

THE BAHAMA ISLANDS

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GENERAL COMMENTS

The Ornithology Group of the Bahamas National Trust on New Providence continues to flourish with monthly field trips, off-island field trips, and Christmas Bird Counts, all of which provide check-lists to add to our database. Tony White has started a new Christmas Bird Count on Grand Bahama.

With the explosion of interest in birding around the world, the Bahamas Government continues to encourage ecotourism and several more Bahamians have become qualified ecotour birding guides. Although ecotourism can be a two-edged sword, it is a major tool in the Bahamas in efforts to appreciate and preserve the natural environment and to heighten awareness in the importance of conservation.

Since a change of government in 1992 and a major lifting of land ownership restrictions, there continues to be widespread land clearance for residential communities, office complexes, shopping plazas, and road improvement. The latest census revealed that of a human population of 300,000, two-thirds now reside on New Providence. Infrastructure is becoming strained, especially with increasing numbers of visitors. The Atlantis development on Paradise Island has put severe stress on the environment of that island.

Many of the major islands of the Bahamas are receiving their share of development. Numerous small islands have now come under foreign ownership and are also being altered dramatically. There is particular concern for nesting seabirds, whose hitherto remote breeding sites are now being threatened by greater use of these islands, because of easier access by sea and air.

It is difficult to discern any attempt by government to control development, despite a recent law to regulate the filling in of wetlands, the removal of hills, or the destruction of "old growth" trees. Pressure from the general public recently won a temporary halt of a major development at the western end of New Providence, which would have placed 600 acres of woodland and wetland and a mile of pristine coastline behind gates.

Several new ecolodges have been opened on some of the family islands, with a corresponding environmental awareness. A recent competition to design the ultimate "green" ecolodge has taken place in The Bahamas, with plans to build the winning design on Andros.

PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES IN THE BAHAMAS

Wetlands

On Andros, a local group has formed the National Creeks and Wetlands Restoration Initiative, now evolving into "Wetland Care Bahamas," to address preservation of wetlands on Andros and elsewhere in The Bahamas, and to identify degraded wetlands and seek funding to restore as many as possible. The initiative is working with Government, Ducks Unlimited, Ducks Unlimited Canada, the Bahamas National Trust, and local businesses. Some restoration has already taken place on Andros.

On New Providence, a proposal was submitted to Government to place the wetlands area of Harrold and Wilson Ponds under protection, following a resolution of the Society of Caribbean Ornithology in Aruba in 1997. To date no response has been received.

Unfortunately a summary report of the work of the West Indian Whistling-Duck Working Group in The Bahamas was not available in time for this report.

Seabirds

Will Mackin has been working extensively on the nesting ecology of the Audubon's Shearwater in the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park. A report from David Lee suggests that the colony nesting in the Exumas may be the largest in the world, with well over 1000 pairs.

In November 2000, a workshop, "Protected Areas Management Strategy for Bahamian Terrestrial Vertebrates, Iguanas and Seabirds," was held in conjunction with the IUCN, the Conservation Unit of the Bahamas Department of Agriculture, the College of the Bahamas, Bahamas National Trust, Ardastra

Gardens Conservation Centre, and local government agencies. David Lee and Tony White provided background information on seabird nesting throughout the Bahamas. The resulting report has been submitted to the Department of Agriculture as a working document to assist in identifying locations of importance and establishing management plans for the protection of rock iguana and seabird nesting sites.

Pine Woodland

Presentation of 75 slides and script has been completed, duplicated, and distributed to several Government agencies in the Bahamas, including the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tourism.

Neotropical Migrants

Efforts are being concentrated on Kirtland's Warbler, known to winter in The Bahamas and Turks & Caicos Islands. Eric Carey is in dialog with Dave Ewert and Joe Wunderle to develop a research and training program for the conservation of wintering Kirtland's Warblers and associated species in the Bahamas. A Kirtland's Warbler recovery plan is now well underway to train and use local residents to monitor various habitats and areas on Andros, considered to be a suitable target island. All winter migrants will be monitored in the same program. Funds are expected shortly to provide scholarships for two Bahamian students to complete degrees in Wildlife Management, which is beyond the capacity of the College of the Bahamas. The results of the initial monitoring program should lead to long-term protection of critical habitat. The Bahamas is working

closely with the Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Program in Michigan.

Hunting

The Bahamas Government continues to review proposals to allow tourist hunting, both for native and released non-native game birds. Quantities of Mallards and pheasants have been released into the Andros ecosystem.

The Department of Agriculture and the Bahamas National Trust recently held a National Hunting Symposium, bringing together various stakeholders, hunters, game wardens, park rangers, law enforcement agencies, NGOs, and naturalists. The symposium recommended urgent action with regard to monitoring, a licensing system, bag limits, and education. A full report is not yet available.

Big Green Cay off Andros has been identified as supporting the largest colony of White-crowned Pigeons in the Bahamas. Government has compulsorily acquired the island and goats will be removed as soon as this can be done without disturbing the nesting pigeons. The Game Bird Committee of the Bahamas National Trust monitors the breeding colony closely.

Introduced Species

The problem of introduced raccoons on Abaco and the threat to the native Bahama Parrot are being addressed, with advice from the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Feral cats also threaten the ground-nesting parrots.