

REVIEW OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Spills add to environmental disasters

AS THE new year begins, it is worth taking some time to review the events of the year gone by. The following summary is based upon events which have been reported in the media but there are likely to be many more incidents which have gone unreported.

The year began with the continuing disaster resulting from the spillage of several thousand barrels of oil from the No 10 sea line at Petrotrin's Pointe-a-Pierre port facility. Oil affected coastal areas along the south-western coast, including La Brea, Vessigny and Granville. Scores of fishes, reported to be mostly mullet, washed ashore in the days that followed. Fishermen & Friends of the Sea has, however, challenged this, and indicated that several other species were involved.

While not conclusively linked to the oil spill, a dead dolphin was found at Vessigny in April and another at Pt Sable, La Brea a few weeks later. This follows the discovery of a dead dolphin at Los Iros in March and the stranding of a melon-headed whale in June.

Petrotrin would again come into the spotlight in July when a ruptured storage tank at Pointe-a-Pierre spilled slop oil into the Guaracara River, and again when a ten-barrel spill occurred at a well in Dignity Trace, Penal. Another small spill into the Guaracara River was reported in December.

Several breaches of the wildlife laws were reported during the year. In January, a Chaguanas man pleaded guilty to, and was fined \$1000 for, the possession of an iguana. During the same month, a birdkeeper of Barataria was charged for possession of 108 chestnut-bellied seed finches; 15 large-billed seed finches; two cockatiels and seven red-backed parrots. Again in January, a compound (purported to be a wildlife sanctuary) illegally situated on State land and within the WASA watershed in Valencia was raided and 15 cages with 50 protected birds were discovered. The outcome of investigations into this incident is uncertain.

In April, a man of Bristol Village, Mayaro, was held with 12 pounds of



THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

lappe meat. Two poachers were held in a vehicle at Dades Trace, Rio Claro in possession of the carcasses of four monkeys and two armadillos, also in April.

In May, a man, his wife and two sons (all from Valencia) were charged for the possession of ten pounds of lappe meat, and four pounds of armadillo meat. In the same month, six men were charged and had their boats seized for entering a prohibited section of the Caroni Swamp. One of the men had been charged in October 2013 for poaching 18 scarlet ibises in the swamp for which he served one month in prison.

In June, three men were held in a vehicle at Embacadero, San Fernando with 11 conures, three yellow-headed parrots, one hahns macaw and one toucan. Also in June, the owner of a pet shop in Blitz Village, Pleasantville, was fined \$7,500 for the possession of 41 brown-throated parakeets, five rose-headed parakeets, two green-winged macaws, one scarlet macaw and one unidentified parrot.

In July, two individuals from Freeport were charged for the possession of 54 protected birds and one capuchin monkey. Controversially, the charges were later dismissed and the animals were returned to the individuals. In August, four men from Caparo were arrested and charged for the possession of a lappe carcass. In December, the carcasses of three agoutis were discovered at a house in Mayaro and three individuals were charged. Finally, on December 23, offi-



A DEAD dolphin found in La Brea in April 2014.

cers searching a vehicle in Cedar Grove Road in Mayaro found a wild hog, along with a homemade shotgun and one cartridge. Three men were held.

At least two suspected cases of animal poisonings have been reported – in October the possible poisoning of crayfish in a stream leading to the Paria Waterfall was reported by Papa Bois Conservation, while in November several common garden birds were found dead or dying at a HDC development in Couva under circumstances which suggested poisoning.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, several sea turtles were found dead during the 2014 season, victims of accidental bycatch in fishing nets or poaching. Reported incidents include five leatherbacks washed ashore dead at Matura in March and five turtles (two green and three loggerheads) found dead in a fishing net at Salybia. It is estimated that as many as 3,000 leatherbacks are caught in fishing nets accidentally every year.

The degradation of Matura continued unabated in 2014. In one instance, it was reported that 400 acres of private and State land in Matura were illegally cleared and quarried by a businessman. Land developers also illegally cleared 100 acres in the Melajo Forest Reserve in an apparent land-grab. This area of

the country continues to suffer from years of environmental degradation and the inaction of state agencies to address it.

The two-year hunting moratorium, which was announced at the start of the 2013 hunting season, was affirmed in 2014. The hunting moratorium has allowed the authorities to begin a national wildlife survey. Unfortunately, several hunting groups were disenchanted with the moratorium and have refused to participate in the survey, which increases the likelihood that the final results would be contested. Hunters have protested the moratorium, citing the proliferation of poaching, marijuana cultivation and other illicit activities. Farmers in Tobago have been vocal about the increase in agouti populations which, they claim, now negatively affect their crop production.

Farmers in Trinidad, meanwhile, have to keep an eye on a range expansion of the giant African snail – a threat to both crops and human health. After containment in Diego Martin for a number of years, snails managed to spread beyond this and have been found, for example, at Invaders Bay, Mt Lambert and Moka Heights. It is believed that the snails were spread primarily by the movement of landfill earlier in the year.

Several controversial projects were proposed or implemented during the year. The extension of the highway to Point Fortin attracted significant attention from the media and the public. The proposal for a dry dock and transshipment facility off the Rousillac Swamp, and a similar project sited near the mouth of the Caroni River, have been the cause of much concern and may face stiff opposition when the EIA is released. Ongoing projects in Chaguanas have raised concerns over the feasibility of such development in the area.

There were, of course, several bright spots in 2014. Spectators flocked to Mayaro in March to marvel at the glow of bioluminescent plankton in the Ortoire River, temporarily becoming a minor tourist attraction. The 2014 Bioblitz successfully completed its 24 hour survey of the Nariva Swamp, finding well over 700 species. Natural history lovers were also enraptured by the footage being streamed live from the Nautilus (a submersible) as it explored the ocean depths near Trinidad. The Government appointed a National Sea Turtle Task Force to co-ordinate marine turtle conservation between the various institutions involved. The EMA indicated its intention to open a monitoring post in Valencia to help curb illegal quarrying in the area. As already mentioned, the hunting moratorium has facilitated a survey of wildlife populations, which continues. The Forestry, Protected Areas and Wildlife Conservation Bill and the new Forest Authority have been advanced significantly.

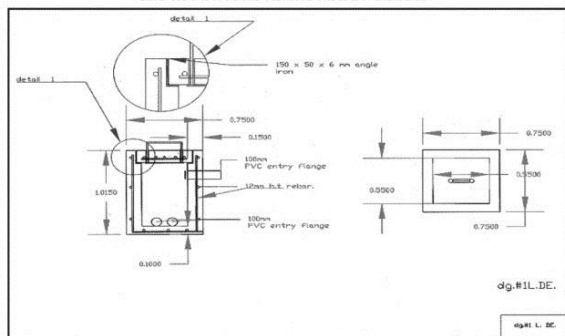
As the new year begins, we hope that 2015 will bring with it many positive developments for our islands' natural environment and resources. Let us ensure that as much of it as possible remains for years to come.

Today's feature was written by Kris Sookdeo.

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

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