The Blue and John Crow Mountains National Park celebrates 21 years

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With a series of events organised by its managers, the Jamaica Conservation and Development Trust (JCDT) the Blue and John Crow Mountains National Park (BJCMNP) celebrated its 21st anniversary in fine style. Starting with the inaugural Blue Mountain Music Festival at Holywell from 22nd to 23rd February which featured Third World and TOK, through an evening of poetry, music and visual images at Redbones Blues Cafe on the evening of the day the National Park designation was signed – 26th February, 2014. A photography exhibition with work by Jeremy Francis and Donnette Zacca ran at the Redbones Gallery for a week. This included some of the photographs Jeremy took of the Blue and John Crow Mountain ranges whilst shooting the photograph of the Grand Ridge of the Blue Mountains which is the highlight of the Pear Tree Press desk planner for 2014. The series of events which stretches into March includes cultural, recreational and academic activities. A learning seminar for secondary level students is planned for 18th March to be hosted at the Institute of Jamaica’s Lecture Theatre and a conference was held at the University of the West Indies (UWI) in February. On 22nd March, the third annual fund-raising World Water Day Mona Reservoir Lap-a-thon for the Blue Mountains will be hosted from 6:00am to 12:30pm at the 2.6km trail around the National Water Commission’s Mona Reservoir at Great House Road, off Mona Road.

The first Conference on the Blue and John Crow Mountains: Majesty and Mystery was hosted at UWI on 27th February. Professor Simon Mitchell explained the unusual geology of the Blue Mountains which underpins the exceptional biological diversity of the site. Maroon author – Bev Carey presented on Maroon heritage and Debra-Kay Palmer from the Jamaica National Heritage Trust on the recent nomination of the Blue and John Crow Mountains as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A paper by Dr. Eric Hyslop described the fresh-water ecology of the Blue Mountains which has a high level of surface water with innumerable streams cascading down steep mountain slopes, whilst Kimberly John presented on the links between this natural heritage and the cultural heritage of the communities (particularly the Windward Maroons) in their use of fresh-water ecosystems. There were papers by Ph.D. candidates Denneko Luke from UWI on the forest ecology of the John Crow Mountains and Caroline Judy Duffie from the Louisianna
State University and the Smithsonian Institute on the genetic differences between the Red-billed and the Black-billed Streamertail Hummingbirds. Other papers were shared on the history of the National Park’s protective legislation, Blue Mountain Coffee and the birds of the area as well as on current management including sustainable tourism.

Protection of the Blue and John Crow Mountains was initiated in the late 19th Century after Hooper’s 1885 report on the Forests of Jamaica strongly recommended the protection of the forests of the Grand Ridge of the Blue Mountains for watershed services. Legislation under the Mountains and Rivers Reserves Law of 1889 allowed government to relinquish lands earlier patented for coffee production and the Afforestation Act of 1927 first designated most of the current National Park as Forest Reserve. With the passage of the first Forest Act in 1937 and the formation of the Forestry Department in 1942, the designation of the Blue Mountains Forest Reserve occurred in 1950 with a focus mainly on soil conservation and the protection of watersheds. The designation of the most of the Forest Reserve as a National Park in 1993 (under the Natural Resources Conservation Act) was to protect the high level of biological diversity and ecosystem services including opportunities for recreation and tourism.
The goal of the Blue and John Crow Mountains National Park is to maintain and enhance the remaining area of closed broadleaf forest, component species of plant and animals and associated cultural heritage, existing in these mountains. The National Park is just over 48,000 hectares and protects the largest contiguous block of natural forest remaining in Jamaica. This forest includes a variety of forest habitat, some of which are unique to this part of the island. The unusual geology, high elevation (1,000 m – 2,256 m) and high rainfall (3,000 – 5,000 mm/year) have created an area recognised as two wholly irreplaceable, Key Biodiversity Areas within the Caribbean Biodiversity Hotspot. In addition to their international significance for biological diversity, the forests ensure provision of a good water supply for Kingston and eastern Jamaica, the micro-climate for Blue Mountain Coffee, soil conservation and climate change adaptation and mitigation. The BJCMNP protect the forests of the upper watershed areas which are the source of the water flowing into the Hope and Yallahs Rivers which feed into the Mona Reservoir (and Hermitage Dam). The Mona Reservoir supplies significant portions of the population of Kingston and St. Andrew. In addition, water originating in the BJCMNP is consumed by all citizens of eastern Jamaica and supplies the many farms which provide coffee, bananas, fruit and vegetables as well as supporting dairy cattle and other animals.

The JCDT has managed the National Park under agreements with the National Environment and Planning Agency (NEPA) since 1996 and was involved in its establishment since 1990, under the Protected Areas Resource Conservation (PARC) Project. The BJCMNP is managed in accordance with an approved Management Plan (2011 – 2016) which describes programmes including Enforcement, Conservation and Sustainable Livelihoods. A small, dedicated team of Park Rangers and other professionals implements management activities reporting to NEPA on a bi-monthly and annual basis.

Protection of the forest ecosystems and wise use and management of the natural and cultural heritage are essential for Jamaica’s sustainable development. Despite the challenges of inadequate funding and the large area with rugged terrain, JCDT has been able to raise awareness of the local communities of the need for protection and restoration of the natural forests. Together, the stakeholders are working towards sustainable livelihoods and development of the broader Blue and John Crow Mountains region in order to protect the core, forest ecosystems which make the area unique and essential for life and economic development.