

Honourable Earl D. Deveaux MP
Minister of Public Works and Transport
Commonwealth of the Bahamas

Greetings

I am honoured to serve as host for this high level Global Island Partnership event representing the Right Honourable Hubert Alexander Ingraham, Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas.

According to data from the Global Island Partnership, "The Caribbean Basin has almost 8,000 square miles of coral reefs that sustain a wealth of biodiversity," including over "1,400 species of fish, 300 bird and mammal species found nowhere else on earth, and six of the world's seven species of endangered sea turtles. Millions of people depend directly on the Caribbean region's natural resources for both food and income."¹

The Bahamas alone boasts a marine territory covering over 100,000 square miles that encompasses a unique confluence of landform types, wetlands both saline and freshwater varieties, mangroves, blue holes, creek systems, shallow water banks, deep ocean trenches like the Tongue of the Ocean off of the Island of Andros, and marine estuaries which hosts a range of terrestrial and marine resources important to the region; especially the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean, and the Western Atlantic. In fact, it is claimed that the west coast of Andros, the largest island of The Bahamas, serves as the greatest marine estuary for the entire Western Atlantic. The Bahamas' coral reefs account for roughly 5% of the world's total reef systems, surpassing that of Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

The Government of the Bahamas recognized early on the unique contribution of the Marine environment and the ecological fragility of the system, and its importance as a vital source of food, recreation, and income;

A key deliverable of the National System of Marine Protected Areas is the development of a Master Plan, in support of our country's economic engine, based on tourism and our way of life. Key components of the Master Plan include an Ecological Gap Analysis, Assessment of Management Effectiveness, Capacity Action Plan and a Sustainable Finance Plan.

The Ecological Gap Analysis of the existing protected areas system provides an overall picture of the current level of protection for major habitats and key species.

Significantly, throughout The Bahamas, targets of greatest importance to the national economy such as systems that protect groundwater resources, beaches, mangroves, spawning aggregations of economically important fish species, and coral reefs, have the greatest threat from exploitation unless they receive legal protection. Fortunately, in the context of The Bahamas, the majority of these sensitive targets remain in areas that are relatively untouched by development and human impact. They are therefore eligible for policy intervention, in the timeframe enunciated by Prime Minister Ingraham and established by the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The Assessment of Management Effectiveness has identified four (4) key threats to the Protected Areas system:

- Invasive species;
- Cross-boundary issues with land surrounding protected areas;

¹ Convention on Biological Diversity Global Island Partnership Programme <http://www.cbd.int/island/glispa.shtml>

- Illegal fishing; and
- Tourism and tourism-related conversion for development.

The Capacity Action Plan identified mechanisms and targeted activities designed to address key threats to the Protected Areas system; as well as provide solutions to administrative challenges, such as limited human resource capacity, and lack of technical expertise, to cover the vast expanse of ocean the Bahamian archipelago spans.

On a per capita basis, the Bahamas contribution to the management of our protected areas system is significant. Historically, Government funding for protected areas has averaged approximately US\$3 million per annum. The Financial Needs Assessment for Marine Protected Areas in fiscal year 2008/09 estimated expenditures at US\$11 million. Presently, available funding for management of Marine Protected Areas in The Bahamas is US\$6.0 million. A financial gap of US\$5 million exists.

The Sustainable Finance Plan component of the Master Plan gives projections for financial gaps over the next ten years, if current funding mechanisms continue to be the only methods for financing protected area management.

The establishment of Protected Area Trust Funds via the Caribbean Challenge will be an important source of additional financing. It is the hope of the Government of the Bahamas that the Trust Fund will be built beyond its initial US\$12 million, to a level that will enable more than US\$1million being provided annually for management of the system within four years.

Overall, the Master Plan development process has resulted in significant progress throughout The Bahamas in terms of identifying gaps and deficiencies within our National System of Protected Areas. The Master Plan has provided the added benefit of improving communication and coordination between environmental protection and management agencies; and has also increased awareness amongst key stakeholders regarding the role and benefits of protected areas in biodiversity conservation.

It is expected that through dedication of resources to such agencies, implementation of the Master Plan will be facilitated; resulting in preservation and protection of The Bahamas' most significant resource.

Like The Bahamas, many nations throughout the Caribbean region are home to fragile marine ecosystems that must be properly managed and balanced with both social and economic development. We share the experiences of The Bahamas with you - the establishment of The Bahamas National Trust through an Act of Parliament; the creation of the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park; and development of The Bahamas National System of Marine Protected Areas. This was done not solely to demonstrate what can be done; but also to serve as a reminder that effective environmental management requires commitment of resources, teamwork, consistency, planning, follow up and continuity.

In our quest to conserve the invaluable natural resources which sustains livelihood on many of our Small Island Developing States, the people of the Caribbean will undoubtedly continue to face unique challenges; particularly as they relate to threats to biodiversity, geography, distance, and limited fiscal and human resource capacity.

It is imperative that leaders at all levels build effective working relationships and partnerships with statutory and non-governmental organizations; share knowledge and experiences, skills and technologies; and together identify new, robust and innovative financial mechanisms which will constitute viable and sustainable revenue sources.

In so doing, we can achieve the objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity, and together make our shared vision for greater conservation of biological diversity and sustainable use of the earth's natural resources, a reality.

We must act today in order to meet the challenges that global biodiversity faces, such as the projected impacts of climate change. We must act, because, we can serve no greater public good than to conserve, protect, and sustainably utilize the invaluable marine and terrestrial resources that support our people, enhance our culture, and improve *all* our livelihoods.

It is therefore my pleasure to join our partners, The National Implementation Support Partnership and the Global Island Partnership initiative; and our leaders, especially my Prime Minister, in sharing this important launch and in hosting this event.

We urge our partner to join us in this challenge. Let us take on this compelling mission to save the resources which contribute so enormously to our way of life.

Thank you.