

Address by Ian Lambie on the occasion of the 108th Anniversary of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

Saturday July 10th 1999

Honorable Minister, Other Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I consider myself to be very privileged in being asked to deliver a history of our Club - the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club.

I wish to commence by congratulating the Club and its membership on attaining its 108th anniversary and to pay tribute to two special persons who are here with us today, and whom I met when I joined the Club in 1958 (41 years ago). I refer to Theodore Frankie Farrell and Victor Clement Quesnel, two stalwarts of this wonderful organisation.

Mention must be made of some of those former members who have made significant contributions to the Club since I became a member but who unfortunately cannot celebrate with us today. These include Rev. Fr. L.J. Graf, A.T. Carr, C.L. Williams, Capt. A.L. Mendez and G.E.L. LaForest.

After its inaugural meeting on July 10th 1891, the Club met regularly until 1907 and after a period of inactivity it was resuscitated in 1924. Sometime after 1947 it again lapsed into a period of dormancy and in January 1954, it again became active, with the return of Victor Quesnel to Trinidad and his being elected to the post of Honorary Secretary. Happy to say that since that time 45 years ago and up to the present time, the Club is "alive" with its Monthly Lecture/meetings and Monthly Field Excursions being organised. It has also succeeded in publishing its Natural History Journal on a regular and timely basis.

Membership in the Club has fluctuated from time to time with the 1970s being the period of unprecedented growth, with membership increasing from 140 members in 1970 to 409 by 1978. Many of these new members were junior members, some of whom I am pleased to say, have become professionals in the Natural Sciences and in Natural Resource Management and in Environmental Management.

In March 1966 our first Annual Programme of Activities was prepared and in June 1973 "The Field Naturalist" the quarterly bulletin of our Club made its appearance.

In November 1974 the name of our Club was changed with the inclusion of Tobago.

Over the years the Club has mounted several projects but the two which generated the most interest among the membership were the Sea Turtle Project and the Projects of the Botany Group in the Aripo Savannas.

The Club first visited the Matura Beach to investigate the reports of the slaughter of Sea Turtles in 1963. In 1965 we commenced patrols at Matura, Las Cuevas and other beaches to observe the nesting activities of Sea Turtles, most of which were leatherback turtles.

In 1970, the Club began a Turtle Tagging Project with Peter Bacon being the coordinator, and by 1980 when active tagging ceased, 330 turtles had been tagged. Unfortunately, these tagging records have never been published.

However, in 1973, the Club submitted a report, prepared by Peter Bacon, entitled "The status of Sea Turtle Resources in Trinidad and Tobago" to the then Minister of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries. This document together with "follow-up" meetings with the Minister and with the regular publication in the news media of articles and photographs depicting the slaughter of turtles on the Matura Beach and letters to the

Editor calling for amendments to the existing laws, in order to better protect the nesting turtles on our beaches, resulted in the issue of the Turtle and Turtle Eggs Regulations of 1975 (Act #23 of 1975 as Government Notice No. 119 of Sept 8 1975) which included all the recommendations made by our Club. A memorable victory had been achieved by the Club.

Mention must also be made here of the first "major battle" waged by our Club against an international conglomerate - the Shell Oil Company. Up to 1973, the Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club was considered to be a very conservative organization, but in that year our Club emerged in the vanguard of a most vigorous protest movement. The Blue River Action Committee was protesting the cutting of the mangroves, the dredging of the no. 9 Drainage Canal in the Caroni Swamp and the use of the No. 9 Canal and the Blue River for the transportation of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) from the refineries at Point Fortin and at Pointe-a-Pierre to a bottling plant off the Princess Margaret Highway, by the barge "Shell Pelican". Following a "dirty" fight and after the Government of Trinidad and Tobago had acquired the assets Shell Trinidad Limited, the owners agreed to cease operating the barge through the Swamp. However, the Blue River Action Committee acceded to the Government's request for time to construct new facilities at Sea Lots to receive the LPG. On December 22 1977, some 4 ½ years later, the Club's representatives were present to witness the commissioning of the LPG facilities at Sea Lots. The barge "Pelican" ceased operating through the Caroni Swamp the next day.

Another major victory was achieved by our Club.

After the Royal Victoria Institute Museum had been destroyed by fire on March 31 1920, the member of our Club actively assisted in the rebuilding and replacement of the natural history exhibits.

During the last 50 years our Club has produced a number of well-known "offspring". On April 24 1947, at a meeting called by the Club, it was decided to establish the Zoological Society of Trinidad and Tobago (the Emperor Valley Zoo) and in 1989 the Club "gave birth" to the Caribbean Forest Conservation Association. Our Club was also a founding member of COPE, the Council of Presidents of the Environment.

Members of our Club has served on several Committees including the Wildlife Conservation Committee, the Management Committee and Council of the Institute of Marine Affairs and on the Appeals Panel dealing with appeals against the decisions of the Town and Country Division relative to land use.

At the National Awards Ceremony held on Independence Day August 31 1980, our Club was the recipient of the Medal of Merit (Gold) in recognition of its Public Service to the Community.

While I am pleased to see the increasing awareness which the politicians and policy makers are showing in matters relative to our natural environment by the enactment of appropriate legislation, and

While I am pleased to see the establishment of an Environmental Management Authority (although it is still toothless),

- I am frustrated by the absence of a National Trust in Trinidad and Tobago
- I am frustrated by the continuing decimation of our wildlife including the sale of wild birds
- by the inadequate number of, and ill-equipped wildlife patrols

- by the apparent uncontrolled felling our forests by loggers and the resulting destruction of our watershed areas, wildlife habitat and forest trails
- by the apparent uncontrolled quarrying for sand and aggregate and the resulting pollution of our waterways
- by the apparent destruction of our fisheries resources by trawlers and the quantity of wasted by-catch
- by the mesh size of the seines used by some fishermen
- by the absence of a minimum size limits and a close season for crabs, oysters, crayfish, lobsters, conch, etc.

Nevertheless I am heartened by the number of young people involved in the environmental movement, not only in our Club and similar organizations but also in the secondary schools and university.

I continue to be the ultimate optimist where the natural environment is concerned.

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