

“PROTECTED FOR WHAT?”

For centuries, protected areas (PAs) have been used worldwide to encourage the sustainable use of, and equitable distribution of benefits derived from natural resource conservation. Defined by the World Conservation Union (IUCN, 1994) as *“areas of land and/or sea especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and natural and associated cultural resources, and managed through legal or other effective means”*, the number of protected areas is ever increasing as the means to achieve conservation objectives.

In January 2007, the number of PAs worldwide stood at 107,034¹, and included national parks and landmarks, wildlife and marine reserves, historic sites, protected landscapes and resource management areas, among others. These areas were designated mainly to conserve biological diversity, i.e., the variety of flora and fauna, and the ecosystems within which these thrive. Of these, a relatively small percentage is found within the Caribbean region, and aim in part, to conserve the endemic plant and animal species (species not found anywhere else) of the region.

Despite their popularity for biodiversity conservation, PAs are also valuable socially and economically, and to support national development. Benefits include the provision of opportunities for employment, livelihood support, and income from the sale of associated goods and services. They are also useful in educational development and scientific research, and provide food, clean water, recreation and inspiration. The establishment of PAs also lends to the protection of natural attractions which serve as assets for the long-term viability of the vital tourism industry, and which help to foster national pride.

Notwithstanding, the term ‘protected area’ usually gives rise to the perception of ‘restricted access and prohibited use of resources’, but this depends in part on the nature, reasons for protection, and management regimes of the designated areas. Specifically in the small islands of the Caribbean, the limited land and natural resources results in their use and often exploitation by communities in and around PAs to support livelihoods. Noting that restricted access to resources in these islands can lead to poverty increases and added degradation, the focus of conservation must revolve more on the **sustainable use** of the resources, i.e. current use in a manner which also allows for future use. National examples of PAs designated for sustainable resource use include the internationally lauded Soufriere Marine Management Area (SMMA), and the recently declared Pointe Sable Environmental Protection Area (PSEPA) on the island’s south-east coast.

Charged with the conservation of the natural, historical and cultural heritage of the country, the Saint Lucia National Trust in 1988 embarked on a 4 year journey which culminated in the publication of a System of Protected Areas for Saint Lucia. The Systems Plan, as it is commonly known, proposed 27 sites for designation as protected areas, and was seen as a practical means to integrate conservation needs into national sustainable development. It was, however, not officially adopted at the national level, and as such, is not a legally binding document for resource conservation.

¹ World Database on Protected Areas (<http://sea.unep-wcmc.org/wdbpa/index.htm>)

In 2004, the Government of Saint Lucia signed on to the OECS Protected Areas and Associated Livelihoods (OPAAL) Project, a regional initiative geared towards the conservation of globally significant biodiversity in the region through the creation of an integrated system of protected areas. The project is executed regionally by the OECS Environment and Sustainable Development Unit, and nationally by the Saint Lucia National Trust. The OPAAL Project lends support to the ongoing revision of the System of Protected Areas, a process which has also gained the support of the Government.

Today, the Trust continues to move toward the ultimate goal of an effectively managed System of Protected Areas for Saint Lucia, to conserve critical resources for use and enjoyment by both present and future generations. The Trust will continue to advocate on these issues, and welcomes input from all stakeholders. For further information, or to lend your assistance to the process, please contact us at 452-5005, or by e-mail at natrust@candw.lc.

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Caption: Picture of Pointe Sables Environmental Protection Area taken from Moule-a-Chique



Caption: Picture of Pointe Sable Environmental Protection Area taken by Piton Productions, 2006