

# THE EVOLUTION OF ECOTOURISM IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

## A SECRET WAITING TO BE REVEALED



**COURTENAY ROOKS**  
 Adventurer, Naturalist and  
 Eco Tourism Professional,  
 Trinidad and Tobago

Gasparee Caves,  
 Chaguaramas, Trinidad

Think of rugged mountain ranges that crash into jagged coastlines or gently slip into long plains and rolling hills that beg to be explored. Blessed with diverse South American ecosystems of rainforests, wetlands, savannas and so much more, Trinidad and Tobago shares both South American and Caribbean geology, natural history and amazing habitats. Put into this dream destination a massive network of trails for hiking, birding, or mountain biking with long river systems for kayaking or splashing in. And, for good measure add world famous eco-lodges, rare and fascinating wildlife, all on islands whose culture gave birth to distinctive forms of music that in turn gave the Caribbean its rhythm and there you will have paradise.

Lying just seven miles off Venezuela's coast, separated by the Gulf of Paria which only gains a depth of 30 metres, you can easily see South America from Trinidad, and during Ice Ages you could have walked there. This was possible

because during ice ages sea levels were lower by a minimum of 100 metres and more. This connects T&T to the South American plethora, hence in essence we are South American in nature on tiny Caribbean islands.

We have over 460 bird species, over 100 mammals, over 100 reptiles and amphibian species, over 620 butterfly species and more than an astounding 2,000 flowering plants; amongst the greatest variety for any island on Earth, certainly more than the rest of the Caribbean combined. With all this wildlife in a massive variety of habitats from wetlands, rain forest-covered mountain ranges, elfin woodlands, coral reefs to rugged dynamic coasts, Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) is poised to be the Caribbean's premiere eco-adventure destination. So far though, it has been a mostly untapped gem waiting to be discovered.

Ecotourism is the truest form of sustainable tourism where symbiotic relationships are formed between government, private enterprise and rural communities in ways that benefit everyone and everything, particularly wildlife and wild spaces. This resource can be used as a vehicle to improve rural communities, providing careers that all lead to conservation of nature instead of potentially destructive activities. In fact ecotourism has its genesis in conservation.

The early roots of nature conservation in T&T began with the preservation of Tobago's Main Ridge in 1776 for the protection of the rains. The protection of the Main Ridge subsequently led to development being stopped on all high hills, which led to forest reserves, scientific reserves and wildlife reserves such as the Caroni Swamp.

Later in, 1891, Trinidad joined the conservation movement with the creation of the T&T Field Naturalists' Club. Members of this illustrious group were the protagonists for the formation of several key agencies for the preservation and management of the environment, including: the European Valley



All photographs: Stephen Broadbridge

Zoo, the Institute Of Marine Affairs, the Environmental Management Authority, and Environment Tobago.

The Asa Wright Nature Centre, some would say T&T's first eco-lodge, also owes its beginning in part to members of the Field Naturalists' Club. In 1967 Spring Hill Estate was purchased from Asa Wright by environmentalists and birders establishing the nature centre as a Not-for-Profit Trust to "protect part of the Arima Valley in a natural state and to create a conservation and study area for the protection of wildlife and for the enjoyment of all."

The honour of being first however, goes to the Pax Guest House which started in 1916; its situation on the edge of forests and immediacy to initially the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture, then the University of the West Indies, meant that visiting researchers chose Pax for its proximity to the university and to nature. This meant that the folks with vast knowledge in frogs, birds, bugs, snakes, butterflies, plants and all nature were often at the dinner table sharing stories and knowledge. In Tobago, it was the Blue Waters Inn that developed a long history as a birders' and divers' destination of choice.

By the late 1970s these lodges concentrated their efforts in the birding market with growing success. Trinidad and Tobago boasts more species of birds than the rest of the Caribbean combined; the distinguished neotropical ornithologist Richard French's *Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*, made T&T one of the world's most well known birding destinations. The combination of biodiversity, being English speaking and having world-renowned guides make it an ideal destination for the main birding markets of England and North America.

