

Jamaica

Adventures in Paradise



By William S. Siegmund, CWS-V

This story starts 15 years back when my wife and I chose a beach on Jamaica's western shores for our wedding. We return yearly to celebrate our anniversary. There, a people live their existence simply from day to day. They gather at the beach for sunset each evening, even on nights when all signs of the sea indicate there'll be no fishing tomorrow—15 years of visits for me, a way of life for generations there.

Far from Kingston and a short way from Montego Bay, lies the town of Negril, where this early evening beach gathering to watch the sunset is a nightly ritual. Whether a pleasure or business trip, to watch the opposing currents, clouds and wind is enchanting. Locals tell the story of a man braving the sea, in a hollowed out cottonwood tree—the likes of which grow no more—and the sight of him on the horizon, returning from the reef. The catch is always secondary to the return trip.

With a resignation similar to that of the old man in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, it's understood—the bounty of the sea is what it is. A baited trap pounded to pieces by a storm current or a shark that wanted its contents more than the strength of the trap is "just a part of it." It comes as little surprise that the catch has been depleted to less than a sustaining resource. With little left to provide, much less sell, good catch, bad catch, the former always celebrated, the latter rarely questioned. Stories—"fish

stories"—tell tales of traps so full the bounty had to be dragged to shallow water to recover the trap and not capsize the canoe.

A new water treatment plant under construction. The old plant is in the background.



Beauty and the beast

Today, the white sand shifts the way old people—which is how elders are referred to—have never seen. The coral reef that created this marvelous spot on Earth is severely wounded and dead in many places. Fragmented by the motion of the sea and time into seven miles of "sugar sand," the beaches lie today unprotected by the same structure that allowed their natural formation. Created by timeless tidal motion and the moon's pull, the soft sand underfoot is threatened by the very people who flock there because of its beauty.

The Great Morass—a wetland created by the convergence of the Fish, Newfound, and North and South Negril rivers and sandwiched between the beach and mountains—was contaminated from growing sugar cane, first from the runoff and then from use of chemical fertilizer. The sulphur smell from the runoff made

the mountain-fed streams unusable for traditional washing of clothes or a supply of fresh water. Pouring into the sea, the toxins severely alter the culture of the people that live along the river and those dependent upon the reef.

Today, the situation is complicated even further by a huge influx of tourists that came as a result of services provided by multinational corporate resort chains. With them come all the problems of human waste, overtaxed fresh water supplies and complex trappings of fossil fuel-based water sports.

The pipe

Jamaica is slowly joining the world economy—for better or worse depending on who you talk to—with a growing middle and business class. Still, much of the island remains a rural, agriculturally based micro-economy. It's this economy with which I'm most familiar. Few homes here have elaborate plumbing systems. "Shacks," as Jamaicans call them, dot hillsides and villages, representing the independent spirit and lifeblood of the natives. Viewed as poverty by some, it's more a reflection of a simple "soon come" lifestyle afforded a forgiving climate.

To me, the slow pace and backyard garden plots—with rich soils growing luscious fruits and vegetables—look like paradise. Many still go to the "pipe" for water. The "pipe" is just a single spigot that comes out of the

ground somewhere in the yard, most often near the cook shack. Tying into the system is as easy as a PVC Tee and a one-yard length of pipe. A multi-room cement house may have a flush toilet and lavatory sink but residents still rely on the pipe for cooking and cleanup water. The shack my wife and I stay in on the beach has an indoor tiled shower, but we prefer the original one outside surrounded by a dense growth of hibiscus flowers.

Water is piped via a seemingly impossible engineering network that snakes into the hills to pristine rivers or springs. One such spring is in the caves at Roaring River. Local children from a nearby village will take you far into the formations to see the spectacular sight of fresh water just bubbling to the surface of an underground pool and churning into a raging stream. The sound echoing off the walls is incredible! This water is collected as it leaves the caves before it joins the Roaring River to become the water in the "pipe" for Savannah La Mar and the villages, burrows and Parishes on "that side," as the locals say.

