



**ADDRESS BY THE HONOURABLE PENNELOPE
BECKLES, MINISTER OF PUBLIC UTILITIES AND THE
ENVIRONMENT ON THE OCCASION OF THE LAUNCH
OF THE NATIONAL BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY WEBSITE**

Mr. Earl Nesbitt, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Public Utilities and the Environment

Dr. John Agard, Chairman of the Environmental Management Authority

Dr. David Persaud, Ecologist, Ministry of Public Utilities and the Environment.

Distinguish members of the Media

Ladies and Gentlemen

As Minister with responsibility for the management of the environment which includes the conservation of the country's biological resources it is indeed a pleasure for me to officially launch the Trinidad and Tobago Biodiversity Clearing House Website.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the date for the launch of this website has been especially selected. As on Sunday May 22, 2005, the international community would be commemorating the International Day for Biological Diversity. This Day has been proclaimed by the United Nations to commemorate the adoption of the text of the Convention on Biological Diversity on May 22, 1992 and to increase understanding and awareness of biodiversity issues. A website devoted to biological diversity can therefore be a significant platform to building such awareness and hence the reason that I selected today to launch this website.

The International Day of Biological Diversity which is celebrated annually on May 22, is an occasion to reflect on our responsibility to safeguarding our biological resources for future generations. It is within this context that the theme selected for International Day for Biological Diversity 2005 is “Biodiversity: Life Insurance for our Changing World”

The theme is also especially relevant for this year in the context of the launch of the biodiversity synthesis report of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. This five-year programme, initiated by the Secretary-General, studied the relationship between ecosystems and human well-being. The reports findings underline the importance of biological diversity in providing concrete services upon which human life depends.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Trinidad and Tobago is rich in biological diversity considering the country size. For instance the country has a range of ecosystems including a variety of forest types, swamps, savannahs, coral reefs and sea grass beds. These support approximately:

- 2,160 species of flowering plants, 110 of which are endemic
- 433 species of birds
- 100 mammals
- 37 amphibians
- 93 reptiles including 47 snakes

The islands' biological resources are of great importance to all sectors of Trinidad and Tobago's society playing a critical role at both national and local levels, mainly through agriculture, fishing, recreation, tourism and culture. Rural communities depend upon a variety of wild flora and fauna for their existence through hunting, fishing, craft, tour guiding and other nature-based activities. Activities such as nature tours to the Caroni Bird Sanctuaries, forest trails, marine turtles nesting sites and coral reefs in Tobago generate revenue for individuals and communities associated with these features. Trinidad's five terrestrial species of game animals also support a hunting industry worth hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. The country's wildlife fauna and flora are also prized in the lucrative international pet (particularly tropical fish, reptiles and birds) and horticultural markets.

The country's biological resources also play important roles in coastal protection and water availability. Biological resources are therefore a source of essential ecological goods and services. In recent years, growing population pressures, industrialization and unsustainable utilization of the country's biological resources have resulted in the significant deterioration of the natural environment. The Ministry of Public Utilities and the

Environment has implemented a number of initiatives towards the protection of its biological resources. Two recent initiatives in this regard include:

- The implementation of a National Reforestation and Watershed Rehabilitation Programme
- The declaration of Matura Forest an Environmentally Sensitive Area

The Ministry of Public Utilities and the Environment has also taken the necessary steps to have the Caroni Swamp and Bon Accord/Buccoo Reef Lagoon Complex reorganized as Wetlands of International Importance, under the Ramsar Convention. It is expected that the Ramsar Secretariat would soon officially declare these wetland sites. The Environmental Management Authority has also initiated the process of declaring Nariva Swamp, Buccoo Reef and Aripo Savannahs as environmentally sensitive areas and five species of marine turtles, the Manatee, Pawi and White-tailed Sabrewing Hummingbird as Environmentally Sensitive Species.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as these areas are declared and the Ministry and its agencies undertake new initiatives towards the protection of the country's biological resources, such information will be posted on the website that I am launching here today.

The Trinidad and Tobago Biological Clearing House that is being launched today will provide a platform for facilitating the exchange of information on the biological resources. The website has been designed for easy access as

its top priority. Its database can therefore be tapped into easily by even dial up connection.

The home page of the website as shown on the screen features prominently the yellow headed parrot one of our protected species which can be easily confused by the common green parrot which is an agricultural pest.

The website features the following pages:

- New and Events
- Trinidad and Tobago Biodiversity
- Checklists of Freshwater fishes, Amphibians, Reptiles, Birds, Mammals and Trees
- Institutional Arrangements
- Legislative Framework
- Biodiversity Policy and Programmes
- Documents and Reports
- Contact Information

The information on the site reflects information the Ministry has compiled based on reports and publications about the flora and fauna on the country. Over the coming months, the Ministry will continue to add additional pages on the site. Some of these would include:

- Pages providing more details on individual species. I envision these pages to have a description of the species, its legal status, local distribution, CITES status of the species and possibly a photograph.

- Pages providing information non governmental organizations that work in the area. Again I hope that such information would be provided to the Ministry for posting onto the website.

- Pages that will solicit the comments of the public on policy and programmes being developed in the area of biological resource management

- Pages on environmentally important areas in the country such as game sanctuaries, environmentally sensitive areas and Ramsar sites

- Checklists of different groups of plants. To date there is only a checklist of trees. It is envisioned that the website will include checklists of other plant groups such as orchids, palms, grasses and shrubs.

- Checklists of other animal groups. To date the website covers most of the vertebrate groups but none of the invertebrate groups are included. It is envisioned that the website would include checklists of insects, arachnids and other major invertebrate groups.

Such information is not readily available at the Ministry and I hope that you will see it fit to provide such information to strengthen the information base

on the website. In this regard, I welcome inputs from the University, Professors Kenny and Spence, Mrs. Comeau, the NGO community and other scientists in the audience here today.

I give you the assurance that all the information that you provide will properly be reference and accredited. I would also welcome your inputs in updating information that the Ministry has already posted on the site to reflect current scientific knowledge. The Ministry is aware that the nomenclature of species changes with advances in scientific knowledge and the information currently on the site may need to be amended to reflect those changes.

It is only through the combined effort of the scientific expertise in the country that the Ministry will be able to post the best available information on the biological resources of the country that will not only be invaluable to proper environmental planning by decision makers in the country but will also provide the public with proper information and appreciation of the biological resources of the country. A better informed public of the richness of biological resources and the importance and plight of such resources would enhance the Ministry's efforts to conserve such resource.

In closing, I would like to thank you all for making the effort from your busy schedules to attend this launch of the Biodiversity website and I hope that you will provide the Ministry with your input so that the information truly reflects all the knowledge that is available on our country's rich and diverse biological resources.