

FEATURES

Only a wasp, only a bush...Only the earth

HANS BOOS

THE Environment! What a word this is in today's world. When I was a boy growing up in my parents' reduced economic circumstances in rural San Fernando, I am sure that had anyone mentioned this word to me I would have had to look it up in my school dictionary, which was one of the required books while I attended Naparima College.

But I was very fortunate to have such a boyhood. Fortunate in two main ways.

The reduced economic circumstances resulting from World War II affected many Trinidadians, but did not diminish my father's interest in nature, an interest he made every effort to pass on to his children.

In 1942, we had not yet moved South, and were still living in Port-

of-Spain, and one of the first lessons I learned from him was while sitting with him on the knobbly roots of a giant devil's ear tree (*Enterolobium schomburgkii*) which stood in the Queen's Park Savannah at the southwestern end, and which eventually fell down the length of Cipriani Boulevard.

Searching among the shiny leaves of a bois chandelle bush (*Piper marginatum*) growing between the roots of this patriarch devil's ear, dad's expert eyes picked out the camouflaged larvae of a butterfly called the king page (*Heraclides thoas*).

These he showed me, pointing out how nature had designed them to look like bird droppings on the leaves. We took these wet-looking, multi-coloured caterpillars home to where we lived in a two-room barrack, behind a house (recently razed) next



door to the now famous Boissiere House on Queen's Park West.

In a cardboard shoe-box we kept and fed these caterpillars. Fresh picked bois chandelle leaves were put for them into the box, and we watched their growth and the miraculous pupation into seemingly insensate dry twigs suspended to the wall of their prison on the finest of strands of silk.

Then one day Dad placed the box open on one of our cots, and we waited. But waiting is not a strong point in a boy of four, and I missed the miracle of the emergence from the dried, stick-like pupa of the beauty of a king page butterfly. However I was fortunate for I saw many another emergence, and expansion of filmy wings, to the gold and black striped butterfly that often fluttered on the poinsettia flowers spilling over the galvanised-iron fence separating our yard from the house next

door. The king pages, orange dogs (*Heraclides anchisaides*) and the many other fuzzy moths that emerged from strange caterpillars my brother and I collected over the years that followed, were sometimes given a preliminary feed on bunches of hibiscus flowers, and the mosquito nets secured around the natal cots were pulled up, opened, and these unblemished, fragile creatures were allowed to fly free into our front yard.

This was about the time when our island was considered blessed by one of the sharpest double-edged swords to come out of the needs and development of WWII.

DDT was seen to be the saviour of mankind, for it was an effective controller of the insects that primarily affected allied troops fighting in far-off, hostile, tropical theatres of war. Yellow fever, malaria and other virulent arboviruses took a greater toll than enemy firepower.

DDT was to replace the mosquito net in Trinidad too, as its derivatives and relations began to be used to control the insect pests, both social and agricultural.



The frangipani caterpillar - one of the many pieces that make up the whole picture of life on earth.

By this time we had moved to San Fernando and this is where the second piece of fortune was my lot. It was not a fortune in terms of tangible things, but in opportunity. There was an abundance of still quite wild places to nurture our curiosity and for us to explore and do boyhood things. We were young and, like most young boys and girls of these somehow better remembered times, we found our play and our pleasure in what we discovered around us, and made do with simpler, and for us, richer things. Where we lived, on a hill overlooking a tract of land between North Road and Vistabella, there were fruit trees aplenty and enough wild bush in which to roam and play and to pretend we were whatever our fancy and

imagination made us. Bois canot and bois flot trees grew tall and with the leaf stalks and cocoyea we made kites and cages to house picoplats and semps that were there for the catching.

One of our hideouts was under a large, domed allamanda (*Allamanda cathartica*) bush growing in the land adjacent to the Judges Quarters. In this land, tree houses were built in the mango, guava and sapodilla trees, and we really believed we were Tarzans and Janes, as we hung and swung on stout vines culled from the then heavily forested San Fernando Hill, where balata fruit as big as plums littered the forest floor. This allamanda bush was our special hideout, our private world, away from prying parents, where we stored our treasures,

made our plans for our lives and dreamed away our uncertain future.

Then one day, overhead through the tangled branches of our favourite refuge, there was a flurry of movement and shafts of holiday time sunlight beamed through into the usual leafy twilight. Our retreat had been invaded by thousands of caterpillars. They munched away at the poisonous latex-filled leaves, fat and juicy, their whip-like tails jerking in cadence with their progress up each leaf mid-rib, chewing away our cover, our green leaf-shingled roof, while a heavy drizzle of their droppings audibly rained down on us and coated the bare ground below with a layer of peaty, smelly frass.

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The missing puzzle piece

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The poisonous sap of the allamanda, ingested by these larvae of a species of sphinx moth, made these caterpillars unpalatable to the usual bird predators, and it was only years later as I thought about the disaster that rendered our bush naked in a day, leaving thousands of the caterpillars to starve to death before they had grown enough to pupate for the next amazing change to the adult moth, that I understood what had happened — what had destroyed our playhouse under the allamanda bush, and had doomed an entire generation of moths.

It was the missing piece of the puzzle. Without this piece the jigsaw was incomplete, made no sense, and the perfect picture fell apart. It was the essential interlocking piece. The controlling, stabilising piece, the factor, which normally saw to the survival of a certain number of caterpillars, moths, and the allamanda bush.

For our hideaway never regrew after the onslaught. It shrivelled up in the following week of the dry season and slowly crumbled into a pile of rotten twigs, burying the thousands of caterpillar corpses of a generation of moths.

And the missing piece was the wasp.

“What wasp?” you ask.

Well, as I said above, it was years before I discovered that several species of parasitic wasp use the caterpillars of butterflies and moths as hosts for their larvae. Without these wasps, whose larvae can withstand the toxins ingested and stored with the caterpillars, more caterpillars survive than the habitat — in this case the allamanda bush — can support.

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Protecting biodiversity improves the health of the environment.



Poisoning the atmosphere

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And what happened to the wasps?

Well, the crop-spraying planes that flew non-stop, day after day over the cane fields

upwind and to the east of San Fernando, released a killing blanket of insecticide that was insensitive to what was below. Froghopper, pest, beetle, and butterfly, mosquito and moth fell dead, the beautiful and useful along with the dangerous and deadly. And where moths and butterflies during their dormant period as pupa, or egg, or even hardy caterpillars which can ingest a sap so toxic to other animals, escaped some of the deadly mists, the wasps, the unrecognised wasps, all were killed as they went about their daily activity.

We human beings have done away with most of the wasps in our existence. We have systematically killed off the controlling factors, the missing pieces that make up the whole picture of life on earth. The time may come when we recognise that the earth is really only a very big allamanda bush. I could not see it then as I lay under the bush and looked up at the tiny points of blue

between the matted green leaves and stems. But I can see it now when it may already be too late. Today, we had better take a good hard look at what we are doing, not only in Trinidad and Tobago, but also to the one and only world we have, for the dead bodies are already piling up and the protective layers of our atmosphere are already poisoned and threadbare.

There is no place else to go, and unless we all collectively and individually wake up to the fact that as a species, mankind has lost much of what he once had, and is rapidly despoiling what remains, there will be no home left, no hideaways, no allamanda bush, no earth.

For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@tfnfnc.org or visit our website at www.tfnfnc.org and our Facebook or YouTube pages.



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