Last year, I decided to make the trip up "this side" to find the source of the water in the "pipe" that feeds Negril and the surrounding area. We left the main road in the small town of Green River and traveled along a narrow but surprisingly paved road that wound steeply into the hills. We were immediately among the cement houses and hillside shacks that are a part of the lush Jamaican countryside that I love so much. I went along with two friends that are both from respected local families and, as hoped, one of them knew the man in charge. That, along with my business card, was enough to gain entry beyond the barbed-wire-topped gates of the water treatment plant. I was asked not to use names and not to take pictures inside the plant. This "cover your behind" sense of business is common policy in most developing economies where good jobs are hard to come by and easy to lose. We were given a letter that read quite simply "show these

men all courtesies" and signed by the man in charge.

The source was said to be a spring and area wetlands, which a nearby flowing river seemed to reflect. However, we weren't allowed to see the actual intakes I was looking for because of new construction and "the danger of the heavy equipment." The original plant, said to have been built in the late '60s, was neat and appeared to be well run. It was a surface water plant with clarifying tanks and gravity sand filters treating water in batches and looked quite out of place in the lush surroundings. It suffered from the same sort of problems that seem to plague mechanical facilities in developing economies. Equipment in various states of repair, chart recorders not recording, etc., indicated a philosophy of availability of funds and parts prioritized by the need to fix it. There were large bags of aluminum sulfate (for flocculating) and liquid chlorine (for disinfection). I was curious about concentrations in the product water or conditions of the feed water but questions were met with looks of suspicion and I wanted to continue the congenial nature of my visit. Here, queries must be asked and answered by the proper people and I was a guest, honored at having gotten this far.

At the rear of the newer portion of the facility was a massive construction project. A new water treatment plant that, when completed, will dwarf the original.

Cost and benefit

It's only natural to speculate where funding for such a huge municipal project comes from and who principally benefits. The increase in water production will obviously be used to supply water for the new "super club" that's being built in Orange Bay, which continues an alarming trend in many Caribbean nations for multinational corporations to control the lucrative tourist trade. Negril has more than five such clubs, characterized by their self-contained, all-included approach to tourism, controlling every aspect of

your vacation and thus your experience of the host country. Their size demands infrastructure, i.e., water and sewers that may not be necessary for local needs or may not be accessible to nearby communities.

Recently, Negril built a new sewage treatment facility that was needed by the community and super clubs alike. However, it's not able to operate adequately because the projected volume of waste isn't being received. The clubs and large hotels are hooked up but there was little or no money allocated for individuals to make expensive connections to the system. Many small hotels and beach cottages that make up the best of Negril are being threatened by the costs of mandatory hookups.

Without question, the super clubs provide jobs and it's under this pretense the cost of infrastructure for them is appropriated. The foreign corporations are often willing participants in funding of certain projects. The question becomes are we depriving other projects that may benefit the local economy and population more directly as a whole? How much do foreign-owned companies contribute to the national economy? The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) reports Jamaica's growth rate in the past 10 years has been lower than every other country in the region.¹ Although there are many contributing and complex factors that may lead to this, it's obvious proliferation of super clubs in this same period and corresponding increase in tourism haven't been reflected in economic growth or gross domestic product.

The good news

On Nov. 28, 1997, the Jamaican National Resources Conservation Authority (NRCA) signed a declaration creating the Negril Environmental Protection Area, the first such area declared under the NRCA Act in Jamaica. This designation is expected to "permit the growth and development of the area to be consistent with environmental opportunities and con-

straints."² The goal is to establish long term environmental goals, set priorities and outline a strategy of objectives for programs and projects. The hope is to bring together representatives of the Negril community with government and private sector organizations to influence decision-making regarding environmental concerns.

Stated changes in USAID strategy to protect the fragile but economically critical natural resource base may also make a difference in how projects are directed and funded. "USAID has sharpened its strategy now to include reducing regulatory constraints while fostering competition, improving business skills and promoting increased private sector financing to the small and micro-business sectors," according to the agency.¹

Conclusion

If financing for small and micro-businesses can truly be made available to the people of Negril and Jamaica as a whole, combined with an environmental eye to development and preservation, it may be possible for the micro-economy that is Jamaica to reclaim its share of the mighty tourist trade. There's no reason this can't be done, while protecting and preserving the precious and magnificent reasons so many people visit there.

It may be a little farfetched but it may even be possible that an indigent lifestyle might be recognized as a national resource. After all, as in any similar "exotic" destination, this is the true treasure that if not protected, at the least, should be defended and not threatened by outsiders' desire to enjoy "just a part of it." □

References

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