

## CONCERN OVER PLANS FOR SOMBRERO ISLAND, ANGUILLA

The following letter from Jim Stevenson was posted on the Islands Resources web site on 27 May 1998.

The tiny island of Sombrero is one of the rapidly diminishing number of important breeding grounds for sea birds in the Caribbean. It is also home to the endemic Sombrero Black Lizard. Sombrero is the most remote, and therefore least known, offshore cay of Anguilla, which is a UK Overseas Territory in the northeastern corner of the Leeward Islands.

Birds of principal interest which are known to breed on Sombrero are Black-capped Petrels, Roseate Terns, Red-billed Tropicbirds, Brown Boobies, Sandwich Terns, Sooty Terns, Least Terns, Gull-billed Terns, Bridled Terns and Brown Noddies. However Masked Boobies and Brown Pelicans are also thought to breed on the island which lies in a deep water channel where upwellings provide rich feeding. Judging from the range of birds present and the fact that some of the smaller ones are easily wiped out by predators, rats and cats are almost certainly absent from the island (a real rarity in this part of the world).

In April this year, news broke of a plan to build a commercial rocket assembly and launch site on Sombrero. Unknown to most of the Anguilla population, an American company, Beale Aerospace has been in discussion with the UK Government over leasing the island and an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has been begun by ICF Kaiser, a well known US environmental consulting firm based in McLean, Virginia, with a number of contracts with US EPA. Unfortunately, the American consultant's visit to the island this week was for only six hours in the middle of the day. They did not try to assess the lizard population and most of the tern species had not yet arrived to breed. Back in the UK a Foreign Office spokesman has given assurances that the plan and the EIA will be reviewed by the Environment Agency and others and the UK Government has full authority to grant or refuse permission. It would be good to know what criteria will be applied as accurate bird data for the Caribbean is hard to

obtain.

No-one is suggesting that seabirds, lizards and rockets can co-exist on a one mile long island, but the developers are suggesting that they might be able to find other suitable islands, not for the rockets, but for the birds! If such islands existed they would already be colonised. In essence if the plan goes ahead, we will be paying for the development, not with our money, but with our biodiversity.

Already Beale have dragged out the old "birds versus jobs" argument. Anguilla—an island of roughly 7500 inhabitants—is seemingly full of rocket scientists who are queuing up to work on the island.

An interesting economic twist is that Beale is in direct competition with the European space agencies, including UK firms. The UK Government is also funding the development or improvement of existing rocket sites in Eastern Europe. The sharing of old established sites certainly makes good environmental sense, while destroying one of the last unspoiled islands in the Caribbean certainly does not.

Environmental NGOs in the UK and the Caribbean are working together to oppose the plan, through the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum. In the USA a response is being led by the American Bird Conservancy, the BirdLife International Partner in Washington, DC.

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Judy Pierce responded with additional information on Sombrero Island on 28 May 1998, as follows:

### RESPONSE TO SUMMARY OF SOMBRERO ISLAND THREATS

Thank you for sending out Jim Stevenson's summary of Sombrero Island threats to our listserver. I have been trying to get the international community to focus on this issue since it first appeared in the St. Thomas Daily News on August 27, 1997.

I have been in contact with both Beal and ICF Kaiser. According to David Baker at Beal (972-458-9918), the development of the island as a rocket launch site is practically

a done deal. He said the construction phase will start early to mid-summer and is expected to last a year. He admitted that this phase will be very disturbing to the birds. There will be three site areas on the island: launch pad, tanks with propellants, and assembly/integration buildings. They plan on launching a rocket about every month.

According to ICF Kaiser's Genevieve Walker (703-934-3945), the plan was to conduct the environmental assessment

in April. I informed Ms. Walker that the entire summer seabird migration of terns (including the endangered Roseate Tern) would not take place until May, therefore she would completely miss thousands of nesting seabirds which rely on Sombrero to breed. Remember, Sombrero is out there. The birds have no alternate nesting site on which to breed within about 60 miles — that's if they can find a predator-free site with suitable habitat.

