

Cherishing T&T's biological diversity

Published: 23 May 2010

TOP LEFT: Dr Joth Singh

TOP RIGHT: Bloodwoods in the Nariva Swamp.

CENTRE: Yellow Poui.

ABOVE: View of the forest. Photos Courtesy the EMA

The Environmental Management Authority (EMA) highlighted the high level of biological diversity in Trinidad and Tobago as the country observed International Day for Biological Diversity, on Saturday. Biological diversity, or biodiversity, is the term given to the variety of life on Earth. It also includes genetic differences within each species, for example, between varieties of crops and breeds of livestock. Chromosomes, genes, and DNA—the building blocks of life—determine the uniqueness of each individual and each species.

EMA's Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Dr Joth Singh, said: "It is safe to conclude that among our most valuable natural assets is our vast and wonderfully diverse national ecosystem." The country's biodiversity is partly attributable to the islands' close proximity to the South American mainland as well as the range of habitat types present in the two islands. There are, for example, approximately 97 mammalian species, 433 bird species, 93 reptilian species, 37 amphibious species, 664 butterfly species, 300 tree species, 310 fern species, 209 orchid species and over 600 fish species.

"This vast variety of species is distributed throughout the various ecosystem types which include tropical rainforest, wetlands and savannas," Dr Singh said. As a direct result of such diversity, Trinidad and Tobago is a major destination for explorers with an interest



in observing and studying the abundance of flora and fauna to be found. Among the attractions are endemic species such as the Trinidad Piping Guan (*Pipile pipile*), orchid (*Cyrtopodium Parviflorum*) and the Golden Tree Frog (*Phyllodytes auratus*). Many features of the country's biodiversity are harnessed in the pursuit of recreation (river and beach limes, hikes through the forest), livelihoods (hunting and fishing, handicraft, reef tours), religious (ceremonies by the sea or river) and festivals (by being a source of inspiration for carnival costume design).

“Unfortunately,” said Dr Singh, “even though biological diversity is essential as a source of food, fuel, medicine and other resources, it is being lost at an accelerated rate, mainly due to human activities.” As a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) since 1992, Trinidad and Tobago has accomplished many of its conservation objectives. The main objectives of the Convention are: conservation of biodiversity, sustainable use of the components of biodiversity and the fair and equitable sharing of the components arising out of the use of genetic resources.

Toward this end, the EMA has designated three areas and three species as environmentally sensitive. They are the Nariva Swamp Managed Resource Area, the Aripo Savannas Strict Scientific Reserve, the Matura National Park, the Trinidad Piping Guan (*Pipile pipile*), Manatee (*Trichechus manatus manatus*) and the White tailed Saber-winged Hummingbird (*Campylopterus ensipennis*) respectively. In managing the designated areas and species, the EMA takes a participatory approach where management occurs in collaboration with the various stakeholders involved in an effort to encourage decisions to be made through partnership and collaboration.