

The years 1981 – 1990

By VICTOR C. QUESNEL
P.O.Box 47, Port of Spain.

The 1980s are too close for us to see them in perspective. I can treat them only as the culmination of the preceding years whereas a future historian may see them as the beginning of a new phase. So all I will do is list the highlights and document the events underlying two major trends.

The highlights

In 1982, after a fairly lengthy exchange of letters, the club entered into a twinning arrangement with the Ottawa Field Naturalists Club. In essence this calls for a continuous exchange of publications and information about activities and the promise to facilitate the members of one club on visits to the country of the other.

In 1985 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and H.R.H. Prince Philip visited Trinidad and Tobago and the Club presented Prince Philip with an album of photographs of some of the plants and animals of the country, all of which were taken by members of the club. A duplicate collection was kept by the Club and exhibited on several occasions.

As we had done with the Zoological Society of Trinidad and Tobago in 1947, the club spun off another society in 1989 – the Caribbean Forest Conservation Association. The decision to form the new society was taken at a symposium entitled *Forests in our Lives*. This symposium was organized by the club's Conservation in Action committee after many meetings and discussions on conservation issues and the work of Mrs. Sylvia Kacal and Dr. Charles de Gannes deserves recognition in this regard.

The trends

As I see it, the two major trends are an increasing involvement of the club in conservation issues and an increasing recognition of the club's role in such matters by Government and other organizations. These trends are intertwined and I will make no attempt to disentangle them.

In 1980 Frankie Farrell and Hans Boos represented the club at a conference in St. Lucia on the biology and preservation of parrots; it was organized by the International Council of Bird Preservation. Mrs. Anne Hilton and Frankie Farrell represented the club at the Eleventh Commonwealth Forestry Conference. Prof.

Julian Kenny and Victor Quesnel gave evidence before the Commission of Inquiry on the Draft National Physical Development Plan.

In 1981 our president, Ian Lambie, was appointed to the Board of Management of the Institute of Marine Affairs and to the Appeal Board of the Minister of Finance that deals with land development.

In 1982 Mr. Hans Boos replaced Ian Lambie on the Board of Management of the Institute of Marine Affairs and Mr. Neville Acham was appointed to its Council. In this year and again in 1986 so many environmental issues needed attention that we set aside a whole Sunday for a thorough discussion of the club's response to the challenge they presented. The main decision: Our role is primarily educational.

In 1985 we acted as guides for a group of young biologists from Leicestershire on a visit to Trinidad and Tobago in an exchange programme that also entailed a visit to Leicestershire by some of our young biologists.

In March 1987 Glenn Wilkes presented a paper in the seminar organized by the Society of Planners. That year's dry season was the driest of recent times and fires burned fiercely everywhere in the Northern Range. The whole island suffocated under a pall of smoke. Club members joined others in an effort to put out the fires on El Tucuche. Since then, we have been involved with the effort to replant a part of the Melajo Forest Reserve that was burnt out then. That year we were invited for the first time to mount a display at the annual flower show of the Horticultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago and we have participated in like manner in every subsequent year under the able direction of Muriel Pierre.

The general election of 1986 brought to power a new government with an attitude to environmental matters somewhat closer to ours than was that of the previous government. One of its very first actions was the promotion of a country-wide clean-up day in January 1987. Club members participated in this and also in the somewhat less successful clean-up day of 1988. Later in the year (1987), as part of a new thrust in tourism, the Government sponsored a Natural History Festival in which members acted as lecturers and as guides on field

trips. The festival was repeated in 1988 again with major input from the club.

1988 was a particularly busy year. In March John Seyjagat represented the club at a conference in Venezuela on the biology and preservation of the Scarlet Ibis. In April Muriel Pierre and her group set up our exhibit from the flower show at the Citizens for Conservation Fair "Heritage by the Hollows" at Wildflower Park. In June Muriel and her group again set up an exhibition at the offices of Solid Waste Management Company. In July Charles de Gannes presented a paper on The Environment's Need for Water at a seminar organized by WASA and Susan Shurland represented us at a seminar organized by the Town and Country Planning Division on "Planning Legislation Reform". Also in July Caroline Chaboo presented a paper at a wildlife seminar in Antigua. In October, after several meetings of interested members, we presented to Town and Country Planning Division a detailed commentary on the Draft Port of Spain Land Use Plan.

1989 was less busy but Mrs. Yasmin Comeau attended a seminar in Washington hosted by the International Development Bank the purpose of which was to consider the role of Non-governmental Organizations in the preservation of the environment. In June Muriel Pierre contributed to a seminar on Sustainable Development of the Northern Range and Diane Renaud represented us on the World Food Day Committee which met several times during the months leading up to 16 October.

Not surprisingly, a third trend has become noticeable: the increasing role of women in the management of the club. Disregarding the very brief period during which Miss Esla Mollineaux held office, our first woman Hon. Secretary, Miss Luisa Zuniaga, was elected in 1982 and our first woman President, Mrs. Yasmin Comeau, in 1990. Mrs. Comeau had been elected Vice-President in 1989 but had acted as President after 30 April that year when our President, Mr. Neville Acham, was tragically killed in a road accident while returning from a field trip.

The spirit of adventure of the 1970s that Ian Lambie referred to in an earlier section carried over into the 1980s. In 1976 we had mapped the Oropuche (Cumaca) Cave and in 1975 and 1978 we had begun the mapping of the main Aripo Cave. In 1978 we had sought, without success, what we called the Oropuche Sink, a funnel-shaped depression shown on old topographical maps which we thought might be the point at which water ran underground to re-emerge at the Oropuche Cave.

As Ian Lambie has recorded, we had been introduced to Fig Walk in April 1975 without knowing its exact location. Our guide on that trip said it was on the Matura River and, if so, it should have been easier to get to from Platanal than from Matura. We tested this hypothesis in February 1978 successfully reaching and exploring a good part of the Matura River but without finding any sign of Fig Walk. On 22 March 1981, by crossing the ridge between the Rio Seco and the Salybia River we found the tributary of the Salybia on which the "Inner Camp" is situated and explored upstream from this point. We did not go far enough to find the stand of "figs" that gives the spot its name but we recognised the river as the one on which Fig Walk is situated.

Geographical exploration declined after 1981 but is certain to revive again. For Paul Comeau and a small group discovered a new cave in Aripo. Exploration of this cave has begun. Reports of another cave in Blanchisseuse are still to be checked and the point of exit of the water from the main Aripo cave is still to be discovered so the nineties promise to be a decade of new exploration.

Sadly, membership in the club has declined steadily in the 1980s in parallel with the decline in the economy of the country and possibly caused by it. Now that the national economy shows signs of recovery we can expect the fortunes of the club to improve. I am confident that the spirit of adventure that marked the 1970s will return and vitalize all the club's activities in the 1990s.