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**News**

**Oracabessa Fish Sanctuary**

A catalyst in community development

Oracabessa has always been a fishing village. Even in its heyday as a major banana shipping port from the 1920s to 1960s, fishermen were the backbone of sustainable livelihood to families in the area, says the latest news by the Oracabessa Foundation, in St Mary.

The organisation says that, even now, as tourism is poised to pick up where bananas left off decades ago, fisherfolk continue to play an important and vibrant role in the well-being of the Oracabessa community. Unfortunately, the foundation says, the job of the fisherman is getting harder every day.

Like the marine biologists and environmental experts have stated, the Oracabessa Foundation says Jamaica has some of the most depleted fish stocks of any country in the world, and their bay is no different. "As little as 25 years ago, you could make your way down to Fisherman's Beach and have no problem getting your hands on an eight-, 10- or even 15-pound snapper. Walking into a restaurant, you would have had your choice of fish - and it would have been sliced."

Back then, the fish were too big to put on your plate.

Today, 10-pound snappers are about as plentiful as mermaids and unicorns, says the foundation, explaining that when you order fish at Dor's Fish Pot in the district, the two or three sprat will fit completely on the plate (head and tail included).

Although that makes for an interesting culinary experience, it is a disaster for the fish population, it says. In addition, like the rest of the fishermen in Jamaica will tell you, they need to set 15 pots to catch the number of fish they used to catch with only two or three.

involving the local community

How can the decline be stopped? Rather than taking advice solely from academics or environmentalists, the foundation said it went in the direction it knew best by involving the local community in search of solutions. In this case, the fisherfolk themselves.

"What we found is that nobody is more concerned about (and ready to stop) the decline in local fish stocks than local fishers. Sure, there are disagreements about how to implement proposed solutions, but when push comes to shove, everybody knows that something must be done or their way of life is going to disappear like the last banana boat leaving the port," says the foundation.

In April 2009, the Oracabessa Foundation officially established a partnership with the St Mary Fisherman's Cooperative to begin work on the Oracabessa Bay Fish Sanctuary. The goal of the sanctuary is to create a no-fishing zone protecting the bay's critical breeding areas and fish habitat.

And as of May 2010, the sanctuary has been officially recognised by the Jamaican Government. The foundation has also received a J\$1,000,000 grant from the Environmental Foundation of Jamaica to complete a participatory management plan. It also received US\$30,000 from **Seacology** (an international nonprofit environmental organisation that focuses on saving endangered species, habitats and cultures of islands) to construct a sanctuary office.

The Global Environment Facility Small Grants Programme has also given a planning grant to put in place a sea turtle nesting habitat and to plant coral.

Success is by no means guaranteed. And it would be a lie to say the process was anything but long, slow and, at times, frustrating, says the foundation. "But there have been tangible successes along the way, and at the very least, there is a committed group of fishers who are going to do everything in their power to sustain their livelihoods by "giving the fish some time to sleep".

The sanctuary will be officially opened on October 9, in conjunction with the Oracabessa Marlin Tournament.

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Photo by Jonathan Gosse Fishermen at Oracabessa Fish Santuary.

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