

Trinidad & Tobago
20th October 2009

Dear Visiting Commonwealth Representative,

As you can see, Trinidad and Tobago is a nation that embraces diversity. Its population is comprised of a mix of Indian immigrants, Afro-Caribbean peoples, British settlers, Chinese newcomers, and more. But this small island nation is also one of the world's best kept wildlife secrets. From its beaches to mountains, Trinidad's ecology far surpasses its human diversity.

Even though the culture is more similar to other Caribbean islands, Trinidad's soil and its ecology is distinctly more South American. This is because Trinidad used to be part of Venezuela's coastline up until the last ice age. Even now, at their closest point, Trinidad is just a mere seven miles off the South American shore. This is not a barrier to animals, particularly birds, to travel back and forth between the two lands. With its tropical climate, this particular region is able to support a wide variety of flora and fauna. I also believe that the wildlife has been allowed to flourish partly because the island lies outside the hurricane belt, which protects it from the annual disaster which often devastates many other islands in the Caribbean.

Before Christopher Columbus landed and gave the island its name, Trinidad was believed to be called *lère* by the native Arawak people, which means Land of the Humming Bird. Apart from the crowded, developing cities, this fifth largest island in the West Indies is made up mostly of plains and forests. It is home to more than 469 species of birds, at least 98 species of mammal, and many other animals, including some species who are threatened for extinction. Because of this, the government and people have taken upon themselves many conservation projects and efforts to protect this wonderful ecosystem.

Located on this island is the last remaining freshwater wetland of its kind in the Caribbean, the Nariva Swamp, which was designated a Wetlands of International Importance by the Ramsar Convention in 1992. This Swamp is a haven for birds, and is a popular destination for tourists and nature photographers. Another conservation project going on in Trinidad is the conservation of leatherback turtles. A village that used to support itself by selling turtle eggs and meat, now has become an important reservation and research center that only allows a limited number of tourists to visit.

With all its efforts, Trinidad's economy is hugely dependent on petroleum and natural gas, so not enough attention is put onto sustaining wildlife habitats, unlike other Caribbean islands are dependent on their tourist industry. Once famous for its coral reef, Tobago's snorkel and scuba diving tourist industry has destroyed the reef and reduced it to a marine wasteland. Many other habitats are also slowly being destroyed by pollution. Some seabird colonies on the island of Little Tobago are also presumed to be extinct after Hurricane Flora hit the island in 2005.

Often, you cannot even see Trinidad on a world map, but despite its size, the islands of Trinidad and Tobago has one of the most diverse wildlife populations in the world. I believe that other countries can mirror Trinidad's conservation efforts and participate in the international efforts to preserve the Earth and their own country's environment.

Sincerely,

Jessica Norman

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