

The years 1954-1959

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I returned to Trinidad from University in the summer of 1949 and met Ludolf Wehekind who was then president of The Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club. In the course of conversation I learnt from him that the club had not been meeting because no one was willing to be secretary. It was not clear to me then (or now) how long that condition had prevailed but we do know that the club was meeting in 1947 and had in fact spun off the Zoological Society of Trinidad and Tobago (see Andrew Carr's article above). I was due to return to the University of Toronto for further study but told Ludolf that if he still needed one, he would have a secretary when I came back "for good", which I eventually did in July 1953. Almost immediately I contacted him and together we made plans to revive the club. So it came about that at a meeting on 28 Jan. 1954 at St. Mary's College Ludolf Wehekind was re-elected President and I was elected Hon. Secretary. From that day to this the club has functioned without a break. At this meeting a decision was taken to hold the monthly meetings on the second Thursday of each month and at the meeting of 11 March 1954 a similar decision was taken to have the monthly field trip on the last Sunday of each month. Thus the pattern of life for the next thirty seven years was laid down in early 1954.

In my days as secretary I stuck to the procedures that I had inherited. At that time we did not draw up a programme of activities for the whole year. Instead, each meeting was arranged as an individual event and each field trip was decided upon at the meeting by majority vote. I, as secretary, saw to the printing and mailing of invitation cards as each meeting fell due. But, though the procedures remained the same, older members must have sensed a different spirit even at the earliest meetings of 1954. World War II had disrupted the peaceful life of the country and repercussions on the environment were beginning to be felt. At the very first meeting of 1954 two conservation issues were raised, the keeping of caged song birds and the felling of trees in Port of Spain. These issues were debated at the succeeding meeting in February and the main item of business at the meeting in March was a discussion on pollution of rivers by industrial wastes. Protection of song birds was discussed again at the meeting in September 1954 and a committee comprising Ludolf Wehekind, Raymond Johnson and myself was appointed to study the matter and report to the club. At that time there was an active Cage Bird Association that was campaigning for a change in the law banning the caging of birds and their agitation received support from certain members of government. In fact, because of this support, popular opinion soon came to believe that the Law had been changed and there was a great increase in the number of people taking up the hobby with every indication

of a thriving business developing. The committee's report of Oct. 1955 noted all of this together with their observation that some bird populations were declining. The majority recommendation was that the law should remain unchanged. One member recommended some relaxation with adequate safeguards. The report stimulated much debate and even controversy within the club and eventually the Management Committee decided not to release it to the public.

Later in that year (1954) another conservation issue exploded when there was an outbreak of yellow fever and public health officials proposed that the monkey population be exterminated as a measure to eradicate the disease. There was a lively discussion at the meeting in November when some alternative strategies were suggested, such as the inoculation of all persons applying for permits to hunt or to remove or burn forest trees. In the end, at least in part because of our constructive counter proposals, inoculation was provided for everyone and the monkeys were spared.

Were these discussions the beginning of the conservation movement in Trinidad and Tobago? I think so – although I am willing to concede that there may have been some isolated forays in that direction before 1954.

The conservation theme was brought to public notice when with the Zoological Society of Trinidad and Tobago, the club sponsored three screen tours of the National Audubon Society of the USA. These were films on conservation themes narrated by the photographers. If memory serves the first of these was Bonaventure Island narrated by Bob Hermes and his wonderful slow motion sequences of gannets in flight live on in my memory even now.

The club published a journal in the years 1891 – 1896 and the question of publishing a new series of the journal was raised and discussed in the Management Committee in 1955. An editorial committee was appointed in October 1955 and the first issue appeared towards the end of 1956. At first it was intended that the journal should be published annually if possible but at longer intervals if circumstances prevented this. Other issues appeared in 1957 and 1961 and then the first of a biennial series appeared in 1965. And so it continues to the present time.

In 1955 also the Management Committee decided that the club should honour the founding members by erecting a plaque at the Royal Victoria Institute. Capt. A. L. Mendes was put in charge of the project which was speedily concluded. The

plaque was unveiled by Mr. Moreland Hopkins (Director of Education) on 14 March 1956.

Over the period under review rules were changed several times but the only change that deserves notice here is the change concerning the presidency. At the Annual General Meeting of 12 Feb. 1959 the existing rule was changed to prevent the same person from holding the presidency for more than three consecutive years. This rule remains in force today.

The decade of the fifties saw the beginning of great changes in the political structure of the country. The general election of 1956, won by the Peoples National Movement, issued in the modern era of party politics and parliamentary democracy that led to independence in 1962. The new government, fired with enthusiasm, instituted several new committees on some of which the club was invited to provide representatives. Capt. Mendes represented the club on the Standing Conference of Cultural Organizations of Trinidad and Tobago and attended several meetings as his reports to the management committee show. I represented the club on a committee to advise the Minister of Education. In my recollection, the first meeting of this committee was also its last. The Wildlife Conservation Committee fared better. I represented the club in the late fifties both before and after the promulgation of the 1958 Conservation of Wild Life Ordinance. The club has been represented on this committee continuously since then.

The club has always had close ties with the RVI Museum. Those ties were strengthened when Mr. Arthur Greenhall was appointed curator in 1954. Shortly afterwards Mr. Ludolf Wehekind was appointed assistant curator providing thereby direct representation of the club in the museum's management. As part of our involvement some members of the club attempted to mount an ecological exhibit but the attempt failed through insufficient knowledge of museum techniques.

The lecturers at our meetings were usually drawn from the club itself or from other local societies or institutions but from time to time we were privileged to hear scientists of international repute. For example, Dr. James Oliver of the New York Zoological Society addressed the meeting of 9 May 1957 and Prof. E. C. Amoroso-Centeno F.R.S., revisiting his homeland in April 1958, delivered a brilliant lecture on the development of viviparity in vertebrates. In June 1958 Prof. Amoroso's film on the reproductive behaviour of the South American frog *Gastrotheca marsupiatum* was shown to the club.

When I became secretary I had intended to better Andrew Carr's record of eighteen years in the post. Events dictated otherwise. Family problems caused me to relinquish the post at the end of 1959 and Mr. Ian Lambie was elected Hon. Secretary in 1960. It fell to him to extinguish Andrew's record as he guided the club's activities for the next twenty years. So I turn you over to Ian now for a history of those years.