A brilliant aspect to the birding ecotourism product is the Caroni Bird Sanctuary and the Scarlet Ibis that reside there. Starting with the Nanan family in the 1940s, American GIs were taken into the swamp initially to hunt ducks.

However, this was quickly eclipsed by sight of thousands of Scarlet Ibis coming into roost at sunset and hunting tours morphed to ecotours. Illegal hunting of the ibis up to the 1980s nearly wiped out the local population; numbers dwindled from over a hundred thousand to less than 2,500 birds by the late '80s. Fortunately, public consciousness swayed from not really caring to loving the ibis as the ecotours in the swamp gained momentum. Hunting the birds became more difficult and new hunters did not wish to hunt something that was a source of national pride. The population of Scarlet Ibis has now rebounded to over 15,000 in the Caroni Swamp and at least another 15,000 in other west coast swamps.

Other birding hot spots developed through T&T; Kernaham Trace in Nariva Swamp, Cumuto, Waller Field, Roussillac Swamp, Oropuche Swamp, Waterloo and other west coast mud flats, Main Ridge Tobago, Buccoo Swamp, Little Tobago all became standard



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Malachite Butterfly, one of 630 species in Trinidad and Tobago

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places where visiting birders turned lifelong dreams to reality. Oh and let's not forget the fragrant Trincity Sewage Treatment Ponds. As cow manure feeds plants, human manure feed fishes, frogs and bugs that birds find delicious.

A tip of the hat must go to the guides who pioneered, like Jogie and Roodal Ramlal in Trinidad and Adolphus James and David Rooks in Tobago. As is said, they have forgotten more than we will ever know.

Ecotourism in T&T has also come to the rescue of two other endangered species: the Trinidad Piping Guan (Pawi) and the Leatherback Turtle. By 2000, the Pawi was under tremendous pressures from over hunting through its range in North and Central Trinidad. The Forestry Division, along with the Pawi Study group and Eco tour guides started the Pride in Pawi Programme that encouraged members of the public to embrace the Pawi as "We Pawi" a shy bird whose genetic makeup is uniquely

Trinidadian, much like most Trinbagonians.

Conservation of Leatherback Turtles had a more rocky beginning, the first step was made by the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club who visited Matura in the late '60s and were appalled at the sight of over 50 turtles hacked to death on the beach. Led by Professor Peter Bacon, research was undertaken throughout the '70s which led to the laws being changed. This also led the author in his first steps to ecotourism as he tagged turtles in 2 or 3 day camps on Grand Tacaribe. Truly, lying on a beach at 1am with a billion stars and dinosaurs morphs one's spirit. A heart-wrenching video did the same to many in the Matura Community who then formed Nature Seekers, a community based organisation dedicated to conservation of Leather Back Turtles.

They forged a very difficult path battling government, friends, family, and even environmentalists until their consistent efforts



Left: Amazonia Campestris.  
Right: a Trinidad Motmot eating a small snake



bore fruit. Their single-minded perseverance has led to internationally acclaimed success; which has since been repeated in Grande Riviere, Fishing Pond and Tobago. It must be noted that Dr Carol James, then of the Forestry Division was an early proponent and her support was critical to their success. It is no idle boast that many beaches have gone from a 60 per cent slaughter rate to 0 per cent. Each year literally millions of baby turtles enter the sea alive due to these communities' efforts. Just as notable is that each year ecotourism careers grow as guides become more professional, better informed and organised, and lodges, guesthouses and B&Bs gain stronger footholds.

T&T remains blessed with a trail network that is unsurpassed and ancient. They were used for hunting, farming and trade routes for First Nations moving between communities, farms, hunting and religious sites. Early European settlers developed these routes into

what are known as Donkey Trails in order for supplies and produce to move easily between settlements. Subsequently, these trails were maintained by the government into the '70s, though as the country's focus shifted into more urban activities it has been mostly left up to the hikers, hunters and mountain bikers to maintain these networks.

