

The Environmentally Sensitive Areas-

The Nariva Swamp Managed Resource Protected Area

Located west of Cocos Bay along the Manzanilla Mayaro Road are 11,343 hectares of prime ecosystems. The largest of the Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs), the Nariva Swamp is nestled between the Counties of Mayaro, Nariva and St. Andrew and is proudly recognized as the largest and most diverse freshwater wetland in Trinidad and Tobago containing mangroves, freshwater marsh, palm swamp, freshwater swamp woods and evergreen seasonal forest. It is a prized ecosystem that supports the existence of many rare and endangered species within its boundaries such as the West Indian Manatee- an Environmentally Sensitive Species (ESS) with a population of less than 30, the green anaconda, white-fronted capuchin, red howler monkey, and numerous birds such as the savanna hawk, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, yellow-headed caracara, the majestic blue and gold macaw and yellow bellied macaw, yellow crowned parrot and blue-headed parrot.

Additionally, the Nariva Swamp performs many invaluable ecosystem functions that provide a buffer zone for hurricanes and storms, filter water and provide nesting and breeding sites for various animals. The area also acts as a carbon storage and sequestering site, reducing the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Recognising the area to be a high value biological reserve distinguished for its unique ecological diversity, the site has been protected under the Ramsar Convention since 1992 and was designated as an ESA by the EMA in 2006.

Within this ESA is a distinct rectangular-shaped area referred to as the Bush Bush Wildlife Sanctuary. At 1,554 hectares, the sanctuary consists of hard wood forest and the swamp receives its water from the Navet, Bois Neuf and Gataca rivers. There are approximately 57 species of mammals (including 32 species of bats), 3 species of opossum, three-toed and two-toed anteaters and 13 species of rodents. Apart from its rich fauna variety, the Bush Bush Sanctuary was of significant medical importance in 1959 as several exploratory trips were made to study the endemic cycle of the Yellow Fever virus. Owing to the unique properties of this area, it was declared a wildlife sanctuary in July of 1968. The site is now used for research and prohibits any hunting or harvesting.

Like the Aripo Savannas and the Matura National Park, the Nariva Swamp has been threatened by human activity. Some illegal activities include squatting; the conversion of land to cannabis and rice farming, illegal grazing of livestock in the game sanctuary, overfishing and illegal timber harvesting, illegal hunting and excessive trapping of birds for the pet trade. In 2008, the Environmental Management Authority (EMA) in collaboration with the Forestry Division and the University of the West Indies (UWI) launched a pioneering project, the Nariva Swamp Restoration, Carbon Sequestration and Livelihoods Project (NSRP). This project intends to restore and conserve the Nariva Swamp. The EMA through the NSRP, continuously engages the project communities such as Plum Mitan and Biche as part of its efforts to sustainably manage the area through a co-management approach. Focus is also placed on vibrant communications and public education strategies, aimed at building awareness of the ESA.

To increase public awareness on this ESA and its valuable characteristics, the EMA coordinated a national photography competition in 2013 entitled “Secrets of Nariva.” The photos produced from this competition depicted the many sights of Nariva including ten legged crabs, a young Bois Mulatre tree, the “Figuier” tree (as referred to by locals) with its complex and impressive root structure, a breathtaking site of the mouth of the Nariva River, and the royal palms towering over a serene backdrop. Of course the capuchin monkeys were the stars of this competition!

The Nariva Swamp is a vital feature in our ecosystem and should be protected for generations to come. It is a safe haven for many endangered flora and fauna and an important scientific research site. Through ongoing research, rehabilitation efforts and public awareness activities by the EMA, the Nariva Swamp is regaining its prestige. However, for us to preserve this and other protected ecosystems across Trinidad and Tobago, we should practice the saying by the Baltimore Grotto, “Take nothing but pictures. Leave nothing but footprints. Kill nothing but time.”

For more information visit www.ema.co.tt. If you have any comments or would like to contribute to this column please respond to emacorner@ema.co.tt.



Caption- photo by Donna Berment- “Secrets of Nariva” National Photography Competition



Caption- photo by Kristy Harold- "Secrets of Nariva" National Photography Competition



Caption- photo by Michael Pascal- "Secrets of Nariva" National Photography Competition