

Title: **WALKING THE TALK**

*[Written for the World Environment Day celebrations on the 5<sup>th</sup> June 2014, by Mr. Lalu Hanuman, a BMT Trustee].*

Barbados has been selected by the United Nations Environmental Programme [UNEP] as a global co-host for the World Environment Day celebrations on the 5<sup>th</sup> June 2014. The theme for this year's celebrations is "Small Island Developing States and Climate Change". The celebration of World Environment Day began in 1972 and has grown to become one of the main vehicles through which the United Nations encourages positive action for the environment.

According to an announcement made recently by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Barbados is "at the cutting edge of the fight against climate change", and that is why it has been chosen to co-host this event. The Executive Director of the UNEP, who is also the Under-Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. Achim Steiner, is in Barbados from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> of June to take part in the planned World Environment Day events. Mr. Steiner is accompanied by a five person team from UNEP. Also a bevy of sixteen international journalists is in the island. Many environment associated activities are planned to take place across the island between the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> of June, amongst which are tree planting exercises. This paradoxically while a certain new hotel on the South Coast that enjoys tax exempt status, has been recently allowed to add to global warming by massacring numerous aged trees with impunity, and by so doing, release all their stored carbon back into the atmosphere, to say nothing of the negative bio-diversity implications.



*Photo taken in Dover, Christ Church, by Lalu Hanuman.*

The current biggest threat to life on our miniscule planet, is anthropogenic climate change. World Governments have failed miserably in formulating collective action to combat it, preferring to engage in myopic banter and hyperbole rather than transformative action. With daily signs of runaway climate change, from melting ice caps and permafrost, to super storms, the tipping point may have already been passed. If so, history will rightly vilify us for our inaction. We need to remind ourselves that we do not inherit the Earth from our parents, rather we borrow it from our children. It is their future that we are greedily consuming with our wanton destruction of the natural environment and fossil-fueled transport and energy.

For the UNEP to say that Barbados is at “the cutting edge of the fight against climate change”, suggests that either the UNEP has not done its basic homework, or it has chosen for its own ulterior motives to disregard the huge environmental deficits that exist here, and to obfuscate the facts. UNEP speaks positively of Barbados’ solar heating programme. They allege that Barbados has saved 15,000 metric tonnes of carbon emissions and over USD 100 million in energy savings from the over 35,000 solar hot water systems that have been installed here. But they have failed to appreciate that water heaters in a tropical environment are a luxury item – most people in the Caribbean quite happily use ambient temperature shower water as they have been doing for

generations. On sunless days, despite many Barbadians having back up electric water heaters, myself included, they do not use them. Rather they shower with the water as is. It is manifestly a false positive for the UNEP to attribute emission savings based on a totally erroneous premise – namely that if most of the current users of solar water heaters in Barbados did not have them, they would use fossil fueled water heaters instead. The UNEP is giving Barbados credit for a nonexistent reality.

While it is laudable that the Barbados Government has pledged to increase the share of renewable energy across the island to twenty-nine percent of all electricity consumption by 2029, there is little sign of this being implemented on the ground to date, other than the import duties on renewable energy electricity systems and VAT being reduced to zero and companies involved in their development, installation or manufacturing being eligible for a 10-year tax free holiday, and a promised programme to outfit nineteen government buildings, including nine schools, with solar photovoltaic systems. The planned rubbish to energy scheme, does not qualify as “renewable energy”. A promise is a comfort to a fool. What is required is firm legislative enacted obligations with benchmark sanctions if the renewable energy targets are not met, to back up such a pledge.

There is great confusion as to current environmental law in Barbados, even by those charged with implementing it, as the below sign manifestly indicates. The below sign is one of many similar ones displayed across the island – it incorrectly refers to the Health Services (Amendment) Act 1975 as being the governing law, but this amendment Act only deals with pension matters, instead the sign ought to have referenced the parent Act of 1969 – (Cap 44).





