

# features

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## Small losses, big consequences

### TT FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

PERHAPS the most frustrating issue that any lover of our natural environment has to contend with is the failure of this country to insist that development adheres to proper land use planning. You can see it every day and everywhere.

Houses built by squatters appear on our river banks (often dumping sewerage and trash into the waterways). Agricultural land is covered with concrete (witness the slow conversion of Aranguez South from the nation's "food basket" to a vast commercial complex). Forest reserves are encroached upon and destroyed (will reserves such as Morne l'Enfer ever be restored?)

Why do citizens not place greater significance on the natural world around them? Economic gain is often a major consideration. It may be as fundamental as



### TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

a family trying to survive by practising slash-and-burn agriculture on our hillsides. Or it might be an entrepreneur chasing vast profits by building a concrete and steel monstrosity on a patch of "useless bush" (or public beachfront).

Part of the problem, no doubt, is also that each generation may only bear witness to the damage done in their time. They may see an acre or two of forest being lost or some old rice lagoon being filled in and rationalise that such loss is acceptable. A drop in the



The Chaguaramas Development Authority (CDA) is considering building a full service hotel at the Chaguaramas Tracking Station.

bucket. But with each passing generation a little more is lost and soon those little bits start adding up.

These are just some of the reasons why development planning

for the country takes place at a national level – so that the interest of all stakeholders can be considered and to allow development to take place in a sustainable manner.

It is very important that we in-

sist on the enforcement of these plans. We create many of our problems (and problems for our children) by letting "little" breaches slide.

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FEATURES

# Citizens must insist on proper land usage

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Take the issue of squatting. On the banks of the tributaries that flow through the South Oropouche Lagoon for example, communities of squatters have built up over the years. These communities include many fishermen and farmers who no doubt work hard to make ends meet. But this does not take away from the fact that the settlements breach our laws, most notably, by building directly on the river bank, mere feet from the water's edge.

So by not taking action at the inception of the community, when the first houses were built, the government now has the much bigger challenge of dealing with entire communities. The government now cannot simply evict the communities and would no doubt have to properly relocate them and compensate athletes for their loss.

This is just one example. There may be as many as 350 squatting sites throughout the country, involving some 200,000 individuals. The Minister of Agriculture, in a newspaper interview earlier this year, indicated that squatting was prevalent in several forest reserves, including the Aripo Savannas in Valencia, along the Toco Road, Pine Settlement in Sangre Grande, Melajo, Nariva, the Caroni Bird Sanctuary and Point Fortin.

The Land Settlement Agency (LSA) is authorised to prevent and contain further squatting on State lands and to regularise eligible existing squatters. However, the LSA had no authority to go on State lands to demolish illegal structures. The Commissioner of State Lands has the ability to do



Houses built on a river bank

so but the attempts over the years would seem to have had limited impact on preventing squatting. The difficulty of trying to enforce our land planning laws was made even worse when the former administration issued Certificates of Comfort to squatters residing on river banks and forest reserves.

So it isn't just individuals or businesses. Even our administrators – the people who are supposed to uphold our laws – have themselves contravened our planning laws.

The Chaguaramas Development Authority's (CDA) issuance of an expression of interest related to the building of a full-service hotel at the Chaguaramas Tracking Station is perhaps the most recent example of this.

In an attempt to appease the opponents of the idea, the former chairman of the CDA indicated

that the hotel would be an "eco-lodge". However, the CDA's idea of what constitutes an eco-lodge appears to differ from what many might expect as he indicated that the facility would include "restaurant options, light shopping, light entertainment, Internet access, etc." (*Express* 18.08.16).

Indeed it appears that what the CDA has in mind is actually a nature-themed, full-service hotel rather than a genuine low-impact eco-lodge.

This is what is known in the trade as "green-washing" – an attempt to portray the subject as being environmentally responsible. Interestingly, following his resignation, the former chairman noted that "an expression of interest for the development of a project which clearly contravenes the existing permitted land use was published recently, after adamant

insistence by the line ministry, despite concerns raised by the board." (*Express* 28.08.16). It is a damning statement indeed and, if true, it hints at the sheer disregard for our laws when it comes to land use. The country itself is supposed to revise its National Physical Development Plan every five years by law.

This has not been done since 1982. When it comes to proper land use planning, it seems the authorities are either content to allow the current state of lawlessness to continue or are powerless to stop it.

But there are examples of how concerned citizens can make a stand for proper land usage. Remember the Orange Grove Savanna? The then Ministry of Sport via the Sport Company of TT attempted to construct a sporting complex on the community green

space, in contravention of the developed land use schemes for the area. The residents and users objected, took the authorities to task and eventually the construction was blocked.

Justice Ricky Rahim in his ruling at that time stated: "There was a duty on the minister to act fairly when considering the application for planning permission. Consultation is not only about objections but also about representations to arrive at the best possible plan which would benefit the various interests in the community and at the same time give effect to the government's intention."

"As we continue to develop as a nation in the 21st century the time may have arrived when those who govern may wish not only to ensure that sufficient recreational areas are provided but also consider that green spaces deserve some measure of protection." (*Newsday* 17.06.15).

It is the duty of citizens and organisations to insist that our laws are adhered to and to make sure that our natural spaces are used for what they are meant for – wild-life conservation, enjoyment of the natural world, recreation, aesthetic beauty, relaxation. Orange Grove shows that when concerned citizens feel strongly about the law – and their environment, such plans are not inevitable and that we can make a difference if we insist on it.

Photos by J Wong-Sang and K Sookdeo.

For more info on our natural environment, contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at [admin@tfncc.org](mailto:admin@tfncc.org) or visit: [www.tfncc.org](http://www.tfncc.org) and our Facebook or YouTube pages.

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