

## Challenges to Conservation in the Portland Bight Conservation Corridor, Jamaica

### *Caribbean Coastal Area Management (C-CAM) Foundation*

In August 2013, the Government of Jamaica announced it was in discussions with a Chinese investor about the development of a transshipment port in the Portland Bight Protected Area/Conservation Corridor (PBPA/CC) of Jamaica, as part of a larger national strategy to establish Jamaica as the premier logistics node within the Americas, joining global nodes such as those in Dubai, Rotterdam, and Singapore. The proposed transshipment port and other associated developments have the potential to negatively affect ecosystems in the PBPA/CC, which includes three CEPF key biodiversity areas (KBAs) – Braziletto Mountains, Hellshire Hills, and Portland Ridge. It appears the investors are particularly interested in the Goat Islands, two near-shore islands in the vicinity of the Hellshire Hills KBA that have long been at the core of conservation strategies in the PBPA.

### **Importance**

In 2010, the CEPF Ecosystem Profile for the Caribbean Islands Hotspot identified the PBPA/CC as one of the most important areas for biodiversity in the region. It includes the only remaining habitat for the Jamaican Iguana (*Cyclura collei*), one of the hundred most threatened animals in the world, and provides refuge for other rare or endangered species of plants and animals, such as an endemic tuna cactus (*Opuntia spinosissima*) and the Portland Ridge Cave Frog (*Eleutherodactylus cavernicola*).

It is home to reptiles and amphibians that are found only in the Portland Bight, including the Blue-tailed Galliwasp (*Celestus duquesneyi*) and the Portland Ridge Thunder Snake (*Trophidophis stultae*). Globally threatened species such as the American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*), Hawksbill Turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and West Indian Manatee (*Trichechus manatus*) are also found there.

The PBPA/CC includes the best example of dry limestone forest in the Caribbean. But perhaps even more importantly, the functional juxtaposition of healthy and relatively undisturbed dry forests, coastal woodland, mangrove wetlands, sandy beaches, sea grass beds, and coral reefs and cays, is very rare in Jamaica and the Caribbean. One of the many important ways in which these ecosystems contribute to the local economy is by supporting inshore fisheries.



Salt Island Lagoon, a focus for biodiversity in the heart of the Hellshire Hills.  
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Hellshire coast with the Goat Islands in the distance.

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The area's importance has been recognised in national and local planning and protection regimes. And in 2012, the Caribbean Coastal Area Management (C-CAM) Foundation received a grant from the CEPF to develop management plans for two of the three KBAs located in the PBPA/CC, namely the Hellshire Hills and Portland Ridge KBAs.

### ***The development proposal***

It was a major surprise to protected area stakeholders when the government announced its intention to enter into a framework agreement with China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) to construct a transshipment port on 6,000 acres on and around the Goat Islands, before conducting a strategic environmental assessment (SEA), or even an environmental impact assessment (EIA). While details of the investor's plans remain unclear and largely unknown by the general public, there are potentially very serious implications for the PBPA/CC. These include the direct and indirect environmental and social impacts of construction, such as dredging channels and the harbour area in the vicinity of Old Harbour Bay, filling wetlands in a Ramsar site, and destroying an established fish sanctuary. Associated quarrying, road construction, and infrastructure development could result in loss and disturbance of forests, including iguana habitat in the nearby Hellshire Hills. Broader concerns include the long-term undermining of national planning processes and the protected area system, as a result of overriding the safeguards they provide to environmentally sensitive areas.

### ***The response***

A coalition of civil society partners, which includes C-CAM, the Jamaica Environment Trust, scientists from the Department of Life Sciences at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus and other local and overseas groups, responded quickly to the announcement of the proposal and the scoping study that followed it. They have sought to provide accurate information about the irreplaceability, importance, and vulnerability of the area, the potential direct and indirect impacts to the area, as well as how this proposal could undermine Jamaica's protected area system and planning framework if established procedures are not followed.



The Old Harbour Bay Fishing Beach

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In advocating for a more transparent and collaborative approach to decision-making, environmental civil society organisations have attempted to foster informed discussion of the issues. These include participating in press conferences, promoting field visits to the area by a wide cross-section of society, educating the public about the costs and benefits of the proposed development, and making presentations to the media and in public fora. C-CAM is currently seeking funding for an independent analysis of development options and alternatives, and the potential impact of the proposed transshipment port on the area's ecological services.

For related information about C-CAM's work to develop management plans for the Hellshire Hills and Portland Ridge KBAs in the Portland Bight Protected Area/Conservation Corridor, see [Capacité Issue 6, September 2013](#).

For information about the Caribbean Wildlife Alliance floristic survey, see [Capacité Issue 3, December 2012](#).

### ***CEPF investment in the PBPA/CC***

The support that CEPF has provided for the PBPA/CC has been of great importance in providing critical baseline information about the area. In addition to the 2012 grant to C-CAM to prepare participatory management plans for the Hellshire Hills and Portland Ridge KBAs, support has included funding for a floristic survey of the Hellshire Hills and the Goat Islands by the Caribbean Wildlife Alliance and partners in 2012. This survey resulted in a 54% increase in the known flora of the Hellshire Hills (including the Goat Islands), and added eight endemic plant species records.

The CEPF is currently supporting the Jamaica Environment Trust to increase public awareness of the importance of the PBPA/CC. Support to the World Resources Institute, which is partnering with the Jamaica Environment Trust and C-CAM, is helping communities and other stakeholders to engage in Jamaica's EIA process. 