is shelved permanently, or a decision might be taken to rewrite significant sections of it that run contrary to environmental preservation.

This should not be allowed to happen. The new law (at least according to the draft bill) would result in several substantial changes to our wildlife conservation laws.

For one, the draft bill indicates a rise in the fine for contravening

the law (for example, by hunting without a permit) to TTS 100,000 (alternatively, a typo in the draft bill may mean the proposed fine is TTS 200,000). This is a substantial increase from the outdated fines in the existing Conservation of Wildlife Act (date) and would help serve as a deterrent to poaching.

Timber harvesting on private land would be regulated, down to the species level and there will be a substantial increase in the num-

ber of national parks, conservation reserves and species management reserves (sanctuaries). There are many more listings worthy of mention but far too much for this article to discuss.

Perhaps the most welcome change is that protected species of fauna are now specified and ranked in terms of threat level to their populations. The ocelot, river otter, manatee and all monkeys are among the (critically) endangered mammals listed. Perhaps this will see the end of the absurd practice of caging ocelots and monkeys by several of the entertainment-oriented "ranches" and "eco-parks" throughout the country. With respect to birds, the bullfinch, twa-twa, picoplat, chat and silverbeak will be listed as critically endangered so that catching and caging these species will require a permit.

We have suggested that the ruddy-breasted seedeater and lined seedeaters should be included as critically endangered species (note that while permits could still be obtained for prohibited species, we hope that these would only be granted sparingly). The draft bill also paves the way for what is hoped will be a well-managed wildlife farming system in the country.

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FEATURES

Give all ducks full protection

● WILDLIFE from Page 4B

This, as we have indicated in a previous article, could be an important tool in managing our wildlife resources.

Positive changes aside, there were several suggestions which we put forward to the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources that we hope have been addressed in the final bill (see the TTFNC website for the complete list).

For example, the placement of all amphibians (except the golden tree frog) in

the Fifth Schedule, where they are not protected, is incongruous. Our amphibians should be provided with some level of protection. 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 Fourth (protected) schedule, we strongly believe that all ducks should be removed from the Fifth Schedule and be granted full protection.

Nonetheless, while waiting for the new wildlife legislation to be completed and enacted, there is no reason why the minister could not take steps to implement some much-needed changes in the interim. As the draft bill indicated concern over certain species, then this amounts to the Government recognising 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 sustain-

able wildlife management is undeniable.

For one, we strongly suggest that a moratorium on the sale of wild caught meat be implemented and this will serve as a useful measure for curbing commercial poaching until the new legislation can be brought on stream. The draft bill indicates that the sale of "wild" meat, unless farmed raised, will not be permitted under the new legislation. Why wait?

The minister would also be well advised to implement a moratorium on hunting of all waterfowl (ducks) and other large marsh birds such as herons and the limpkin given the aforementioned loss of wetlands.

Taking the interim bans further, 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.

For practical purposes, it may not be feasible to ban possession of bullfinches (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. But the minister can offer much needed protection to the other threatened species kept as cage birds.

The draft Forestry, Protected Areas and Wildlife Conservation Bill needs to be advanced and translated into law. It is not perfect, but brings much needed change to our wildlife and forestry laws. Regardless of the heated political environment and the outcome of the general elections, we hope that all parties can see the immense importance of this legislation. We sincerely hope that it can become a reality this year and, until then, we need to consider some key interim measures that can be implemented.

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

The club's next monthly meeting and lecture will be today at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain and the topic is "Guppy mate-choice behaviour" by Heather Auld, Carleton University, Canada.



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Proposers are encouraged to attend a **Pre-Proposal meeting on 24th June, 2015 at 10:00a.m.** in order to become familiar with the conditions which may affect the submission. The meeting will take place at:

The Boardroom
Airports Authority Administration Centre
Piarco International Airport
South Terminal
Golden Grove Road
Piarco

The deadline for submission of proposals is **26th October, 2015 @ 2:00p.m. AST.** Late submissions will not be considered.

Questions or requests for further information should be directed to:

The Secretary Tenders Committee
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