

## **Field Naturalists: Ban commercial hunting**

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Shereen Ali

To mark World Environment Day this Sunday, June 5, we continue to look at some biodiversity and hunting related issues, in the wake of a recent public consultation on hunting on May 20 at the Caroni Swamp Visitor Centre organised by the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

On May 17 we reported views of Marc De Verteuil, environmental activist, eco-tourism operator and founder of Papa Bois Conservation. Today we hear from the T&T Field Naturalists Club, which includes several biologists, scientists and local wildlife experts.

### **Q: What is the main problem facing animal biodiversity in T&T?**

Loss of habitat is the biggest threat. We have a relatively small land mass with which to support our industrial, residential, commercial and agricultural activities. Mercifully, our population has not expanded at the pace that some other countries have seen. But it still places a lot of pressure on our flora and fauna communities.

This problem is compounded by the fact that we do not have a proper land use management system in place with problems from the start at the level of policy and law, right down to the critical aspect of enforcement.

Squatting, illegal quarrying, bush fires and other unplanned activities slowly eat away at our wild spaces. The problem extends to the marine environment as well. Here, pollution, overfishing and loss of mangroves and seagrass beds are the key threats.

Our flora need attention as well. Native orchids and commercially valuable trees, for instance, don't get the same attention that game mammals do but may be even more vulnerable.

### **Q: Has T&T had much success in protecting our biodiversity? Why or why not?**

We have had some success. We have areas set aside as sanctuaries and reserves, and we have species which we have flagged as needing protection. However we have fallen short considerably with respect to enforcement of our laws pertaining to the environment.

### **Q: How can we better enforce laws and protect wildlife, given the permanent staff shortages**

**and underfunding of wildlife agencies here under all governments? Any creative ideas?**

The problem of limited staff is compounded by other issues such as the need to work on weekends, strenuous and sometimes dangerous working conditions.

There is also the honorary game warden system which is supposed to provide additional support but this is far from being an adequate solution.

Outside of law and enforcement, the most effective measure for the long term is education. If we can engrain in our population why we should follow our environmental laws then the enforcement side of the equation becomes a lot easier.

**Q: The current hunting system may be unsustainable. It is based on no known data for existing animal populations or breeding habits. It lasts five months of the year (October 1-end February), arguably too long a time. Anyone can buy up to three hunting permits at the very low cost of TT\$20—yet a single iguana may sell for \$300. And so far, no hunting permit imposes any limits on numbers of animal lives one can kill. There is no accountability in our current hunting system, as no one checks animals trapped or killed; hunter returns are totally unverified.**

**It seems like a recipe for wholesale slaughter. What do you think? What can we do to make this system more sensible? If we cannot reform it, or have no hope of policing it, should we ban hunting? What about higher fines for poaching, and a significantly higher cost for hunting licences?**

Conversely, this lack of data also makes it difficult to prove that hunting is unsustainable. The anecdotal evidence doesn't necessarily support that perspective either.

We have to be careful about differentiating between recreational and commercial hunting.

The TTFNC's policy on hunting does not rule out well managed recreational hunting. As mentioned before, the biggest threat to our biodiversity is inappropriate land use, and at the end of the day we, the naturalists, have much more in common with the recreational hunter than we do with industry and big business (indeed the naturalist and hunter can often be the same person). The caveat here is that there is always a need to ensure that recreational hunters adhere to our laws so we need to first ensure all hunters fully understand the wildlife laws.

Commercial hunting, on the other hand, needs to be severely curtailed and, in our view, banned. The suggestions for higher fines and revised laws have been in play for a very long time and are nothing new unfortunately. Above all, it is meaningless without enforcement.

The draft Forest, Protected Areas and Wildlife Conservation Bill of 2014 clearly spelt out the key

issues to be dealt with—but was sidelined, and now the process seems to have been started all over with a new committee discussing the same things once more.

As a final point, all too often discussion on hunting and wildlife management revolves around the game mammals. We need to pay attention to all our wildlife.

Several of our bird species, for instance, need our intervention. Wetland species in particular are vulnerable as our wetland habitats have been destroyed at an alarming rate. This is not the same situation as pertains to our game mammals which still have large areas of habitat intact.

Similarly, our caged birds have been decimated by overhunting. And it is not so much an issue of laws. Many of our birds are already protected, but based on the reports that surface from time to time, hunters that target birds don't necessarily bother to make that distinction between what species can be hunted and what cannot.

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This is a photo posted online in 2012 of an iguana killed by a local hunter with an air rifle.

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