



ADDRESS TO PARLIAMENT

Aspects of Conservation and the Environment in Dominica Today

BY

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President of the Commonwealth of Dominica

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

OPENING OF THE FIRST MEETING

OF THE THIRD SESSION OF THE THIRD PARLIAMENT

ON MONDAY, 27th JULY, 1987

Madam Speaker,

Honourable Members of the House of Assembly,

I take the opportunity to extend sincere good wishes from Lady Seignoret and myself for the good health and well being of all Members of this Honourable House.

Madam Speaker,

Honourable Members,

Dominica has very recently emerged from a protracted dry period. The experience has shown in no uncertain terms the fragility of our environment. The lack of rain, which I am told was the most severe in 50 years had resulted in some of our rivers and streams being reduced to mere trickles and many persons have correctly voiced grave concern about the situation. Mr. William Demas, President of the Caribbean Development Bank, made a statement on the importance of the environment, with particular regard for forests, at the seventeenth Annual Meeting of the Board of Governors held in Grenada on 13th and 14th May. I quote:

“One aspect of conditionality that is becoming increasingly importantly, and one which the Bank must take cognisance of, is the question of environmental impact of investments in development projects. In the context of the agricultural sector this impinges directly on the question of the forest utilization. Over the past twenty years or so the Region has become more profligate in the abuse and underutilization of its forest resources, to the extent that in a number of the countries the position is approaching crisis point. For example, the widespread practice of burning and shifting cultivation has resulted in the devastation of large areas of forest throughout the Region, seriously impairing the effectiveness of many water catchment areas. Extensive soil erosion, the silting of stream and river beds, regular flooding, declining stream flow and an inexorable decline of soil fertility have collectively resulted in significant declines in agricultural yields that are difficult to reverse.

The CDB, I believe, has no alternative but to examine more carefully the environmental impact of its project and where necessary include conditions that will minimise the environmental degradation. At the same time Governments must begin to tackle the conservation and development of Forests with a greater sense of urgency.”

For these reasons I have thought it desirable to address this Honourable House on the theme: “Aspects of Conservation and the Environment in Dominica Today”.

Madam Speaker,

Honourable Members,

William Palgrave wrote of Dominica in 1876; I quote:-

“In the wild grandeur of its towering mountains, some of which rise to five thousand feet above the level of the sea: in the majesty of its almost impenetrable forests, in the gorgeousness of its vegetation, the abruptness of its precipices, the calm of its lakes, the violence of its torrents, the sublimity of its waterfalls, it stands without a rival, not in the West Indies only, but is should think throughout the whole island catalogue of the Atlantic and Pacific combined”.

Many of us still imagine that what was said of our Island then, is still true today, and we like to promote Dominica a “The Nature Isle of the Caribbean”. We should therefore have a special regard, and take pride in our environment for this is so vital for our fledgling tourist industry.

Dominica's raw beauty is there for the taking, but we must be concerned with how best to develop its potential. We should be determined to preserve the island's uncluttered and unspoilt quality. We should be proud of our richness of our flora and fauna and our healthy environment, and take the opportunity to exhort all concerned to be more thoughtful to ensure its permanence for posterity. Our natural vegetation supports a variety of animal and bird species. Dominica is for us to enjoy, and for this reason a system of National Parks was established in 1975. These parks are protected and conserved for their uniqueness and natural beauty, to be developed in a manner which will not destroy these significant qualities and to provide for education, scientific, recreational and economic opportunities. These parks have something to offer to practically all interest groups and serve as a major tourist attraction.

There are two statutory National Parks on the island, the Morne Trois Pitons and the Cabrits National Park. It is my hope that areas of outstanding and scenic beauty will eventually become part of our National Park System.

The Botanical Gardens, our view and monument at Morne Bruce, the Cenotaph, Library and Peebles Park grounds, Government House, the old Dawbiney Market site, Fort Young are all an integral part our culture, history and heritage.

Detailed information on flora and fauna of Dominica is available in various studies, particularly those supported by the Smithsonian Institute some years ago. The manicou, agouti, crapaud and crabs, are unfortunately being hunted and consumed relentlessly by an uncaring public, both in and out of season.

