



Report
on the
World Wetlands Day 2009

Submitted by
Hema Singh
Project/Education Officer
Environment Tobago
18 February 2009

Executive Summary

Wetlands are said to be the “kidneys” of nature. Their major functions include water storage and purification, hence, the analogy to kidneys of the human body. Other services include flood control, shoreline stabilization and coastal erosion control. Consequently, wetlands are closely linked to human survival and development. Yet wetlands continue to be drained and cleared for agriculture, urban, industrial and tourism developments. What little we have left, we continue to pollute with domestic and industrial wastes.

Many of the threats faced by wetlands have an underlying cause of a general lack of understanding of wetland functions and role. Most wetland areas of Tobago have been destroyed or their capacity severely reduced. Now to less than one percent (1%) of our land area is covered by wetlands.

And so, this year, Environment Tobago celebrated the World Wetlands Day at the Belle Garden Wetland in Tobago.

We felt that the adult and school communities’ participation and involvement in the activities were key to raising awareness of the threats wetlands face and improving knowledge of wetlands.

The activities planned were carried out over three days. Scheduled on Day One was a clean up of the wetland. 50 bags of plastic waste weighing more than 600 pounds, was removed. On Day Two a collaborative effort was made to host the World Wetlands Day 2009 Exhibition and launch the Environment Tobago Poster and Art Competition. Day Three involved free Guided Community Tours and Reforestation.

Introduction

The Belle Garden Wetland was chosen since Environment TOBAGO (ET) is currently carrying out a pilot programme to map and continuously monitor the condition of the Belle Garden Wetland and its tributaries, over a 6 months period using a community based approach - **Pilot Project Belle Garden Wetland, Tobago Sustainable Community Based Wetland Assessment for the Improvement of Conservational and Educational Efforts. This project is funded by the United Nations Development Programme.**

Trained community from the Belle Garden community are conducting field assessments, raising community awareness and learning to sustainably use their wetland resources.

A wetland eco – tour guide system is also proposed to provide income to both Environment Tobago and the trained community members beyond the project duration and as such create sustainability. It is hoped that this project will be replicated throughout Tobago's 32 remaining wetlands.

The activities planned for this year's celebration were done to complement the above project and draw as many interested persons from the community into the wetland to participate and learn about their own wetland. It is also part of our wider education programme which facilitates learning about wetlands throughout Tobago. The theme was ***Upstream Downstream: Wetlands Connect Us All.***

Objectives

1. **Clarify what exactly *are* wetlands**
 2. **Improve knowledge about wetland functions and services**
 3. **Improve knowledge of the link between healthy wetlands and healthy people/communities.**
-

The Activities

Day 1- February 1st 2009

Time: 7:00 am – 10:00 am

The Belle Garden Wetland Clean Up

Summary:

Persons attended: 25

Garbage Collected: 50 bags/600 pounds

Participating Groups: Environment Tobago, National Reforestation Group, Eco-Project Limited, Members of Belle Garden Community, Eco-Tourguide Trainees

The activities began with a clean up activity at the Belle Garden Wetland. The National Reforestation workers along with members of the community, Environment Tobago, Eco Project Ltd and Tour guide trainees all volunteered for the clean up in spite of the rains. In all 25 persons attended the clean up. On this first day 50 bags of trash was collected weighing approximately 600lbs of garbage. The quantity of garbage present at the wetland was overwhelming and it was certain that several clean up activities would have to be done in order to remove all of the garbage.

Day 2- February 2nd 2009

Time: 7:00 am-3:00 pm

Clean Up Activity Continued & WWD Exhibition & Launch of Poster & Art Competition

Clean Up

Summary

Persons attended: 15

Garbage Collected: 44 bags/500pounds

Participating Groups: National Reforestation Group, Solid Waste Management Company Limited

The National Reforestation group decided that they would return the following day to continue. A further 44 bags of garbage was removed. In all over 1100 lbs of garbage was removed from the wetland. RT Morshead donated 2 cases of water for this activity. Solid Waste Management Company Limited (SWMCOL) was contacted to assist with the removal and transportation of the garbage to the Studley Park Landfill.

