FOREWORD

It was on Martinique, at a meeting of the Caribbean Conservation Association in 1988, that I first encountered Ro Wauer and his contagious zeal for nature. But it was another island that Ro had on his mind when he hailed me across the crowded room: St. Croix.

“Save Salt River Bay!” he said, spotting The Nature Conservancy on my name tag. He was referring to a gem of a place, one of the last intact marine estuaries in the Virgin Islands. This mosaic of mangroves, coral reefs, and freshwater wetlands on St. Croix’s north coast is also of world-class historical significance: the only known site of a Columbus expedition landing in what is now U.S. territory, and an archaeological key to vanished cultures.

At the time of our meeting, Salt River Bay was threatened with massive development. A proposed resort and marina would have entailed dredging the bay, blasting the coral reef, and razing the mangroves. Because the area provides habitat for more than twenty-five species of threatened and endangered plants and animals, including the highest diversity of bird life in the Virgin Islands, the prospect was particularly devastating for conservationists like Ro. He had spent an entire year studying St. Croix’s bird life, and was well aware of the consequences of such development.

The St. Croix Environmental Association had already challenged the development permits in court, and Ro was rallying reinforcements wherever he could. We at The Nature Conservancy soon got more deeply involved (we had already protected a small tract of land on Salt River Bay in the 1970s), as did several other conservation organizations.

As the National Park Service liaison for the Virgin Islands for three years, Ro became intimately familiar with the islands—a familiarity that is the basis of *A Birder’s West Indies*. During that time, Ro was the principal author of the “park alternatives” document that became the cornerstone of legislation establishing the Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Preserve. Signed by President Bush in 1992, the landmark legislation was a victory for the entire region.

This coalescing of various groups, both local and international, stands as a model for the successful protection of the Caribbean’s exquisite natural heritage. It illustrates not only the need for partnerships, but also the utility

of conservation in the islands—for St. Croix's new park carries broad implications for increasing quality tourism while protecting key natural resources.

The West Indies give new meaning to the term diversity. Their watery isolation has given rise to an exorbitant number of unique species. Up to 40 percent of the plant life in some Caribbean forests is found nowhere else on earth. And the West Indian flyway is a critical link in the migratory routes of shorebirds and songbirds.

Tropical forests and coral reefs, which dominate the West Indies, are the earth's most biologically diverse types of ecosystems. In the islands, these ecosystems are inextricably linked. In a climate of heavy tropical rainfall, forests prevent soil erosion that would damage the productive reefs. Together with seagrass beds and mangrove forests, the reefs protect the islands from the battering sea, especially during hurricanes.

This chain of emerald islands, legendary for their beauty, lends new meaning to diversity in other, even more complex ways. The region is awash in a sea of varied cultures, languages, political institutions, and economical structures. The gulf between two neighboring islands' histories, societies, and landscapes can be wide and deep. Thus it can be difficult to get a handle on the Caribbean as a region, to grasp its strengths and problems as a whole.

One unifying factor is limited space, a reality shared by islands everywhere. In the Caribbean, the problem of finite land is compounded by dense human populations. The concept of wilderness is a foreign one there. Inhabited for more than 4,500 years, the West Indies' capacity to sustain life has been pushed to the limits in many cases, and their natural resources have been used intensively. The islands have the highest proportion of deforested land in the Western Hemisphere, warning of a vicious cycle of overuse and destruction of natural resources, not to mention ensuing economic woes.

The islands of the Caribbean thus share a common need for sustainable practices and ways of life compatible with their insular environments. Population growth, spiraling rates of development, and destructive agricultural practices are insidious threats to natural and human communities alike. As the integrity of the natural resource base is threatened, so is the economic health of the region.

One bright economic spot is the tourist industry, the most important source of revenue for the Caribbean. Although many of the islands have chosen to build opulent resorts and golf courses to attract tourists, others have chosen to capitalize on their natural resources and scenic beauty to attract escalating numbers of tourists seeking nature-based holidays. Island nations such as Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Dominica,

St. Lucia, and St. Vincent are beginning to realize that protection of their forests and reefs pays important dividends. Their long-term stability—not to mention prosperity—will undoubtedly stem from their ability to live compatibly with their natural environments.

A group like The Nature Conservancy must carefully consider how best to bring its resources to bear in the Caribbean, a region of such biological richness and faced with such basic yet contentious questions as how to sustain nature and people. Addressing the region's long-term environmental and economic health is no inconsiderable task.

The Conservancy's mission is to preserve plants, animals, and natural communities that represent the full array of life on earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. Through the Caribbean Areas Program, which we established in 1989, we work closely with in-country partners to make local conservation a priority by building independent, self-sustaining conservation organizations.

The centerpiece of our strategy is the protection of areas that have been designated as protected, but are still threatened; often, they are referred to as "paper parks." First, we work to strengthen both nongovernmental and governmental conservation organizations. The rise in local conservation groups, such as the Jamaican Conservation and Development Trust and Grupo Jaragua in the Dominican Republic, reflects increased interest in conservation locally. The Conservancy wants to see these groups flourish, to give conservation steady footing in the Caribbean.

Second, we work with our partner organizations to provide basic park resources: posting the boundary at Jaragua National Park in the Dominican Republic, building a visitors center at Morne Trois Pitons National Park in Dominica, or improving a trail at Blue Mountains/John Crow National Park in Jamaica. Throughout the Caribbean, we are helping recruit and train park managers, provide basic equipment, and initiate community outreach and education efforts in protected areas.

Finally, to help bring the all-important financial resources to bear at these sites, we are establishing continuous funding mechanisms to support conservation over the long term. For example, we have developed trust funds for parks in Jamaica and the Dominican Republic using innovative debt-for-nature swaps. These trust funds become dedicated sources of funds for protected areas and vehicles for other revenues, such as user or concession fees charged to those of us fortunate enough to walk or swim in these tropical parks.

I cannot emphasize enough the clear connection between economic development and conservation in the Caribbean, a connection that is perhaps

stronger here than in any other region I know. Economies based on tourism need to protect their natural assets. Tourists are becoming more and more sophisticated in their search for pristine and biologically diverse places—many of which are found in the parks of the Caribbean. With this insightful guide in hand, I urge you to seek out these magnificent places and support their protection.

Parks and reserves will become institutions as valued as schools, libraries, and hospitals only when governments of the Caribbean are convinced of the economic benefit of conservation. Meanwhile, there is a growing cadre of dedicated Caribbean conservationists, many of whom I have the privilege to work with, who already know that there is a much deeper reason to save their natural heritage. This is our ethical imperative for future generations. This is the force that moves people like Ro Wauer and will eventually move the politicians of the region. This is the case made so forcefully and clearly by Edward O. Wilson, Harvard biologist and Pulitzer Prize winner, when he says, “We should judge every scrap of biodiversity as priceless while we learn to use it and come to understand what it means to humanity.”

Bradford C. Northrup
Vice President and Director
of Caribbean Region
The Nature Conservancy