The lack of diversity and numbers of larger animals is more than compensated for by the richness of the island's bird life. Of special interest are the two endemic parrots – the Sisserou and red-necked parrots now on the “List of Endangered Species”. Both of these beautiful and colourful birds inhabit the rain forest slopes of the taller mountain peaks. You are all aware that the Sisserou parrot features prominently on our National Flag, the Coat of Arms, the Public Seal and Meritorious Service Honours insignia.

Many countries would be prepared to pay anything to be able to base their tourism development along the lines being pursued by us but unfortunately, the damage they have inflicted on their environment is irreversible.

Madam Speaker,

Honourable Members,

Today the world faces a serious of interlocking crises which can't be solved separately; the damage that is being done to the earth's atmosphere, fertile land, rain forests, lakes and rivers, create a global threat to the prospects of further development and our survival. It is these problems which cause environmentalists and thinkers to try to produce a strategy known as sustainable development.

Arriving at a commonly excepted decision of “sustainable development” remains a challenge for all the actors in the development process. Meanwhile, we can describe it as a development strategy that manages natural resources and human resources, as well as financial and physical assets, for increasing long term wealth and well-being. Sustainable development as a goal, rejects policies and practices that support current living standards by depleting the productive base, including natural resources, and that leave future generations with poorer prospects and greater risks than our own.

Life is correspondence with environment. Different countries seek different environments, but everything exists at a specific place under specific circumstances. As human beings our greatest psychological asset is a sense of confidence in our environment.

The carrying capacity, which is the measure of the amount of life any area of land or water will support under given circumstances, may be altered from time to time by changes in conditions caused by nature or by man's use of the area.

Today it is necessary for us to adjust our usage and to manage our remaining resources more creatively if mankind is to survive.

Biologists are aware of the need to preserve nature's balance, and of the techniques to ensure it, but only public opinion educated and nurtured amid such scenes can make the application of these procedures effective. There is no automatic force in nature which will carry us forward irrespective of our own efforts.

Our only hope is in education. The problem is not as simple as two plus two quickly answered and as readily disposed of. This is a problem for statesmanlike people who take a long view at the future of generations yet unborn.

The challenge to us is nothing less than preservation of our species by restoring and maintaining the essential environment of our island home.

Any wrong which nature may for centuries commit, she has centuries to repair, but we whose days are short, must walk warily lest we become victims the wasteland we create.

Madam Speaker,

Honourable Members,

Modern planners now realize that agricultural development must be part of an overall development strategy as it impacts on conservation of our natural resources and environment. Our aim should be to make the environment an ally, not a victim of our economic progress. Our people must be educated and change attitudes. They must continually be made aware of all aspects of conservation of our forest resources and the preservation of our wildlife. Within this broader framework of development, agricultural development, agricultural development strategy is closely linked to rural development and to the improvement of the quality of life of rural poor.

Madam Speaker,

Honourable Members,

In addressing this issue we need to consider the present landownership pattern and management of our lands. The most recent statistics available reveal that approximately twenty percent of land available, an estimated 38,000 acres, are under the National Parks and Forest Reserves. Sixty-seven percent of our lands are privately owned or claimed. A further 25,000 acres or thirteen percent of our lands remain still unallocated.

It is necessary that we review the implications of this pattern of ownership from which we may assume that the lands in National Parks and Forest Reserves are under controlled management and protection. On the other hand, what controls can we effectively on privately owned lands. We need to address, equally critically the patterns of allocation and settlement that may be prescribed for unallocated lands.

Of the 190,000 acres of land, twenty-nine percent of an established 50,000 acres are agriculture, urban and village use. The acreage in agricultural use has been estimated to be in the order of 20,000 acres. I am indeed grateful to the Division of Agriculture for providing me with these estimates, but it is unfortunate that a more accurate inventory is not now at hand; the most recent available data base, I am told, being the last completed agricultural census held in 1961.

I invite you to take a close look at what is happening in Dominica today, in the light of what I have said so far. Those of us who may be familiar with parts of the interior, are conscious of the pattern which is developing currently, presenting very serious problems over the entire country. The main

issue is not with this Country's need to utilize its timber resources and to enhance agricultural production, it is rather, that here is perhaps the last and only opportunity remaining in the Caribbean to set aside and maintain in a natural condition portions of natural tropical forests some of it virtually undisturbed by man. Other concerns are for proper watershed protection and carefully controlled sustained forest management on the areas being exploited for lumber, which are so often forgotten.

