

GOOD NEWS FROM JAMAICA: PROTECTION FOR HELLSHIRE HILLS

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Dear Friends,

Despite the demonstrations here in Jamaica, last week the Hon. Easton Douglas, Minister of the Environment and Housing, signed a declaration order bringing into existence Jamaica's newest protected area. Already Jamaica has the Montego Bay Marine Park, the Blue Mountain/John Crow Mountain National Park, and the Negril Environmental Protection Area. Last week on Earth Day, April 22, parts of southern Clarendon and southern St. Catherine (called Portland Bight) became a Protected Area under Section Five of Jamaica's Natural Resources Conservation Act.

In geographical terms, a "bight" is a body of water between two headlands, and strictly speaking, Portland Bight refers just to the body of water between the Hellshire Hills (to the west of Kingston) and Portland Ridge (the part of Jamaica which sticks out to the south). The area declared last week (called the Portland Bight Protected Area [PBPA]) is much larger, taking in 200 sq. miles (520 sq. km) of the surrounding coastal land and all the marine area out to the 200 metre depth contour (some 11 nautical miles south of Portland Point) for a total area of 724 sq. miles (1876 sq. km). It is Jamaica's largest protected area so far – 4.7% of Jamaica's land area and 47.6% of our island shelf.

The Portland Bight Protected Area is rich in wildlife and natural areas; 41% of the land area is taken up with the dry limestone forests of Hellshire, Portland Ridge, and Braziletto Mountain, rated as the largest relatively intact forests of that type left in Central America and the Caribbean (81 sq. miles, 210 sq. km). Of the 271 plant species identified in the Hellshire Hills by Adams and DuQuesnay, 53 (19.6%) are found only in Jamaica (endemic), and several are found only in the Hellshire Hills. The Hellshire Hills is the last known habitat of the Jamaican iguana, an endemic species and Jamaica's largest land animal. In addition, the Hellshire Hills is the last remaining stronghold in Jamaica of the endemic skink. Two endemic reptiles (a thunder snake and the

blue-tailed galliwasp), and an endemic frog are found only on Portland Ridge. Jamaica's only endemic terrestrial mammal, the coney, is found in Hellshire and Portland Ridge. Many endemic and resident forest birds, as well as North American migrant birds, add to the biodiversity.

Another 16% of the land area (32 sq. miles, 82 sq. km) is valuable wetlands, the largest almost continuous mangrove stands remaining in Jamaica (about 48 km long). Within the wetlands are many waterfowl, and healthy populations of our national symbol, the crocodile.

These wetlands, together with extensive sea-grass beds in the waters of the Bight, provide probably the largest nursery area for fish, crustaceans, and mollusks on the island and support 4,000 of Jamaica's 16,000 fishers and their families. Two of Jamaica's largest fishing beaches – Old Harbour Bay and Rocky Point (each with over 1,000 fishers) – fall within the protected area, and there is a tremendous opportunity to manage these fisheries to increase the yields.

Parts of the mainland shoreline, as well as many of the coral cays within the Bight, are major nesting areas for sea birds and endangered sea turtles, including hawksbill and green turtles. Manatees, which were formerly numerous in the area, are now rare, but we have a few.

The Portland Bight area will be a challenge to environmental managers because of the many negative impacts from human activity. Fish habitat is damaged daily by dynamite and drag nets (like beach seines and trawlers), and unsustainable harvesting equipment (such as small net and trap mesh) is common. Killing of turtles, manatees, and crocodiles is common. Cutting of trees in the forests and mangroves for charcoal, fuelwood, fence-posts and yam sticks is causing serious and maybe irreparable damage. Effluent from agriculture and industry is polluting both groundwater and aquifers.

Residents of the area are largely poor, and the area desperately needs new economic opportunities to uplift the standard and conditions of living. Pow-

erful interests are eyeing the area for potentially destructive activities such as limestone mining, caustic soda manufacturing, shrimp farming, solar salt production, and coal-fired power generation. Hopefully, the protection of the area will ensure that more environmentally friendly options are pursued, including those which allow more of the benefits of “development” to remain with the residents of the area. Sustainable nature and heritage community tourism may well lead to more sustainable prosperity, and Portland Bight may yet be the next big growth area in Jamaica's tourism development.

Consistent with Jamaican government policy, management of this new Protected Area will be delegated to an NGO. Discussions are far advanced between the Jamaican government and the NGO I head (the Caribbean Coastal Area Management Foundation [CCAM]) toward this end.

CCAM has already prepared a management plan which has been accepted by the government. It calls for zoning of the PBPA into 28 special management

zones - both marine and terrestrial – including eight “no fishing areas.”

CCAM intends to implement its mandate along co-management lines, and has already midwived three resource co-management councils (fisheries, tourism, and communities) which have begun to take up the reins of management. Resource-users including recreational fishers and government officials comprise these co-management institutions. The regulations soon to be promulgated will reflect the results of discussions in these Councils. Fifty Honorary Game Wardens from among the fishers and vendors are already empowered by the Governor-General and trained.

Rejoice with us! It has taken six years to get here. The real work, however, is yet to be done!