

Hotel development threatens rare thrasher

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Global distribution (red) of the St Lucia White-breasted Thrasher: the hotel development will directly affect the southern thrasher population.

Studies of the St Lucia White-breasted Thrasher *Ramphocinclus brachyurus* have revealed the vital importance of the area now ear-marked for development

A hotel and residential estate development on St Lucia threatens up to 22% of the world population of the White-breasted Thrasher *Ramphocinclus brachyurus*, an Endangered species. The project is part-funded by the European Investment Bank, and linked to St Lucia's hosting of the Cricket World Cup in 2007.

Work to clear the woodland on which the thrasher depends is on hold awaiting the response of St Lucia's Development Control Authority (DCA) to an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which stresses the vital importance of the proposed site to the long-term viability of this species. But developers hope to begin work early in 2005.

The White-breasted Thrasher is unique to the islands of St Lucia and Martinique in the West Indies. Each island has a well-differentiated subspecies, and genetic analysis may result in their being given species status. The global population is just 1,250 breeding adults, 80% of which live in coastal and dry woodland along the

eastern side of St Lucia, within 3 km of the coast.

The majority—an estimated 436 pairs—are found between Praslin and Dennery, which includes the Dennehy Estate, site of the proposed development. This population was not discovered until 1993. The better-known northern population has declined over the last 30 years to just 45 breeding pairs.

A preliminary EIA by a US company found no Endangered species in this area—even though the population, discovered in 1993, is well documented in St Lucia's government and tourist literature.

The 215 ha site of the proposed development is home to an estimated 138 breeding pairs of White-breasted Thrashers—just less than a quarter of the world population.

The UK-based developer, Design Construction Group (DCG), proposes two phases. Phase I involves a hotel, spa, golf course and apartments on Praslin Bay. This would affect around a third of the habitat on the estate and also threaten the colony of endangered St Lucia whip-tailed lizards on Praslin Island. Phase II, is a residential development stretching inland from the bay, and including extensive

landscaping. DCG claims the project will not be financially viable unless both phases are built.

Forest clearance, construction work, new roads and footpaths, and an increase in the number of visitors (up to 3,000 per week), will lead to increased disturbance of areas where the thrasher lives.

The construction of a major resort development is likely to catalyse development on adjacent properties, leading to further habitat loss for the thrasher. The hotel complex would provide jobs, but local feelings are mixed.

Although the bayside development would improve marina facilities, the fishermen and sea-moss/grass farmers of Praslin Bay would be forced to move, and dredging and destruction of mangroves would impact fish stocks.

Threatened by a World Trade Organisation ruling, which in late 2005 will end the favourable status its bananas have enjoyed in the European Union, St Lucia sees tourism as the future mainstay of its economy. "The rugged, beautiful eastern coastline is under-utilised as a tourist destination, but needs more sustainable exploitation of its potential," says Helen Temple, who has studied the thrasher. Sadly, proposals by World Bank/GEF to turn the coast into a protected area were dropped when the Dennehy Estate came onto the market, since the future integrity of the landscape couldn't be guaranteed.

St Lucia has a fine conservation record. The successful action to reverse the decline of the St Lucia Parrot *Amazona versicolor*, combined with a highly effective environmental awareness campaign, is frequently cited as a textbook example of how to carry out conservation work on a small developing island.

ConservationEvidence.com – sharing conservation experience

A new website, www.conservationevidence.com, developed at the University of East Anglia, UK, allows those undertaking conservation management to share their experiences with others. It includes case studies—both published and previously unpublished—that demonstrate the effectiveness of species and habitat management from around the world.

This information is freely available and will be especially useful to wardens, site

managers, conservation volunteers and researchers.

ConservationEvidence.com is in early stages of development but is fully functional and searchable, with about 100 cases currently available on a broad variety of topics. The aim is to increase this to at least 1,000 cases within a year. Importantly, your experiences can be added to the website, and all contributions are welcome.

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