In Dominica, rich river deposits of alluvial soil in coastal valleys have long been considered prime land for cultivation. On the other hand it must be understood that riparian agriculture, while productive is subject to the care of the upper portion of the drainage basin.

Some fifty percent of our lands remain in forests, while an estimated nine percent are in scrub forest, savannah and natural pastures. It is important to note that in the lands categorized as forest there is predominance of secondary forest or about one fourth the total land area of Dominica. Most of it is privately owned or claimed. There is in fact more secondary forest land than mature forest lands.

The following is an extract from the publication entitled "DOMINICA, A chance for a Choice", published in 1970 by the Conversation Foundation of Washington D.C.; I quote:

"Some of the forested slopes are being encroached upon with shifting agriculture and banana plantations, also citrus and coffee cultivations the Chataigner-Gommier association is cut back and replaced by banana-based cultivation with rootcrops. Quite often the land is abandoned temporarily, and Bois Cannot, Bois Blanc and Cre Cre are the typical invading pioneer trees. At the second cultivation the land is usually burned to clear the dense mat of vegetation; by the third rotation, something less demanding is grown for a year, and then the area is completely exhausted and abandoned. The soil can no longer support an invasion of rain forest trees and lies fallow in tree fern and razor grass. Scattered abandoned swales and pockets of coarse grass can readily be observed at the head and slopes of river valleys" Unquote. – This is the pattern often found in Dominica today. Quite true the outward appearance remains lush and green!

Madam Speaker,

Honourable Members,

The pollution of water is one of the most serious problems resulting from such practices, and the burden of a costly 'clean-up' will be far heavier than that of simple preventative planning. Historically, disease, flooding, property loss, soil erosion and subsequent food shortages can be attributed directly to the lack of water resources management in many areas of the world. This is not just a problem of the past; it is happening today and will happen in the future wherever little effort is made to ensure high quality water supplies.

With only a superficial review of water resources of Dominica, it might appear capricious to suggest that our so well watered island with rainfall averaging 80 inches annually and up to 400 inches in the interior, could be faced with a potentially serious water situation. Yet, as has been repeatedly pointed out by many experts, a combination of factors such as I have described makes this a possibility within a relatively short period of time. – But so few of us seem to care, and we complain ceaselessly of water shortage.

The physical features of Dominica and the island's heavy rainfall, accent the problems of rapid water run-off. Flash flooding causes water shortages for city, town and village dwellers. Soil erosion and reduced crop yields occur now and will be more common in the future. Accelerated removal of the forest to accommodate random cultivation, without caring or without an understanding of the necessary precautions required to protect the water supply can only aggravate the fast water run-off and flooding conditions. Water sources and water demand areas so essential to the increasing needs of Dominica today are of paramount importance. Unfortunately, many of our vital catchment basins, for one reason or another, still remain unprotected and are subject to random destruction, severe erosion and unrestrained contamination.

In addition to the water requirements for human consumption we depend on water for our electrical energy. Hydro-electric power can be as easily lost as can reliable drinking water resources, if the drainage area is badly disrupted through poor water management practices. Once destroyed, watershed areas in Dominica rapidly erode, carrying away the precious soil and deposition sediment in storage reservoirs. In addition to damaging storage capacity, cut-over and eroded watershed tend to have rapid run-off with little retention of water, producing a highly variable streamflow. Such intermittent flow would also disturb the hydro-electric potential.

Water is a very important and key resource of this country. We require it for so many of our basic functions of life; to the extent that it is an important resource that we have, we must make sure that it is properly managed. Thoughtless pollution of water anywhere kills the source of life.

It is the declared Government policy to develop dependable and safe islandwide potable water services. This undertaking includes major rehabilitation, expansion and replacement programmes in almost all existing water supply areas or catchment areas, and the construction of new water supplies systems where necessary.

It is important that it be explained to all that if we permit uncontrolled deforestation our water sources will inevitably dry up, resulting in grave problems.

In this regard under the Central Water Authority (Repeal and Vesting of Property) Act, 1986 (No. 19 of 1986), Government is vested with the duty and power to prevent the pollution or contamination of the rivers, streams, catchment areas, water courses or any source of water supplied either from surface run-off or underground.