Very little accurate data have been collected from Sombrero (the only published accounts I know of are Rob Norton's paper on Sombrero [he found Black Noddies and Masked Boobies — both species of concern in the Caribbean] in *Colonial Waterbirds* [1989; vol. 12:120-122], and Dave Pritchard's 1990 account in the RAMSAR Convention in the Caribbean RSPB Sabbatical report). Many of us would like to know what nests on Sombrero, but it is very difficult to get to — much less land on.

I suspect that Beal Aerospace will try and use the "birds versus jobs" argument in the USVI as well. According to a Daily News article on March 23, 1998, Beal is negotiating

with the VI Port Authority to lease 100 acres on St. Croix to "construct and operate corporate and manufacturing aerospace facilities" on that island that could employ 200 people.

All this begs the question as to how Beal plans on getting all this equipment on an island that even under the best sea conditions is difficult to access.

I would be willing to assist in a survey of Sombrero if the logistics can be worked and governmental approval (UK or Anguilla) can be attained. On St. Thomas, I have connections to rent a trawler and have had an experienced boat captain offer his services. The island lies about 65 miles due east of Virgin Gorda, and would take about a day to get to and a day to get back, seas permitting. I suppose flying to Anguilla and renting a boat would be another option. Do we know how others are getting to the island? Any suggestions regarding this would be helpful.

Sincerely,

Judy Pierce

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Judy Pierce provided an additional response to the Island Resources Foundation on 23 July 1998:

### QUICK OVERVIEW OF BIRD NESTING CONDITIONS ON SOMBRERO

A three-day bird survey was just completed on Sombrero. Briefly, the island is exceptional and probably is the most important island for breeding seabirds in the eastern Caribbean. Hundreds of Brown Boobies, Brown Noddies, Bridled Terns, and Sooty Terns nest on Sombrero. And they nest everywhere. Magnificent Frigatebirds roost on the island; however, we found no evidence of nesting. We did not see Roseate Terns, although others (Gladfelter et al., and Pritchard in RAMSAR) did. Roseates move around year-to-year and it is not unusual to have them breeding on an island in one year and not the next, but the habitat is certainly suitable.

We saw no evidence of rats and only approximately 16 Laughing Gulls and so threats from predation are exceptionally low. The flying fish were astoundingly abundant as they flew off the bow wake of the boat.

Of particular note are the nesting Masked Boobies. Perhaps about 50 pairs nest here...very important considering their low numbers in the local vicinity.

All those concerned who want to comment should get those comments ready. According to ICF Kaiser, the com-

ment period should open sometime in August, but where to send those comments is still unclear. Kaiser will keep me posted. The EIS should be available — either hard copy or web.

For more information check <http://www.ICFKaiser.com>.

From what I could observe of the other offshore islands near Anguilla...all are heavily vegetated and have numerous nesting Laughing Gulls. Not even an option for most terns to colonize. Probably have rats as well.

Let's keep up the pressure. This is an island that must be protected

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SOCIETY MEMBERS WITH INTEREST IN THIS IMPORTANT CONTROVERSY SHOULD BECOME INVOLVED.

ANGUILLIANS CALL IT SOMBRERO. Not Sombrero Island or Sombrero Cay—just Sombrero. Sombrero is the northernmost islet in the Lesser Antilles. It is a 95-acre rock, one-mile long and a quarter-mile wide, 38 miles from Anguilla and separated from the mainland by the Dog and Prickly Pear Passage. The relatively flat top of the rock is 40 feet above the surface of the water yet the treacherous northern rollers are known to wash over the entire island even on relatively calm days.

Sombrero is best known for its Lighthouse. The flashing beam, 166 feet above sea level, protects ships passing from the Atlantic Ocean to the Caribbean Sea through the Anegada Passage. This important landmark (which I understand is soon to be automated) has appeared on St. Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla stamps in 1954 and again in 1963. Anguilla's first definitive two-cent stamp issue in 1967 also depicted the Sombrero Lighthouse.

