

## State of the Environment: Guest Editorial

Once more our country is experiencing boom conditions driven largely by the exploitation of offshore natural gas resources and the increases in the market prices of gas and oil. How many members of the Club will recall the last energy boom and its effects, the drift away from the land to the cities and towns, and the wide range of funds set aside? Can any recall the special conservation fund, a sort of precursor to the current multi-million dollar Green Fund? And what became of it? It disappeared with the inevitable recession that followed the boom. Today we are again already experiencing in many ways comparable negative effects that were part of the last boom. The diversion of much of revenues on social relief programmes such as Unemployment Relief Programme (URP) and Community Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP) has again made it difficult to obtain labour in agriculture or forestry, while regularization of squatting has made the phenomenon of squatting a permanent component of our culture. Increased consumption, both private and corporate, has also exacerbated the pollution problem.

At the same time we are, at least, in a better position to cope with the inevitable environmental degradation. We do in fact have a Ministry of the Environment although this is only one half of a larger one that includes Public Utilities. We also have a ten-year old Environmental Management Authority that in theory has overall charge of management of the environment, including, of course, the natural environment. The Authority does have a wide mandate but must manage according to legally laid down rules and procedures approved by Parliament. Few of these are actually on the books and it must rely on older existing legislation, usually with little impact. It does have the Certificate of Environmental Clearance procedures that have now come into effect while it has designated at least one Sensitive Area at Matura, and is proposing to designate others as well as Sensitive Species. But it is yet to have its draft vehicle emissions, air quality, effluents, and toxic and hazardous substances standards become law.

But there is a greater concern as the country enters the boom. This is the rapid industrialization based on the non-renewable resource of natural gas, driven by another Ministry, the Energy Ministry and the Prime Minister's Office, and a process that makes considerable demands on the resource of space, especially space that at present is arable land or mature secondary forest. Much of this industrialization will take place along the coast of the Gulf of Paria stretching from La Brea to as far as Icacos. And while full details are not yet available, the industrial estates at Union Estate of about 800 acres and at Cap de Ville Estate of 2000 acres alone represent a significant proportion of the South-western Peninsula, perhaps as much as ten percent. And we are informed that steps

are being taken to find similar acreages farther along and possibly through Cedros and Icacos. These estates require access to the sea via deepwater harbours. All this is actually happening without reference to Parliament or the citizenry.

The country has signed the United Nations Convention of Biological Diversity that does require it to conserve its major ecosystems. No one can dispute that the South-western Peninsula is a unique part of Trinidad. While its forests may not be of the same grandeur as those at Matura, or the Heights of Aripo, or the Trinity Hills, it is a part of the island that displays a diverse range of ecosystems from the cliffs and beaches of Chatham, Icacos and Columbus Bay, to the sedge swamps of the Fullerton Lagoon, the mangrove forests of Los Blanquizales Lagoon, and the many bouffes, some of which rise out of the sea at Chatham from time to time. There are also the islands of Los Gallos and Soldado Rock, a noted sea-bird-nesting site. There are a few scattered human settlements and small agricultural holdings. But there are also forests, including a forest reserve on the peninsula.

Perhaps, however, its biota makes it unique. With its proximity to the Macareo and Pedernales Rivers, and its traffic in human beings going back several millennia, many South American species are found there and nowhere else in Trinidad. This includes both plant and animal species. The Cedros Bee orchid, the Cedros balisier, the silver hatchet fish, the Cedros guabine, three frogs and at least one snake are examples. The peninsula is obviously an area of some dynamism in terms of movement of species from the Orinoco Delta to Trinidad, and this makes it worthy of declaration as a Sensitive Area under the Environmental Management Act, and under the UN Convention of Biological Diversity.

There will be a range of views on the subject of economic development. All must agree that there must really be some balance between development and environmental preservation, but one commonly held fear by biologists, Club members and conservationists generally, is that as we follow the current path, it is the environment that will suffer. There are, however, possible options that members of the Club, and indeed the public might pursue. The most important is public education, pressure on the political processes to plan carefully, to observe planning law and enact more effective laws and, above all, to honour the country's international treaty commitments.

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