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Bahamas expands marine protected areas by 4.5 million hectares

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An aerial view of Snake Cay, East Abaco Creeks National Park. Photo: Nancy Albury



A cave diver explores East Abaco Creeks blue holes, which offer important habitat for many species. Photo: Brian Kakuk

NASSAU, Bahamas -- In its commitment to the goal of tripling protection of its marine and coastal areas by 2020 under the Caribbean Challenge Initiative (CCI), The Bahamas has significantly expanded its network of marine protected areas. On Monday, Kenred Dorsett, minister of the environment and housing, announced the creation of 15 new parks and three park

expansions, comprising 4.5 million hectares in total.

Helping protect many endangered and threatened species, the parks contain habitat for endangered rock iguanas; nurseries for Nassau grouper, queen conch, and spiny lobster; and nesting and breeding grounds for more than 82% of seabird species that breed in The Bahamas.

With these new parks, the project has exceeded its original target projection of 2.5 million hectares of protected areas.

The Nature Conservancy has worked closely with the ministry of the environment to map the network of protected areas in The Bahamas with an emphasis on the country's marine parks. The parks will benefit local fishers by allowing fish populations to thrive and help create jobs by stimulating tourism. They will also aid in shoreline protection and help ensure food security.

According to Dorsett: "We recognized that biodiversity is about people and our need for food security, medicines, fresh air and water, shelter and a clean and healthy environment in which to live."

He added: "Protected areas constitute an important stock of natural, cultural and social capital, yielding flows of economically valuable goods and services that benefit society, secure livelihoods, and contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals."

The CCI is an effort to triple the coverage of marine managed areas in the Caribbean by 2020 by inspiring Caribbean nations to commit to conserving at least 20% of their marine and nearshore environment. The Bahamas has been a signatory to the CCI since 2008, and in 2014, the country became the first to pass legislation to establish the Bahamas Protected Area Fund, its national conservation trust fund devoted to protected area management.

The trust fund helps ensure that Bahamian marine parks will have a dedicated, sustainable source of revenue to employ staff, galvanize local community support, purchase equipment, build visitor facilities and monitor ecosystem health.

Under the CCI, not only has The Bahamas committed to expanding its protected area network, but it also has committed to improving the effective management of protected areas. The Nature Conservancy will collaborate with the government of The Bahamas and partners to begin developing customized management plans for the newly declared protected areas.

The Conservancy will work with partners to foster the involvement of communities and other stakeholders in the management of the newly declared areas.

"The declaration of these new protected areas marks a tremendous moment for conservation in The Bahamas", says Shenique Albury-Smith, The Nature Conservancy's senior policy advisor for The Bahamas. "Not only are these areas important for the country's iconic wildlife, but they will benefit Bahamian livelihoods as well. These declarations represent a tangible demonstration of the government commitment to protecting our marine resources."