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COMMENTARY

Barkers – National Park or Dump?

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By the Green Hornet

During the Christmas holidays, the family decided that we would go and visit Barkers Park – our one and only large-scale national park, launched with great fanfare during Quincentennial year.

We drove through downtown George Town, dwarfed by mega-ships which loomed over the island like mythical monoliths.

Then up West Bay Road and past the ever-growing (in height) monster hotels and condos until we got by the Ritz Fortress and its Fortifications, and entered the clutter of West Bay.

There are no signs to Barkers Park. You have to follow the pointers to Villas Pappagallo – usually nailed to a convenient power pole or tree.

Then you just keep going along a heavily pot-holed gravel road, with collections of dumped garbage alongside it, until you come to the so-called park entrance. The signs are now fading and plants are growing around them. In ten years, they should be completely obscured.

It's hard to realise that it's only three years since the glitz of our Quincentennial celebrations, when the park was officially opened by Prince Edward, the Earl of Wessex.

As part of his busy May 2003 three-day visit, Royal Prince Number Three joined in Cayman's celebration of its maritime past in our 500th year of recorded history.

Flanked by the usual collection of dignitaries (politicians, bureaucrats, et al.), Prince Edward officiated in the inauguration of the Barkers National Park.

The park itself covers 261 terrestrial acres and 2,036 marine acres, for a total of 2,298 acres. It was to be the first national park in Cayman that would "be the cornerstone of a national system of protected areas".

The PR blurb told us: "Within the park's boundary is a prime example of low elevation Caribbean beach ridge forest that provides essential storm protection for the area. Offshore, the mangrove, sea-grass, coral-reef continuum is critical to the ecological health of the adjacent North Sound and the surrounding reef."

Fine words, indeed. And what has happened since the park's dedication? Perhaps we could ask Prince Edward, who is planning another visit to Cayman next month.

Ivan certainly interrupted just about everything in Cayman – except, of course, urban expansion and road-building. But we still only have one real national park. And it is not a pretty sight.

Everywhere you go there is garbage littering the place. The mangroves and other vegetation are growing back after being whipped by Ivan – mangroves which I am sure helped to protect much of eastern and northern West Bay from serious flooding during the storm.

Several organisations, including the National Trust and dms Broadcasting, have organised litter clean-ups, but still the dumpers trash the place.

Despite the eyesore of the garbage, Barkers is alive with bird life. We saw many different species –shorebirds, wading herons and everything in between. We heard them first and then spotted them among the quiet canals and mangrove trees.

It started me thinking about tourism and what we use to attract tourists. We are now pushing the so-called Go East campaign, which will as likely as not end up with us destroying the very thing which makes eastern and northern Grand Cayman attractive: island culture and relative peace and quiet.

Barkers needs fixing up

And yet we have a gem of a park in West Bay that we don't use. Heck, we don't even take care of it, turning it into a garbage dump and a place for illicit meetings.

It wouldn't take much to put in some boardwalks and bird blinds, to access parts of the beach areas still untouched by condo-land. Places where we can enjoy a tranquil afternoon observing nature . . . the very thing that is the focus of the Brac's eco-tourism marketing program.

Put in proper park gates. How much would that cost, for goodness' sake? About the cost of two feet of new highway.

Have the park patrolled and supervised by park wardens, who could be employed by both the Department of Environment and the Department of Environmental Health. They'd have to clean it up and fine the dumpers, too.

Look at the national parks in other countries. On the whole, they are special places that are very attractive to citizens and visitors alike. And they are cared for with pride. Pride in Cayman . . . c'mon, people. We've done it in the Botanic Park.

Working together, government and the National Trust have made that park a showpiece of planning and native vegetation – not to mention the home of the comeback reptilian kid, our Blue Iguana Breeding Programme.

This 65-acre park in the centre of the island was officially opened in 1994 by H.M. Queen Elizabeth II and is located a 25-minute drive from George Town, in North Side.

According to the park's blurbs, it is "a dream that is becoming a reality . . . not only preserving a segment of Cayman's landscape, but also offering a walk through time into the rich floral history of these islands and by demonstration encouraging conservation and horticultural values.

"The Woodland Trail permits an intimate exploration of natural habitats. At just under a mile, it is a leisurely 35-minute walk displaying a variety of plant species, most of which are native to Cayman.

"The trail winds through a varied mosaic of habitats, all inter-related yet distinctly individual. In this diverse woodland you will see huge cacti and other xerophytic plants growing only a few yards from groves of thatch palm.

"Many air plants and orchids grace the tangled branches of the buttonwood swamp. At regular intervals around the trail you will find thatch-roofed sitting areas containing information panels describing the woodland and its inhabitants."

In other words, it works well as a park – something I can attest to from my many visits.

Where's our 13 per cent protection?

We also have to see the Botanic Park and Barkers as part of the overall commitment that was supposed to put aside and protect at least 13 per cent of our land resources.

But we seem to be stuck – stymied at around 5 per cent. I guess the general feeling is that if we wait long enough we won't have to worry. There won't be anything left to save.

Believe it or not, this year marks the 20th anniversary of the Brundtland Report.

It was published in 1987, when the World Commission on Environment and Development (also named the Brundtland Commission after its chair, Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland) concluded that economic development must become less ecologically destructive.

In its landmark report, "Our Common Future," the Commission noted: "Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable – to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

It also called for "a new era of environmentally sound economic development", which included the saving of at least 13 per cent of land-based resources, which was needed to protect biodiversity.

And that's something we're not doing too well on, isn't it?

The Darwin Initiative, spearheaded by the Department of Environment, has been turning up some fairly gloomy information as they progress.

One of the scientists involved told me that the initiative is not just about recording what we have lost, but implementing practical projects to do something about it.

Much has been lost already: "The reality of the situation is that the baseline for environmental preservation shifts with each new child born on the island. While it may appear to those familiar with the past that we have lost most of everything worth saving, the truth of the matter is that things may get much worse," he told me.

People are already becoming attached to the new baseline of protecting feral chickens and green iguanas, casuarina trees and Monk parakeets. As thatch and local broadleaf dwindle, we replant with exotic palms and exotic broadleaf.

"Our recent Red List of flora indicates 46% of our native botanical species to be threatened with extinction. Once we lose touch with what makes these islands truly unique, we will be just a small part of somewhere else, and blissfully ignorant of the fact."

You can read more about the Darwin Initiative in its newsletter. Just drop me a line and I'll e-mail you a copy.

We need more REAL Parks

However, regardless of all the biodiversity studies, we need to get our national parks and protected terrestrial areas up to the magic 13 per cent figure. I don't mean the pocket-handkerchief urban parks that Dart has been dropping all over the island – I mean REAL parks. Big ones.

We could start with protecting a big chunk of the Central Mangroves, and then create a wildlife corridor through to the East End consisting of Crown land together with the purchase of adjacent private lands (using the Environmental Protection Fund).

Part of this should be wilderness to protect the wildlife – in particular the re-establishment of the blue iguana in the National Trust's Salinas Reserve – and the rest could be open to limited public access.

And while we're at it, the East End of the Brac's Bluff needs to be purchased and protected before any more crazy golf-course/condo plans surface.

The rate of construction on the Bluff is becoming quite alarming, and more of this unique habitat needs to be protected. We should also add in the uplands and last remaining mahogany forest on Little Cayman.

Then we can really say we have more than one large national park. But first, we need to find an intelligent way to use the one we've already got. We could do no better than using the Botanic Park as an example.

If you wish to contact the Green Hornet directly, you can e-mail me at: caymanhornet@yahoo.com. All messages will be treated confidentially