

ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES IN T&T OVER THE LAST 50 YEARS

FROM WATER POLLUTION TO A GREEN ECONOMY



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A useful benchmark to begin examining the above question, is the *Report of the Water Pollution Committee* published in March 1962 as Independence Day approached. This committee appointed by the Governor General and chaired by Mr Justice J.R. Blagden, met and received memoranda or interviewed interested parties from 1959-1960. Its remit was “to examine the problems of the pollution of rivers, inland and coastal waters and agricultural land by oil, sewage and effluent from factories and mills, and to recommend such measures of control as may be necessary in the overall interests of Trinidad and Tobago”. Among some of its noteworthy recommendations were:-

- Declaration of the Caroni River from its junction with the Mousica down to the sea, together with its tributaries the Mousica and Tacarigua as open drains with permission to discharge trade effluents therein.
- Introduction of a Pollution Control Ordinance.
- Establishment of a Pollution Control Authority.
- Institution of a Sewerage Scheme or Schemes which will undertake the reception of both domestic and industrial effluent.
- Introduction of an Industrial, Agricultural and Fisheries Land Zoning Plan.

So where are we 50 years later with regard to implementing these recommendations? Fortunately, thinking has improved with regard to the Caroni River and its tributaries being declared “open drains”. This is because since 2001 the Water Pollution Rules 2001 are in force under the Environmental Management Act 2000. Perhaps also, the passing of the Environmental Management Act 1995 (rev. 2000) and the establishment of the Environmental Management Authority (EMA) 32 years post-Independence might be regarded as responses to the calls for a Pollution Control Ordinance and the establishment of a Pollution Control Authority. The EMA

has also created a National Environmental Policy, Certificate of Environmental Clearance Rules, Environmentally Sensitive Areas Rules, Environmentally Sensitive Species Rules but as yet Waste and Hazardous Waste Rules and Air Pollution Rules are still outstanding.

The matter of nationwide Sewerage Schemes was first addressed in the Lock Joint (America Ltd) Sewerage Extension Project of 1966 in which over 320 kilometres of street sewers and 5,000 manholes were installed in San Fernando, Arima and Port of Spain. A major, more recent development is the 2004 commissioning of the WASA Beetham wastewater treatment plant (WWTP) which began to treat domestic waste from Greater Port of Spain. It is worth noting that effluent from this plant meets the strictest environmental standards. An associated problem is the numerous non-functioning WWTPs from various housing developments scattered across the country, 38 of which WASA has assumed responsibility for since 2004. Looking forward, six regional WWTPs are planned for the East-West corridor and these plants will ultimately lead to the elimination of numerous small WWTPs that are currently in operation thus hopefully providing wastewater coverage to 75 per cent of the population by 2015.

The next significant recommendation made by the Water Pollution Committee, related to the need for environmental issues to be included in a land zoning plan. This was first addressed in the 1982 National Physical Development Plan of Trinidad and Tobago laid in Parliament pursuant to the requirements of the Town and Country Planning Act 29 of 1960. The two volumes of the plan present a survey of the nation’s physical characteristics, natural resources, population, economy, physical and social infrastructure, housing, land tenure, environment and settlement patterns, and an analysis of the spatial system and development potential. Unfortunately this plan which is required by law to be reviewed every 5

years is now obsolete, never having been revised in the 30 years since it was created. In the 50th year of Independence however, the situation is about to change as the Ministry of Planning and Sustainable Development is developing a new National Spatial Development Strategy to replace the obsolete National Physical Plan of 1982. Inclusion of conservation areas which provide ecosystem services that support people in the context of sustainable development is a significant aspect of this strategy. Trinidad and Tobago still retains significant forest cover because built development has largely concentrated in urban areas of both Trinidad and Tobago. The system of Forest Reserves maintained by the Forestry Division since colonial times and the conservation of the Main Ridge Forest Reserve in Tobago by the Tobago House of Assembly (THA) as a protected area (the oldest in the Western Hemisphere) since 1762 has helped ensure that more than half of the twin island state still remains under 'green' cover.

In the years since the 1962 *Report of the Water Pollution Committee*, the Cabinet has appointed other follow-up committees on 15th October 1970 to *Consider the Question of Pollution* and on 17th November 1978 to *look into the matter of pollution, the restoration of quarrying sites and to make recommendations*. These committees highlighted previously unmentioned environmental issues which are still concerns today, such as the need "to preserve areas of special ecological significance" and the need to avoid "visual pollution" and "indiscriminate dumping". The conflicts with quarrying and similar development activities with human habitation are still very relevant issues in 2012. The general feeling among the population would seem

to be that environmental enforcement is weak and the right balance between environment and development has not yet been achieved by the 50th anniversary of Independence.

So where do we go from here? Promising signs are on the horizon, finally a dedicated Ministry of Environment and Water Resources has been created. Secondly, the creation of a new Ministry of Planning and Sustainable Development for the first time elevates Sustainable Development to an explicit policy goal with the intent of attaining balance between the social, economic and environmental objectives. The government's Medium Term Policy Framework 2011-14 sets out a 'Green Economy' framework to address this interrelationship and an associated institutional framework to address the structures required to support sustainable development. Time will tell. ■

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Nariva River on Trinidad's east coast. Photograph: Stephen Broadbridge

T&T's waterways: no longer "open sewers"