

US scientist says 'no' to Font Hill's development

Title RESPECTED animal ecologist and conservation scientist Dr Peter Marra has waded into the debate over Font Hill in St Elizabeth, insisting that the site ought not to be developed given its ecological value. "Intact and undisturbed mangrove, coastal beach and coral reef habitats are all extremely important but also extremely rare habitats in Jamaica and throughout the Caribbean. Much of Jamaica's coastal areas have been developed into high-end or high-occupancy tourist destinations. It is essential that some coastal areas be left intact to maintain at least some of Jamaica's natural resources for future generations," Marra, a terrestrial animal ecologist with the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Centre, told Environment Watch. "Font Hill, a recently designated Important Bird Area, represents such an extraordinary natural area, with the intact black mangrove full of crocodiles, gorgeous untouched beaches essential for nesting sea turtles as well as for the Jamaican endemic, resident and migratory birds," he added. Marra was responding to news earlier this year that the Government of Jamaica could develop the 3,000-acre property, which is owned by the Petroleum Corporation of Jamaica and deemed ideal for a "high-end tourism and new town development". There is, he said, also tremendous research value from which the island and the region as a whole can benefit over the long term. "Font Hill is extremely accessible and harbours remarkable wildlife. It could be an outstanding educational and ecotourism destination for Jamaicans and tourists visiting the island. As an educational facility, Font Hill could be a unique site focusing on terrestrial, near shore and marine environments to help train the next generations of Jamaicans about their natural heritage. All this can be done while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the site for generations to come," said Marra, who has been doing research at Font Hill since 1989. "It is one of the most valuable sites in the world for research on the non-breeding season ecology of migratory birds. The site is unparalleled in terms of the amount of knowledge that has been gained about the winter ecology of migratory birds," he added. Marra, 47, who has received numerous professional appointments and awards over the years -- including the Smithsonian Institution's Secretary's Distinguished Research Prize for 2008 -- has also supervised the work of others at Font Hill. All the studies, including his own, have turned up invaluable data. "As far as research findings, we have discovered many fascinating things about the biology of migratory and resident birds in Jamaica, including how tightly rainfall and land use determines their condition. For example, birds wintering in highly disturbed habitats like scrub or pasture lands lose weight over winter compared to birds in wetter habitats such as mangrove or sites with mature tall trees," he revealed. "One of our findings that clearly stands out is that events that happen during the winter to migratory birds determine much of the biology of these animals in subsequent periods of the annual cycle. Specifically, we have shown that the winter habitat you occupy determines how many young you produce, where the birds actually breed in their first year and how well they survive. This has never been shown before for any migratory birds," Marra added. He has warned that any

development of Font Hill could therefore see "one of the last great natural places left in Jamaica destroyed". "Economies recover, the environment does not. More specifically, important sea turtle nesting areas will be gone, as will essential habitat for Jamaican crocodiles, countless birds and other wildlife. Also gone will be a place where Jamaicans can experience nature and wildlife," said the seasoned researcher. However, Marra was quick to add that he was not ignorant of the economic realities that could lead a government to want to develop such an area. "I want to emphasise that I do understand that the Jamaican Government has financial issues that must be resolved. My only hope is that we can convince them that developing the environment for tourism isn't the only solution. Once it's developed, it's gone for good," he said. Marra has, in the interim, said he is willing and ready to work with stakeholders to come up with alternatives. "I would like to work with them as much as they will allow to come up with viable alternatives. The south coast needs to remain an area where only low-level (impact) development is pursued. Setting aside natural areas for future generations of Jamaicans is not only essential planning, it is responsible stewardship of our planet," he noted. He added that there was no question that there exists alternatives. "The mangrove and surrounding habitat, the beaches and coral reefs, all need to be protected. There is still ample space for a visitor centre, training centre and an educational centre. Each of these could be used by staff of the park or could be rented out for conferences that focus on sustainable environmental development," he suggested. "The educational centre could be a site where school children visit to learn, for example, about the natural history of all of the important Jamaican ecosystems. I also envision the creation of guided or self-guided nature trails. For the site to be successful, it must appeal to both Jamaicans and to tourists just visiting the island. It is a remarkable place to bird watch, walk or to simply go swimming."

Source: Jamaica Observer Original news release can be found in:

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