*Picture showing the erroneously quoted Act as displayed at Fairchild Street, Bridgetown. Photo by Lalu Hanuman.*

This week we will hear local politicians paying lip service to environmental issues, but despite there being a draft Environmental Bill in Barbados for some ten years, it is yet to see the light of day. There is a clear need for some of the different haphazard and confusing pieces of environmental legislation to be codified into one single piece of legislation, which has an exclusively environmental focus, rather than be hidden in ostensibly health focused legislation, or scattered in several different Acts. Perhaps the draft bill may well already have that in mind, if so, this draft bill ought to be immediately brought out for public discussion, and subsequent legislative action.

Any new Environmental Act should cover, *inter alia*, such issues as genetically modified crops; the involvement of local communities in planning applications and tree removal schemes - by way of notices to the public and objection criteria; the planting of community orchards to provide food security and wild-life havens – and the planting of fruit trees in publicly accessible spaces; green burials to help regenerate woodland and wildlife habitat, and prevent yet more land being consumed by cemeteries; the total protection of diminishing wetland areas such as Graeme Hall – including for the latter the re-opening of the now permanently closed sluice gate;

encouraging of cycling as an alternative mode of transport; fossil fueled vehicular traffic reduction schemes - such as alternative road access days for even and uneven registration plates; vehicle emission controls and checks; financial inducements for non-fossil fueled transport usage; support for sustainable energy with benchmark sanctions if the renewable energy targets are not met; grey water reuse schemes; adequate public bins – especially on beaches; the levying of a returnable deposit on plastic shopping bags; the banning of styrofoam / polystyrene food and drink containers; removal of ambient lighting from beaches likely to be visited by marine turtles- to be replaced by motion activated lighting; banning of hazardous pesticides and cleaning agents which end up damaging coral reefs; proper handling of asbestos removal; hefty fines for discarded fishing tackle; banning of reef fishing; compulsory recycling and or reusing; ensuring that environmental studies form a core part of the school syllabus - from nursery to secondary levels of education; the imposition of hefty custodial sentences for serious deleterious actions to the environment; and most importantly a functional system to prosecute environmental reprobates. Such an Act will help promote food security, bio-diversity, and climate responsibility.

Recycling and reusing need special emphasis. At present supermarket outlets in Barbados openly flout the law by refusing to accept back foreign bottled beverage containers, in clear and flagrant violation of Section 4 (1) of the Returnable Containers Act 1986 (Cap 395A). This legislation needs to be extended to apply to food containers, plastic shopping bags, and batteries. Doing this will not only protect the terrestrial and marine environments from contamination by these items, and aid in recycling and reuse, but it will also provide much needed employment for people who would collect these discarded items and return them to the dealers. This will also cut the current collection costs of the Refuse Department, and save on land fill space. It is a joined up holistic approach to the issue of recycling and reuse. With a financially realistic refundable deposit scheme, the environmental menace posed by such discarded items, can be readily and easily eradicated.

This is all readily doable, and will not only be good for the terrestrial and marine environments, but it will also help boost local revenues, given the large reliance on the tourist industry in the local economy. Tourists do not want to visit a polluted wasteland or a rubbish dump for a vacation. They expect to find clean beaches and the bio-diverse environment that they were led to believe existed when they viewed the promotional tourist literature.



*Passing tourists “enjoying” the filthy squalor at one of many dump sites in Barbados – here shown is Fairchild St, Bridgetown. Is this any incentive for tourists to visit Barbados? Not quite the idyllic scene that the Ministry of Tourism promotes in its many brochures and expensive metropolitan television adverts. No small wonder that tourist arrivals are declining in Barbados. Photo by Lulu Hanuman.*

As numerous studies have pointed out, the social, economic, and environmental pillars of sustainable development are inextricably entwined, and nowhere is this more apparent than in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), where a decision made in one sphere can have a strong and immediate impact on the other two. From economic growth, to climate change, to food security, the issues facing SIDS are multi-dimensional and they require integrated action to address them. Having a far sighted Environmental Act in Barbados, will go a long way in achieving this.

The environment is not a toy to be played with by Governments or by the UNEP - rather it is a pivotal factor in continued human and non-human survival, and it must be treated as such, and accorded all due respect.

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