The original lighthouse came into operation on January 1st 1868 and was run by the American company which had begun mining phosphate there in 1860. By 1893, the lighthouse was taken over by the British Board of Trade, which continued to administer the new lighthouse that was opened in 1962 after the destruction caused by Hurricane Donna in 1960. The lighthouse keepers can tell how windblown waves reach unimaginable heights up the light tower during the hurricane season.

Former Chief Minister, Sir Emil Gumbs, can recount a number of intriguing stories about the rigours of transporting and loading construction materials for the Lighthouse in the days when the Warspite ruled the waves. Writing about the St. Martin-Anguilla Connection in the *Archaeological and Historical Society Review* 1981-1985, Don Mitchell Q.C., mentions the fact that "in the 1870's French and Dutch men worked on the English lighthouse of Sombrero." This writer has also told the story of the Seaman Abandoned on Sombrero and that of Sombrero and the Common Law in previous issues of *Anguilla Life* magazine.

The period of phosphate mining by the Americans lasted for about twenty years and the following description of the process, taken from Derriman's book *Marooned*, provides an explanation for the Sombrero landscape as it appears today.

"The barren rock was equipped with a light railway, a steam rock crusher and accommodation for the workers, with loading points set up on the shoreline. By 1876, some 3,000 tons were being shipped each year. The phosphate was found in pockets in the rock which could be worked only by blasting. When surface reserves had been exploited the Americans turned to the sea. Now divers had to drill holes underwater and insert blasting charges. After the explosion, loosened portions of rock were hoisted to the surface, an enormously expensive operation that could not be carried on indefinitely. By 1890 production had fallen greatly so the workings were abandoned. The graves of seven workers who died there can be seen today."

The remains of the phosphate works, the graves, the many experiences which the four keepers and cook have had over the years and of course the lighthouse, are all part of Anguilla's cultural heritage.

However, Sombrero is also important for the endemic black lizard (*Ameiva carvina*) and for the bird life which contribute richly to Anguilla's biodiversity. A number of species of special concern can be found on the island, which is considered to be the best seabird breeding location in the region. A three-day survey of bird life conducted by representatives of ICF Kaiser on Sombrero in July 1998 found hundreds of Brown Boobies, Brown Noddy Terns, Bridled Terns, and Sooty Terns nesting everywhere. About 50 pairs of Masked Boobies were found and this is significant, as the numbers of that species in this area are low. Magnificent Frigate Birds roost on Sombrero, but apparently do not nest there.

Sombrero's high biological value is due to a number of features such as:

- its isolation,
- its relative lack of human contact,
- its unique geographic location in relation to migratory routes, wind and current regimes,
- its special nesting and breeding conditions, and
- its high probability of unique species.

This is why leading international organizations such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the American Bird Conservancy, BirdLife International, and the regional organization Island Resources Foundation are all lobbying strongly against the proposal by Beal Aerospace Ltd. of Texas to establish a rocket launching facility on Sombrero.

The Anguilla National Trust has requested that a public meeting be part of the Environmental Impact Assessment so questions about the effects of rocket launching on the cultural artifacts and the wildlife can be answered. The island does not have sufficient information about rocket launching nor do we have persons with the technological expertise for the proposed project to offer significant employment opportunities to Anguillians. In addition, the proposed facility does not seem compatible with the Anguilla Archaeological and Historical Society's plan to offer day tours to Sombrero for its historical and ecological value.

Finally, the history of exploitation and exhaustion of Sombrero's phosphate resources raises questions about what will happen when rapid changes in rocket launching technology render the Beal facility obsolete. Will we still have Sombrero? This is why both the British Government and the Government of Anguilla have given every assurance that the project will not proceed without reviewing the findings of an Environmental Impact Study. It is hoped that the people of Anguilla will have access to the report and that their responses will be considered in making the final decision.

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