World Wetlands Day Exhibition & Launch of the WWD Poster and Art Competition

Summary

Persons Attended: 50

Participating Groups: Environment Tobago, Buccoo Reef Trust, Community Development Handicraft Group, Water and Sewerage Authority, Belle garden Eco-Tourguide Trainees, The Department of Natural Resources & the Environment and Division of Fisheries, Heather Dodson, local artist, Radio Tambrin, Channel 5

Next on the list of activities was the Launch of the WWD Poster and Art Competition and the hosting of an Exhibition at the Belle Garden Community Centre on World Wetlands Day. The launch was attended by approximately 45-50 persons. The items on the programme were well received. It began with remarks by P. Turpin, followed by a presentation on Wetlands in Tobago by Diana Melville of BRT. Bryan Bain, an Eco tourguide Trainee presented on biodiversity in Wetlands. Tina Eastman was unable to attend due to the inclement weather, so the Presentation on the State of the Belle Garden Wetland was not presented. A 20 minute video on Wetlands, Water and Sustainability and Wetland Conservation Around the world was shown (Ramsar Secretariat). This video aimed to give attendants an international perspective of wetlands and conservation. After the Launch of the Competition attendants were invited to view the exhibition and collect literature. Booths were set up by Environment Tobago, The Buccoo Reef Trust, The Community Development Handicraft Group, the Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA), the DNRE as well as Fisheries Division gave posters, stickers and activity books for distribution to students. Ms. Heather Dodson, a local artist whose work involves driftwood wall art was also present with some of her pieces. Mr. Curtis Archie, the Belle Garden Village Community Development Officer also attended. The event was covered both by Radio Tambrin and Ayanna Carter of Channel 5. Positive feedback was given on the day's proceedings by attendants, media and the general public.

Day 3- February 3rd 2009

Time: 8:00 am – 1:00 pm

Community Guided Tours & Reforestation Exercise

Summary

Tours

No. of persons: 5

The third day of activity included guided tours for the community. Two of the Eco Tourguide Trainees were enlisted to take interested persons through the wetland pointing out special features and the range of biodiversity found in the Belle Garden Wetland. Channel 5 also covered this event as well as the Reforestation exercise. School visits will continue in order to create sustained interest in wetlands.

Reforestation

Trees planted: 100

Contributing Groups: Forestry Division, The Belle Garden Anglican Primary School, Land Management Division, Environment Tobago, Belle Garden Eco-Tourguide Trainees

Permission was sought and granted from the State Lands Division of the Tobago House of Assembly to conduct the Reforestation Exercise. The Forestry Division donated the 100 plus trees and 5 spades for the exercise. Also meetings were held with the Principal, Mrs. Westfield and class Teacher Mrs. Dick regarding the proposed activities. A class presentation was made to the Standard Four Class on Thursday 29th January at 10:30 am. This session was to raise awareness and sensitise the students to issues related to wetlands and also assess understanding of wetlands.

Evaluation

The decision to have the activities spread over three days was a good one as it allowed the different groups to participate. Also, the Wetland Clean up was a good way to bring in the community to see the extent of pollution in the wetland. Many of the National Reforestation Workers are from the Belle Garden Village and it was encouraging to see the enthusiasm to clear the wetland of all foreign debris.

The Wetland Exhibition was a tremendous success. We obtained permission to use the Belle Garden Village Community Centre. The Centre was transformed into mini theatre to seat approximately 60 persons, a small stage and several display tables. We felt that this was the most appropriate venue since the community would feel welcome to attend. Principals or teachers and two school students of each school in Tobago were invited to attend. In all 8 schools were represented.

The Reforestation Exercise which involved 24 Standard 4 students (10-12yrs) of the Belle Garden Anglican School, was done to give the students an opportunity to be proud and appreciate their wetland. The school is located on the banks of one of the tributaries that empty into the wetland.

Prior to the exercise, Environment Tobago conducted a presentation and short lecture on Wetlands. This served to sensitise the students to the wetland and wetland related issues in Tobago and in their village. An initial assessment of the knowledge of the students regarding wetlands was done. The Pre-assessment revealed that 83% of the students had a fair knowledge of wetlands though most associated it with being a swamp. 79% of the students identified Swamps as a type of wetland. Other types identified were marsh, river, sea and lake. 24% of students in the class had "No response" when asked to give two types of wetlands in Tobago. Only 17% were able to give correct answers. 36% had "no response" when asked to give the names of two plants which are found in wetlands. 68% indicated "No response" when asked to give two functions/services which wetlands provide. 88% believed that wetlands were important though 48% had no response as to why or how wetlands can be protected.

From the above it can be seen that a lot of work must still be done in improving knowledge on wetlands. Though this was just one school it is hoped that this can be repeated in ALL schools in Tobago to assess, evaluate and improve understanding and knowledge about wetlands in an effort to conserve and protect what is left.

Lessons Learnt

The decision to have the activities spread over three days and also to involve as many persons as possible in the activities regardless of the role they would eventually play meant that the logistics involved in planning this event was overwhelming. One possible solution to this is to start the planning process earlier and form a small committee with delegated responsibilities.

Next Steps

- To acquire funding to continue wetland education throughout schools in Tobago. Engage the corporate society
- To arrange as part of that education, tours of the Belle Garden wetland for schools
- Regular clean up of the wetland