

Responsible Conduct When Visiting Caves in T&T

16 November 2021

Caves can be an interesting place to visit, both in terms of the geological formations themselves as well as the caves' inhabitants.

However, before anyone decides to explore the island's cave systems, the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club would like to put forward some important points for consideration.

Oilbirds are a popular cave "attraction". They are very unique with the distinction of being the only nocturnal, fruit-eating bird in the entire world. Their cave dwelling nature and eerie shrieks are also notable features of this species and Trinidad is lucky to have a few suitable cave systems which are home to oilbird colonies.

As highlighted on a recent episode of "Wild Trinidad and Tobago" on CNC3 there is an active oilbird colony at the Cumaca Cave.

However, oilbird populations are very vulnerable as they are entirely dependent on caves where the adult birds raise their young on exposed rock ledges and roost during the day.

Visitor disturbance poses a significant threat to oilbird colonies as demonstrated at the well studied oilbird colony at the Asa Wright Nature Centre where the birds temporarily abandoned the site as a result of disturbance.

Stress on the oilbirds at all colonies should therefore be minimized by controlling the number of visitors, the frequency of visits and the restricted use of dim lights. If every group that visits an oilbird colony (like the one at Cumaca) decides to use bright lights and flash photography then visitor disturbance can snowball into a real problem.

Incidentally, Cumaca Cave is located on a privately owned property. As indicated in the details on the WILD Trinidad & Tobago "CUMACA CAVES" clip on YouTube, written permission to enter the property must be sought from the owner at 674-5483 or at lisa.modealive@gmail.com.

Cumaca Cave is not the only popular cave system in Trinidad and Tobago and similar concerns can also be extended to other caves on the island.

The Tamana Cave system is home to long established roosts of several species of bats. For this reason, it has become a popular attraction for scores of visitors.

Images regularly surface which show members of hiking groups entering the cave and using unnecessarily bright lights that will invariably disturb the roosting bats. In addition to hikers, it has been reported that persons are entering the cave to collect guano. Continued disturbance could eventually result in bats abandoning the cave.

The Tamana Cave is the largest known single population of bats recorded on the island and if the bats were to abandon the cave it would be a devastating loss to the environment, science and

ecotourism.

Furthermore, there is also the health and safety risk to humans entering the cave without proper protective equipment. There is evidence supporting the known risk of infection of pulmonary histoplasmosis from bat caves in Trinidad. Unfortunately, hiking groups routinely ignore this risk and allow hikers to enter the cave without any precautions!

While awareness and appreciation of our cave ecosystems is an important aspect of conservation, the public is reminded to always put the wellbeing of the cave ecosystem first.

Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

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