In the '90s active and adventure ecotourism was introduced through Caribbean Discovery Tours, Wildways and Rooks Nature tours who provided professionally led hiking, wildlife and kayaking tours. Some favourites emerged such as the sensory overload of Tamana Cave with its hundreds of thousands of bats and pungent metres of dung crawling with roaches and other nightmarish creatures, as well as kayaking in Nariva's tea waters to see the world's loudest primates, howler monkeys, and diving into Gasparee Caves' emerald cenote. Tobago also became famous for its

**Ecotourism in T&T has come to the rescue of at least two endangered species: the Trinidad Piping Guan (Pawi) and the Leatherback Turtle**



The Northern Range Mountains, Trinidad

**T&T remains blessed with a trail network that is unsurpassed and ancient**

scuba diving, which stopped the rape of Black Coral sea beds. The turn of the century brought mountain biking, rock climbing, rappelling and most recently zip lining to make things a bit more adventurous. Oh and lest some folks get vexed with me I forgot to mention kite surfing, surfing, and windsurfing!

The key to all T&T’s adventurous activities is that they are all tremendous fun. There are no thousand foot cliffs to climb or death defying mountain biking descents or even man eating sharks to wrestle, every activity is a wonderful

kick in the pants and guaranteed to plaster a big smile across even a very sullen mug! How can fruit off a tree and a curry breakfast, mountain biking to a waterfall that you rappel, swim under, go to hear steel drums, English tea with French desserts, local beer and curry dinner with friends not be fun?

So get out there and enjoy all the ridiculously fun, beautiful eco and adventure tourism opportunities Trinidad and Tobago has to offer! It will be awesome – I say that way too often, but it’s the simple truth. ■



**INTERVIEW WITH THE HONOURABLE STEPHEN CADIZ MP**  
Minister of Tourism,  
Trinidad and Tobago

**How important is tourism to the Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) economy?**

The tourism sector today accounts for around 4.5 per cent of our GDP. It employs directly 30,000 people and indirectly another 30,000. Those kinds of figures are nothing to scoff at, so it gives us a good platform to build on for the future, and we intend to do so.

**What sets T&T’s tourism offering apart from its competitors in the region?**

Trinidad and Tobago is an incredibly diverse place – in every respect, from our ethnicity and our geography to our incredible biodiversity. In many ways, Trinidad and Tobago is unique in the Caribbean, because we share many characteristics with South America, and we need to capitalise on that uniqueness. If we do that, I think in a very short space of time we will be one of the premiere destinations in the Caribbean.

The Caribbean, of course, is a world-class destination itself, so we need to show how different and diverse Trinidad and Tobago is whilst remaining firmly part of the Caribbean experience.

**How do you intend to encourage more ‘multi-destination’ tourism in T&T?**

We are a twin-island state and each island is very, very different. Even as a local, when I go

to Tobago it’s a whole other experience coming from Trinidad, and that is something we can take advantage of in terms of marketing to different market niches.

Tobago has the world’s oldest protected rainforest, which lends itself to eco-tourism, as well as some of the region’s best reefs and beaches, which appeal to divers and water-sports enthusiasts. Trinidad, for its part, has a well-developed sports infrastructure that can be leveraged to capitalise on the popularity of major sporting events, as well as boosting our attractiveness as a place where athletes can come to train. Trinidad is also a very active and lively place, with many festivals and cultural events throughout the year, and both islands can be promoted as destinations for eco-tourism, heritage tourism, and business and convention tourism.

**What are your priorities in the short-to-medium term?**

We have a number of low-hanging fruit that we are going after in Tobago, such as cruise liner arrivals and additional airlift, so I believe that within a short period of time Tobago’s international visitor numbers will be back up where they belong. I believe we have a very strong base to work from and we are going to build on that for both Trinidad and Tobago. ■