Further, where a gathering ground is required for the purpose of extending or augmenting a water supply, no land not then already leased or sold by the State, shall be granted, devised or otherwise disposed of within such limits or area for any purpose whatsoever. This mandatory!

The Forests Ordinance Chapter 80 of the Revised Laws of Dominica 1961 provides, among other things, for private lands to be proclaimed protected forest, in order to facilitate the protection and prevention of floods, landslides, soil erosion and for the proper management of timber, timber lands and water supplies. It also provides for rules controlling felling and burning of trees and the clearing of lands for cultivation in such 'protected forests'.

Provision is of course made for compensation when privately owned lands are proclaimed protected forests.

Landslides have been responsible for the loss of lives and property in Dominica, as well as costing Government substantial sums of money to clear them. The risk of landslides is increasing due to the uncontrolled deforestation and cultivation of lands on excessive slopes, roadsides and rivers. Most of the affected lands are privately owned which makes the problem more difficult to control. However, it is becoming increasingly urgent for appropriate steps to be taken to minimise the risk of landslides.

Madam Speaker,

Honourable Members,

There are real and growing dangers to our simple and most precious god-given possessions: the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the land which sustains us. The rapid erosion of rich topsoil, the destruction of beauty, the blight of pollution, the demand of an increasing population, all combine to create problems which are easy to observe and predict but difficult to resolve. If we do not now, Dominica in the year 2000 will be much less able to sustain life than it is today.

Each year we observe World Food Day on the 16th October – the founding day of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). It is dedicated to the enhancement of public awareness of pertinent issues relating to hunger, poverty and malnutrition. However, drought, soil erosion, deforestation and in general, the destruction of the ecological balance, undoubtedly help to bring about nutritional problems.

Madam Speaker,

Honourable Members,

If you find, I have been repetitive in my address, it is in an effort to ensure that we all appreciate the gravity of the situation with which we are confronted. The cause for the conversation and

proper utilization of our natural resources cannot be overemphasized. It is the very basis on which development will be sustained.

Plants have fed the world and cured its ills since life began. Now, we are destroying their principle habitat at the alarming rate. We live on this planet by courtesy of earth's green cover. Plants protect fragile soils for erosion, regulate the atmosphere and maintain water supplies. Without plants man could not survive. I have it said that tropical forests are the laboratories of the world.

Yet knowing this man destroys a tropical forest somewhere in the world at the rate of 50 acres every minute, making a crisis for ourselves and an even bigger one for our children. For once the forests go, they are gone forever.

The problem seems so vast that there is a tendency to shrug and say "what can I do?" but there is an answer. There is something that each and everyone of us can do. There is no doubt that the forests in Dominica are a valuable resource. Unfortunately, through a general lack of understanding or a desire to modify a natural condition to meet a short term need, we often become a liability to the larger community of island life, and, in the long-term, even to ourselves, by threatening the survival of healthy human culture.

Forests are a renewable resource that can provide many benefits, if managed with care and thought for the future. Harvesting trees is a legitimate use of the resource. Re-forestation, however, is the generally accepted companion practice to sustain the timber harvest. In this regard, I well recall a report by J. A. N. Burra, who was Assistant Conservator of Forests here in 1953. He advocated a complete forest utilization plan without which there would be no way that the perpetuation of any resource could be insured or that various practices could be measured and evaluated for possible conflicts with other high priority land uses, such as essential water supplies, agriculture, city and village expansion, utilities, recreation and roads. Mr. Burra was convinced that only the most thoughtful considerations based on accurate land use information would resolve these problems.

The impact of natural as well as man-made disasters on the environment can be great and have lasting effects. Hurricane David in 1979 was a disastrous effect to the Country's forest resources, and according to "Appleworth, Pool and Me Donald" of the Institute of Tropical Forestry of the United States of Agriculture in Puerto Rico, the estimated damage was over 70 percent of trees uprooted, broken, twisted or otherwise badly damaged, in areas hardest hit. It was estimated that the volumes of trees damaged range from 4,000 to 65,000 board feet per acre. The need to know how to control and deal with disasters and to take timely remedial action are very important environmental management tools.

