

Environmental and lizards 'tales'

By Orville W. Taylor

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XAYMACA: "THE land of wood and water," is what the Tainos used to call Jamaica. It took us more than 500 years before we realised that they were mistaken for Arawaks. It is taking an even longer time for us to understand that we are destroying our natural heritage and legacy. Be warned! By the time Edward Seaga's love child is able fully to appreciate his contribution to the preservation of Jamaican culture she may not know of the diversity of plants and animals that lived here.

Our national bird is the doctor bird or streamer-tailed humming bird. How many of you have ever seen one? And for those who have, when last? What does a John Crow look like? And I don't mean your spouse. Have you ever seen the Indian Coney, a large rodent that looks like a guinea pig? Where did you last see a Jamaican snake outside of the zoo? Do you understand that crocodiles play an integral role in the environment? Do you realise that the encroachment on their habitats affects your supply of river fish and shrimp? Did you know that the Jamaican iguana was once believed to be extinct and would have been so except for the vigilance and determination of the University of the West Indies (UWI) and Hope Zoo.

#### A NASTY BITE

I won't pretend that the shy iguana is harmless because, if harassed or held it can deliver a nasty bite. However, so will your parakeet, common fowl, puss, dog, hamster and woman. Especially her. Nevertheless, I am quite aware that the average Jamaican is totally petrified of lizards, even those which cannot possibly hurt them.

A Surinamese friend, a little woman, barely taller than a 'condensed tin,' was amazed that her five foot eleven, slightly feminine female roommate was afraid of a tiny 'Polly lizard' that was smaller than her poorly-done acrylic nails. In a statement that left me completely flatfooted, she declared the obvious, while chasing away a 10-inch croaking lizard. "Lizard smaller than me!"

Yet, the phobia that the Amazonian Jamaican revealed is not unique. It pervades the ranks of badmen, police, macho heterosexual males and even pastors. Many a pastor has successfully chased out demons and rebuked evil doers but cowered in mortal terror as a defiant green lizard (the Jamaican anole,) did push-ups and 'long out his tongue'.

Poor pastor truly understood that, as the Bible says, if one is speaking in tongues and no one is there to interpret, then he or she should keep silent. So right, because our lizards do not stick out their tongues. That brightly-coloured sac they display is called a dewlap and it serves to woo females and discourage other males, even if they are gay and attracted by the hue.

Our fear of snakes is understandable because in Africa and India where most of us originate, there are cobras, vipers and 20-odd foot long pythons capable of

swallowing a man whole. An ability not limited to female snakes. Still, none of our Jamaican snakes are dangerous, including our nine-foot Jamaican boas. Neither are any of our lizards harmful. Yet, the inexplicable phobia is best expressed by my elderly neighbour: "All snakes and lizards are dangerous. Those who don't bite you will frighten you to death!"

It is perhaps this fear that has made the governmental agencies less than vigilant in the protection of reptilian habitats. There is a rumour that the only place where Jamaican iguanas are known to still breed outside of captivity is being viewed for sale and hotel development. The UWI scientists have worked assiduously to save this species and have received much international recognition for the effort. It would be a damned shame if such a sell out were to take place. No responsible government should allow this to occur and no Opposition should let it go unnoticed. Let's hope that it is untrue.

Nonetheless, apart from the wanton treatment of our wildlife there is even less governmental scrutiny regarding plant life. The national fruit, the ackee, like most of us is a 'deportee' from Africa. It is the only national plant that is policed to any extent and that is because it is fraught with export challenges.

More pathetic is the national flower, the indigenous *lignum vitae*, the 'wood of life.' Grown without any stimulants it is the hardest wood around. Yet, there are apparently no protective measures to prevent the 'rape' of this national treasure. Outside of protected forestry reserves, nothing prevents the wanton cutting down of these plants to make tourist trinkets and idiotic caricatures such as those which jut out into the road in Fern Gully. This national icon had been so decimated that poachers travel from as far as Trelawny to remove trees next to prime iguana nesting sites in Hellshire. Why can't we stick signs in the airports saying, 'don't buy *lignum vitae*!' Most of our children will never know what this plant is. Ironically, the plant is protected by international law but no local statute.

#### ENDANGERED

Anyway, how many have ever seen the blue mahoe? Despite sounding like an African American pornographic star, it is the national tree. Like the *lignum vitae* it is also endangered and poorly monitored. Which laws restrict or outlaw the possession of the wood from these trees? We must hasten to the point of criminalising the abuse of these plants because as my female environmentalist laments, "hard wood is hard to replace."

On a similar note, a non-native Asian restaurateur had illegal shellfish on his menu. What bothered me was not that being too expensive it was appropriately called 'robster.' Rather, he was selling it out of season.

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