

CONCLUDING REMARKS

THE CHALLENGE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN THE CARIBBEAN

HERBERT A. RAFFAELE

*Office of International Conservation, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Arlington, VA
22203, USA; e-mail: herb_raffaele@fws.gov*

CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

The need for public outreach regarding the importance of, and need for, conservation is instrumental for conservation to occur in the Caribbean. Such outreach must occur at all levels including in schools, to the general public, and with decision-makers. To date, the Caribbean has been a leader within the hemisphere in the development and implementation of public education campaigns. The success of these efforts has strengthened the recognition by the islands of the region regarding the importance of outreach as a conservation tool.

The focus of public outreach efforts is often to develop local pride in Caribbean wildlife. The region lends itself exceptionally well to such an approach because most islands support endemic species which islanders can very much call their own. And, it does not hurt that some of these species are attractive, widespread, and reasonably visible by the general public.

The use of national pride as a conservation tool is especially important for island states still in the early stages of development. Wealth can be measured in many forms other than money. When measured from a biological perspective, the islands of the Caribbean host a wealth substantially more vast than that of the United States — a good reason for them to be proud.

Despite recognition that public outreach is the single most powerful tool to achieve conservation in the Caribbean, this cannot be accomplished without adequate personnel and infrastructure in place to deliver such programs. It is for this reason that capacity building is another fundamental conservation challenge of the region. Capacity building is needed in the area of training personnel in the field of resource conservation, as well as providing infrastructural support for organizations in the region to deliver conservation on the ground. The latter may include items from computers and fax machines to vehicles and gasoline, or binoculars and field guides. Though the University of the West Indies

offers resource management training and workshops on various resource conservation themes, such efforts will have to be increased many-fold to provide the levels of training and institutional structure needed to achieve effective conservation.

Related to the need for public outreach is the importance of strengthening political will. Obviously environmental concerns will always place a distant second on developing islands where housing, food, health, and jobs are uppermost on local political agendas. The challenge is to show the interconnectedness of conservation with these elements of basic livelihood. A sound, clean environment can provide food, sustain health, provide timber for building, and provide an incentive for tourism — an outstanding mechanism for creating both jobs and revenue. A few years back this connection was successfully achieved on the island of St. Lucia. As a consequence, the Prime Minister took it upon himself to take the lead in declaring a new national park on the island, a park that would further the conservation of the island's wildlife as well as its water supply.

The passage of new, updated local laws is often signaled as important within the region, and this is a legitimate concern. At the same time, more important than new laws is the effective implementation of existing legislation. Virtually all the islands of the Caribbean have wildlife conservation legislation, but only a handful feel that it is effectively implemented. A basic reason for this is that much of this legislation lacks support by the general populace. This, coupled with limited or no enforcement, leads to such legislation having no positive effect.

The successful achievement of the first goal discussed — public outreach — is the best way to put teeth into local legislation. Once people have pride in their wildlife they will demand its proper protection. An anecdote in this regard is worth mentioning. A foreigner visiting one of the Lesser Antilles asked a taxi driver to take him to the rainforest so that he could find some parrots. Upon further discussion the driver learned that the foreigner wanted

to trap a valuable, endangered parrot to take abroad. Rather than taking the foreigner to the rainforest, he drove him to the police station instead! There is little doubt that this turn of events would not have transpired were it not for a prior outreach campaign which had made the taxi driver proud of the island's natural heritage. This new awareness made the driver a de facto law enforcement officer.

RESEARCH CHALLENGES

The Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds has done an outstanding job over the past few years of identifying conservation priorities within the Caribbean as a whole. Some of these relate to research in one way or another. Regrettably, it is all too evident that such an exercise, though important, is limited in its usefulness due to the shortage of local personnel and funding to implement the identified goals. All of us involved in the Caribbean find it an extremely disappointing exercise to look back after a few years to find unaddressed conservation goals of fundamental importance to the region.

North American biologists, too, have their own sets of conservation goals they would like to see implemented in the Caribbean. Unlike their Caribbean counterparts, however, these generally are accompanied by the financial resources needed for their execution.

Regrettably, when one steps back from the two sets of priorities, Caribbean versus North American, one often finds very little overlap. This has proven

an ongoing problem for many years. The real challenge for North American researchers is to address this problem and conduct research of use to islanders as well as themselves. This involves taking several steps which I shall outline briefly.

- Know local goals and integrate North American goals into them.
- Engage local cooperators. You are working on their land and on their resources.
- Develop an understanding of constraints and limits facing Caribbean counterparts.
- Be sensitive and listen carefully. You come from a different culture, so communication is not quite the same.
- Create equal partnerships. Inviting local cooperators to help in the field followed by you taking the data home, analyzing it, and then publishing the results is not an equal partnership.
- Train local personnel in skills useful to address their conservation needs, not just contribute to your database.
- Leave useful products behind. A publication in English of work you did on a Spanish-speaking island is not only useless locally, but is an insult to resident biologists.

Only when the Caribbean has its own local cadre of skilled conservationists and research biologists will the region have a fair chance of effectively conserving its extraordinary natural resources. Together, we can all help make this a reality.