

SEPTEMBER 29, 2016

# #GoatIslandsSaved!

## Conservationists Warmly Welcome Jamaican Government Decision Against Transshipment Port in Protected Area



*Jamaican Prime Minister Andrew Holness in the bird-watching hide at the Caribbean Coastal Area Management Foundation's (C-CAM) Wetland Information Centre in the Portland Bight Protected Area. The hide is dedicated to the late Jamaican ornithologist Robert Sutton. (Photo: C-CAM)*

It's not often that Caribbean environmentalists like Diana McCaulay, CEO of the Jamaica Environment Trust (JET), have serious cause for celebration. However, McCaulay and her team of "Jetters" are thrilled with the news that the Jamaican Government has decided not to proceed with a transshipment port at Goat Islands, an ecologically sensitive area in the Portland Bight Protected Area (PBPA), the largest nature reserve on the island – and an Important Bird Area.

The port, to be constructed by China Harbour Engineering Company as part of a major logistics hub project, would have destroyed Great and Little Goat Islands, its fish sanctuaries, and mangrove forest—the largest in Jamaica and home to many endemic and resident birds such as the globally-threatened West Indian Whistling-Duck, the near-threatened Plain Pigeon, Jamaican Lizard Cuckoo, Jamaican Oriole, Jamaican Owl, Jamaican Tody, Sad Flycatcher, Jamaican Spindalis, and Jamaican Mango, all among the 17 endemics that occur in the area. The Bahama Mockingbird is only found in the PBPA in Jamaica; while Magnificent Frigatebird and Brown Noddy nest on the Portland Bight cays. The area also provides critical habitat for the White-crowned Pigeon and countless migratory warblers and waterbirds. It would also have negatively impacted the breeding grounds for the critically endangered Jamaican Iguana, in the dry limestone forest habitat of the nearby Hellshire Hills.

An almost audible sigh of relief

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and delight echoed in cyberspace after Jamaica's social media savvy Prime Minister Andrew Holness tweeted to JET's CEO on September 22:

"Someone asked about Goat Island at the #TownHall. Please see response." The attachment noted: "*#TownHall Re: Question about Goat Islands. ANS: We have already taken a decision that there are other locations that would do less environmental damage. We are going ahead with a logistics port but not at Goat Island...*"

The Prime Minister was in Queens, New York that evening, conducting a Town Hall Meeting with Jamaicans from the diaspora. Diana McCaulay responded: "*Lost for words. Wow. Am so glad. Will RT.*" Finance Minister Audley Shaw subsequently tweeted a photograph of protesters with a "Save Goat Islands" placard, with the message: "*Saved! The Government has listened and carefully made a decision in the best interest of Jamaica. #Governance*"

The decision came after over three years of hard campaigning by JET, supported by hundreds of conservation organizations and concerned individuals both at home and abroad. Diana McCaulay comments: "I was overjoyed to get the news that the Government of Jamaica is proceeding with the logistics hub, but NOT at Goat Islands. Although the campaign to Save Goat Islands has not been as high profile as it was initially, JET has continued to work behind the scenes to convince the new Jamaica Labour Party administration to relocate the planned hub due to the environmental damage it would cause."



*The Jamaican Iguana (Cyclura collei) was declared extinct in 1948. After it was rediscovered by a man and his dog, hunting wild pigs in 1990, this still critically endangered species became the subject of a successful breeding program involving a number of scientists at home and overseas. (Photo: Robin Moore)*

called the ongoing breeding program "one of the greatest success stories in conservation science." Now the possibility exists for Goat Islands to become a sanctuary for the critically endangered lizard – and a place for Jamaicans to relax and enjoy the stunning landscape and marine environment.



*The Bahama Mockingbird is restricted to coastal dry limestone forest in the Portland Bight Protected Area, which is the largest designated Important Bird Area in Jamaica. (Photo: Emma Lewis)*

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In a joint press release on September 28, the International Iguana Foundation (IIF) and Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC) congratulated Diana McCaulay, JET and the Jamaican Government for this happy conclusion. They noted the remarkable 25-year collaboration among several conservation organizations to recover and re-establish the Jamaican Iguana – which was deemed extinct until a hunter stumbled across one in the Hellshire Hills in 1990. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)

As celebrations quieten down a little, Diana McCaulay observes, with a note of caution: *“We hope the Prime Minister will make a formal statement in Parliament, as well as hold a press conference on this and other pending environmental decisions, such as mining in Cockpit Country. We do want to know where the site of the logistics hub will be...”*

So champagne corks have popped, or perhaps a few rum punches have been downed. Meanwhile, McCaulay is grateful to all those who championed the #SaveGoatIslands campaign, adding: *“JET thanks BirdsCaribbean for its support for the Save Goat Islands campaign.”*

BirdsCaribbean Executive Director, Dr. Lisa Sorenson commented, *“We are elated with the news that the Goat Islands and Portland Bight Protected Area has been spared. We thank our members and partners for supporting this campaign through writing letters to the Jamaican government, signing the petition, and donating time and resources to fight the development. This is a rare conservation victory that we can all be proud of. We commend the Jamaican*



*Magnificent Frigatebirds, Portland Bight Protected Area. (Photo: Lisa Sorenson)*

*government for taking this sound decision that will preserve the unique and extraordinary beauty of this area for present and future generations to enjoy, as well as provide sustainable livelihoods.”*

So, now the “Save Goat Islands” T shirts that environmental campaigners wore at last year’s BirdsCaribbean International Meeting in Kingston can be packed away and preserved as historical items.

And the hashtag has changed to #GoatIslandsSaved.

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