

**CELEBRATING INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY,
MONDAY, 22ND MAY 2006 - Theme : “Protecting Biodiversity in our Dry lands”**

Saving Our Tropical Dry Forest for Sustainable Development

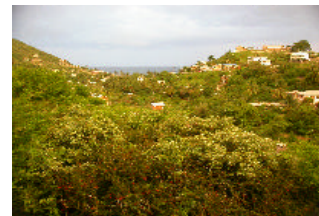
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Life in the tropical dry forest responds to the rhymes of the annual solar cycle, which drive the circulation between the wet and dry seasons. In the dry season, the trees remain dormant, life is on a “go-slow”. Consequently, the name “dry forest” was given. Prior to the rainy season, trees flower and insects appear to pollinate them. The pace of life is hastened once again when the rainy season arrives. The trees produce their leaves again and transform the landscape. In short, in the dry season it is all earth tone. In the rainy season, it is an emerald tangle.

To many people who travel along the Dennery/Vieux Fort highway, the tropical dry forest, which is found on both sides for most of the highway, are wasted lands. On the contrary, in reality, these are not wasted lands and the forest is not dead as the perceived name may suggest.

Unfortunately due to this perception, tropical dry forest has nearly disappeared in St. Lucia. St Lucia has a total of 7,496 hectares of protected forests, of this, a minute 259 hectares is tropical dry forest. Alas! This represents only 0.39 percent of the protected dry forest reserves on the island.

Apart from having less attention given to its protection from human development activities, the dry forest is even more vulnerable to damage, compared to the rain forest because the dry season makes them accessible and easier to burn. Evidence of this is very common during the dry season when we drive from Castries to Vieux Fort.



The tropical dry forest is located along the coast of St. Lucia. Unfortunately this is the area with the highest density of human settlement. Moreover, high infrastructural developments in these areas facilitate more pressure from agricultural, industrial, tourism and other developments, which greatly contribute to the demise of the tropical dry forest.

Who Will Protect Our Dry Forest? The Wildlife Protection Act provides protection for the wild animals, which mainly include birds, reptiles and mammals. However, little and in most cases, no protection is given to their habitat. Therefore the dry forests in St Lucia are exposed to the vagaries of human activities. In this regard, from my point of view, the Fer de Lance Viper should be highly commended, for it has provided some well deserved protection to the dry forest ecosystem in our costal areas where it is still standing. This seemingly very significant symbiotic relationship, between the snake and the forests, could be responsible for sustaining the few patches of dry forest that remain in St Lucia. The snake provides protection against humans and the forests provide shelter.



In the areas where the snakes are present there seem to be minimal disturbance to the forest due to the snake. For example, the North East Coast, which includes Grande Anse and Louvette and in Dennery, the dry forests are less disturbed by human activities as compared to the other areas, such as Gros Islet regions where urban and settlement sprawl is rife. Therefore, the Fer de Lance snake is a blessing in disguise for our dry forests.

The demise of the tropical dry forest, for most parts of St. Lucia, puts us at a significant disadvantage because the dry forest plays a very important role in maintaining the health of our environment, biological diversity and our economy. The dry forest protects human settlement in low-lying areas from flooding. It also protects the coastal waters that support our fisheries and the vital tourism industry from poor quality water due to soil erosion.

Although the dry forests have less overall diversity, when compared to the rainforests, an amazing array of biodiversity is present. Many of our endemic species (plants or animal species which are found only in one defined geographic region) of flora (plants) and fauna (animals) are found in the dry forests. Some of these include birds such as the St. Lucia Wren, the St. Lucia Oriole, the St. Lucia Nightjar, the St. Lucia Black Finch, the St. Lucia Warbler and the White Breasted Thrasher. These include reptiles such as the St. Lucia Anolis, the St. Lucia Iguana, the Fer de Lance, the St. Lucia Racer, and the St. Lucia Whiptail. Our dry forest is the only home for the St. Lucia Wren, the St. Lucia Nightjar, the St. Lucia Racer, the St. Lucia Whiptail, the Fer de Lance and the White Breasted Thrasher.



Without the tropical dry forests, these animals would be without a habitat or a home. Imagine yourself without a home, as is the case for many people in Grenada after the ravages of hurricane Ivan. As a matter of fact, the White Breasted Thrasher, the St. Lucia Nightjar and the St Lucia Iguana are considered to be among the world's most



threatened species of bird and iguana respectively. This is because the dry forest habitat where they are found is constantly fragmented and is disappearing at a rapid rate. Although the Thrasher is unique only to St. Lucia and Martinique, however, 80 percent of the world population is found in St. Lucia. The majority of the White Breasted population appears to be concentrated only in the dry forests between the Bordelais and Praslin dry forests area. On the other hand, the St. Lucia Nightjar and the St. Lucia Iguana appear to be restricted only to the dry forest on the North East Coast of St. Lucia. While the true status of the nightjar is not well documented, the population appears to be very small based on the number of reported sightings and calls heard. For the iguana, scientific studies have revealed that there are only about 600 adults surviving in the wild.

The plants found in the dry forest too are very important. The dry forests consist of trees, shrubs and under growth with varying heights, which form a canopy of lush green foliage in the rainy season that help protect coastal land from soil erosion. The endemic plant species that we have so far found in our dry forests include the Acalypha elizabethae, and Bernardia laurentii.



Other plants found in the dry forests provide a host of goods and services. The Latanyé Palm grows naturally in the dry forests. This palm has been exploited for over one hundred years and is still a source of livelihood for many families who depend on the palm to sustain the local broom industry and themselves. The broom handles also comes from trees grown in the dry forests for example Bois Madam and Bois Gwiye. The mauby sticks that are used for making the beverage are also obtained from trees growing mainly in the dry forests. The forests provide a source of fuel wood for many people who are not fortunate to have a stove at home or for those who need an additional source of fuel. It is also a source of edible fruits such as Balata, Black Berries and Bois Tan. In the honey industry, this type of forest is very important for bee pasture. Plants such as Campeche, Ti Bom, Bois Tan, Glory Cedar and the like are known for producing high quality nectar in honey production.



The protection and conservation of our dry forest has added value in that it improves the aesthetics of our beautiful island. Imagine what would be left in the memories of our

visitors if these lands were to remain bare or strictly under housing and factories. The green image “Simply Beautiful”, which is used to promote St. Lucia as a holiday destination would be a thing of the past. The flowers that emerge during the month of March and April are sights to behold and the different shades of green are aesthetically pleasing to both locals and visitors alike.

So, next time you’re driving or find yourself in the dry forests, I hope that you take the time to reflect on the contribution of this ecosystem to our lives and its contribution to our overall existence in St. Lucia. Moreover, I want you to reflect on how we can take action, collectively or individually, to mitigate the impacts of our activities on this very important biological community.

HAPPY INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY!