

# Guest Editorial

by Kris Sookdeo

In 2012 the Club distilled the varied positions of its membership into a very important document that reflects what we believe was, and still is, a realistic policy on hunting and wildlife management.

The guiding philosophy behind this policy states that protecting sustainable populations of all native species must be the top priority for wildlife management in Trinidad and Tobago. To this end we believe that if hunting is to continue, it must be managed based on sound empirical knowledge of the present population and population trends of each targeted species.

In the absence of such knowledge, we support the precautionary principle, which dictates that hunting should be tightly restricted until we have quantified the resource and an effective regulatory framework is formulated and enforced.

This philosophy is very important. On the heels of the two-year hunting moratorium, there has been much debate over whether or not it should be extended with ample arguments being brought forward for both positions. But there is an inherent problem in these arguments which prevents us from getting to the heart of proper wildlife management: insufficient objective data.

On one hand, you have hunters who would like to see the season reopened. The primary arguments for this include the loss of access to their chosen legitimate recreation and the proliferation of illegal activities including poaching, pipe-gun usage and marijuana cultivation due to poor or uneven enforcement of the ban. Other statements including suggestions that the temporary ban may cause certain species to multiply out of control (simultaneously implying that hunters are necessary for controlling wildlife populations) and is reminiscent of previous statements that the nation should consider culling ocelots to protect agouti stocks!

This is not to say that the anti-hunting lobby is not prone to their own embellishments, often readily depicting an alarming picture of forests devoid of game species but without the hard evidence to support it.

Persons who are against hunting should also consider that recreational hunters are often our most active honorary game wardens and some hunting groups go even further, like the South Eastern Hunters Association, in planting feed trees in the forest and hosting educational awareness sessions. Like it or not, *bona fide* hunters will remain an important part of wildlife management in Trinidad and Tobago for a long time to come. They do, after all, have a vested interest in having sufficient game mammals around.

The emotional angle that is sometimes taken is prob-

lematic as well. Depictions of innocent forest animals being shot dead by a hunter glosses over the fact that humans kill animals all the time when we believe it is acceptable. And therein lies the distinction between many of those on either side of the hunting fence – hunters see it as acceptable while those against it believe it is not. Whether you believe that killing and/or eating a wild animal is wrong or right is a matter of personal opinion. Clearly in this sort of situation, national decisions cannot rely on personal opinion or emotion.

In the absence of data driven analysis it is inevitable that a variety of views would arise. Even within our own organization (whose founding members include several passionate hunters) there exists much difference in opinion ranging from pro-hunting to anti-hunting. And that's within an organization whose members share a common appreciation of nature. Imagine the divergence of views in the wider population!

Ultimately, as indicated by the Club's policy, the national policy for wild game management has to be knowledge based, with game species treated as any other natural resource.

While it is true that the anti-hunting lobby is, for the most part, deficient on data, the belief that hunters can accurately gauge the status of our wildlife solely by their observations is likely also inaccurate. If a hunter goes into the forest with 10 dogs and catches 2 agoutis, does that say anything about the population of agouti in the area? It reveals nothing about the carrying capacity of different sections of our country (how much game there could be) or the current population (how much there is) or how sustainable the population is (is the population growing or declining?). We need information to manage our game species resource. It starts by conducting proper wildlife surveys so that we can all get a better idea of what the current status of our wildlife is. The government, via the EMA, is currently in the process of conducting wildlife surveys in conservancies throughout the country. It is hopefully just the beginning of ongoing monitoring efforts, and species specific shortcomings (viz. recording nocturnal game species) can hopefully be addressed as the survey is refined. This survey will, hopefully, form the basis of longer term monitoring.

When we have this information we will then need the appropriate laws. Last year, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago produced a very important document by way of the Draft Forestry, Protected Areas and Wildlife Conservation Bill, the product of extensive work on several policy statements (the National Wildlife Policy, the National Environment Policy, the National Wetland Policy,

the National Forest Policy and the National Protected Areas Policy).

Among the many clauses, the draft bill indicates a rise in the fine for contravening the law to TT\$100,000. This is a substantial and much needed increase from the outdated fines in the existing Conservation of Wildlife Act.

Perhaps one of the more welcome changes is that protected species of fauna would be specified and ranked in terms of threat level to their populations. In the Bill, the ocelot, river otter, manatee and all monkeys are among the critically endangered mammals listed. Hopefully, this will see the end of the absurd practice of caging ocelots and monkeys by several of the entertainment-oriented 'ranches' and 'eco-parks' throughout the country. With respect to birds, the bullfinch, twa-twa, picoplat, chat and silverbeak will be listed as critically endangered so that catching and caging these species will require a permit.

Indeed, it is crucial that the Club throw its support behind this Bill and sees that it makes the transition into law.

But we do not necessarily have to wait patiently for successive surveys or new wildlife laws. If there are instances where the stakeholders, or a major subset of them, can come to agreement on what is the best management option, then it may not be necessary to wait. The management option can then be pursued immediately and has the added benefit that because there is prior agreement on the best management option by most stakeholders, there will be less of a barrier to implementation and there will be more people attempting to enforce the management option.

Even so, these moves would only alleviate concerns over legitimate recreational hunting. What then about the poachers? Subsistence hunting aside, poaching is usually conducted for economic gain. If the economic reward is removed, then poaching activity would logically decline substantially. If the poachers are indeed a big problem, then we expect that the recreational hunting lobby should readily support an outright ban on the sale of wild caught meat. Recreational hunters can then continue liming in

hunting camps with an agouti or two on the fire and those opposed to hunting could rest easier knowing that hunting pressures have eased substantially.

This one wildlife management solution may very well benefit our game mammal populations more than any permanent ban or temporary hunting moratorium ever could. Imagine then what a proper data driven wildlife management policy, combined with a ban or moratorium on the sale of wild caught meat, could achieve.

So what do we as naturalists do? We can agitate for big changes, like an unconditional ban on hunting, which will probably never be approved. Or we can fight for the smaller changes which can happen and which can potentially have a huge impact, namely a complete ban on the sale of wild caught meat.

Sadly, the major recreational hunting associations have continued to defend the commercial sale of wild caught meat. Can the associations expect the country to accept that the same wildlife populations which are threatened by illegal poachers, logging, quarrying etc., are somehow able to comfortably withstand the impact of poorly regulated recreational and commercial hunting?

But many individual hunters support ending the commercial sale and this provides an important opportunity. Think about it. The TTFNC and these hunters share an interest in walking in the forest and experiencing the sights, sounds and smells of the forest. We only differ in our opinion on what to do with about ten species; we want to look at them, the hunters want to eat them. This is in contrast with other sections of the national community: developers, contractors, road builders and many agriculturalists with whom we share very little in common when it comes to natural history.

It is in our interest to work with those with whom we have something in common. Perhaps it is time that naturalists and hunters stop arguing and focus on what we all have in common – a desire to see sustainable wildlife populations throughout our country – and fight for an end to the sale of wild caught meat.