We are indeed very fortunate to have on our statute books some comprehensive legislation intended to prevent undesirable practices which will tend to destroy our beautiful island and hence jeopardize our chance of survival. Reference has already been made of The Forest Ordinance, and Rules made thereunder provide for the conservation and control of our forests. There is the Stewart

Hall Water Catchment Rules, the aim of which is to ensure that the pollution of the Stewart Hall Water System is kept to the minimum and that the flora and fauna of the area are protected.

Mention must also be made of the National Park and Protected Areas Act, and the Forestry and Wildlife Act. The former provides for the establishment of a national park system dedicated to the people of this Country for their benefit, education and enjoyment, while The Forestry and Wildlife Act provides for the protection, conservation and management of our wild mammals, fresh water fish, amphibians, crustaceans and reptiles and for all purposes connected therewith.

I wish to take this opportunity to commend the Ministry of Agriculture and its Forestry and National Parks Division for their dedicated work. In spite of various constraints, they have achieved a great deal and have some major accomplishments to their credit. For example, formulation of a Forest Policy for Dominica, undertaking a Forestry Inventory, programmes of Public Education, Environmental Protection, re-forestation and establishment of National Parks and Forest Reserves.

We are asked to be responsible citizens and to avoid those practices that will help destroy our beautiful island and jeopardize our chances for survival.

Each year, we are reminded of the closed hunting season during which wildlife and fish in rivers and streams should not be taken during their breeding period when the closed hunting season begins in the 1st of March and ends on the 31st August each year, so at this point in time we are in the middle of that closed hunting season.

How many of us – the citizens of Dominica, for various reasons, are tempted to disregard the law with particular reference to Crapaud and Crabs. Yet, many of us who do not obey these laws have felt the importance and wisdom in their enforcement. I refer here to the role played by the hunting law regulations in replenishing our wildlife resources following the passage of hurricane David in 1979.

Madam Speaker,

Honourable Members,

We should not regard conservation as a deterrent to development. In fact, proper planning dictates that environmental impact assessment are carried out for each developmental project. The aim being, to be able to identify the negative impacts of such developmental project and to institute corrective measures at the outset.

The concept of eco-development was borne out of the urgent need to link conservation and development together to achieve the desired overall progress towards which all countries aspire.

Dominica is not in this conservation struggle alone, although at this point in time we may be in a more fortunate position than many others. We must therefore play our role and preserve and build for ourselves, for our children and for the future generations a better environment. Our efforts must result in a greater awareness of the problems that threaten our natural environment and the great necessity for preserving it.

Each year the 5th June is observed as World Environment Day in order to encourage Governments and organizations within the United Nations to carry out world activities to re-affirm their concern for protecting and improving the environment, with a view to enlisting the co-operation and commitment of all citizens in solving environmental problems.

We must at all costs avoid that false feeling of security subscribed to by those who think that Dominica has been fortunate to avoid some of the frightening experiences of developed countries. The view has been expressed that the geographical composition of the Island renders a highly sensitive, and indeed a very fragile situation that should not be viewed with indifference and that the situation relating to the environment should be treated with the urgency of a national security issue which presents a threat to our very existence.

But I suggest that there may be no reason for despair, for identifying our shortcomings in time does not mean a dismal future of endless gloom. In fact acknowledging these realities is the first step in dealing with them. We can meet our resources problem - water, food, minerals, farmlands, forests, population and pollution – if we tackle them with courage and foresight.

There is an urgent need for public awareness in relation to the question of enlightened land management. This must be an ongoing exercise to educate all our nationals about the Country's resources and how they should be utilized and preserved intact for the general development of all our people, now and in the future.

The march of 'civilization' must not be allowed to poison and destroy our wildlife and our forests and pollute the air, our water and even the sea. The success of the programmes initiated by the Forestry and Parks Service depends largely on public support and understanding. I am aware of the programmes initiated by the Forestry and Parks Division to educate our youth and adults; but I suggest that a massive education programme is now indicated.

Madam Speaker,

Honourable Members of the House of Assembly,

What was said by Palgrave over a hundred years ago is still partially true today. In the grandeur of her mountains, the lushness of her vegetation, the lavishness of nature, Dominica remains unsurpassed.

Let us stand here on this beautiful island which God has given to us, and do everything humanly possible to preserve and husband its resources for the benefit of ourselves and future generations.

May the Almighty guide your deliberations and bless the work of this Honourable House this Session.