



Feature Address

By

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Minister of Planning and Development**

**Launch of the State of the Marine Environment Report:
Trinidad and Tobago 2016**

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**Institute of Marine Affairs
Chaguaramas**

Ladies and gentlemen, I am quite elated to be able to share these few moments with you today, as we launch the IMA's 1st ever State of the Marine Environment Report. This launch assumes even greater significance, because it aligns quite nicely with the benchmark I have set for my Ministry, and indeed, which the Government has declared for all Ministries, that our decisions and actions will be taken on the basis of scientifically gathered and robustly defensible data.

In this regard, I wish to sincerely congratulate the IMA for its production of the State of the Marine Environment Report 2016. This Report provides a scientifically grounded understanding of the existing conditions of some of Trinidad and Tobago's important coastal and marine ecosystems, habitats and species. It also details how these resources have been, and continue to be affected by the range of natural and human pressures to which they are subjected. This Report therefore establishes an environmental baseline from which we should aspire to improve.

Ladies and gentlemen, whether it was to transport refined sugar back to the metropolitan countries or to recover what was buried deep under its surface, Trinidad and Tobago has always relied on its ocean and marine resources for economic prosperity. Data from the Central Statistical Office (CSO) has shown that for the past 10 years, the industrial sector has accounted for more than 50% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) while the service sector (including tourism and shipping) has accounted for about 40% GDP, but more than 60% of the labour force.

We know that, in Tobago, for example, Tourism is especially important, as approximately 50% of employment is tourism related. Nationally, the fishing sector, although contributing much less to GDP, provides a source of livelihood and subsistence to communities from Toco to Charlotteville, and from Carenage to Cedros. It is also a source of nutrition and recreation, especially to some of the more vulnerable in society.

One analysis of the economic impact of Trinidad and Tobago's coastal zone to the national economy, has estimated that within the direct impact coastal zone the contribution to GDP in 2015 was US\$2.14 billion. Within the broader coastal zone, the contribution amounted to approximately US\$22.5 billion or 81% of total GDP.

It is estimated that almost 80% of all socio-economic activities and 70% of Trinidad and Tobago's population are located either along, or in close proximity to the coast. Approximately 8% of all public and private infrastructure, by value, is located immediately on the coastline, while 89% of the total value of physical assets lies within the broader coastal zone. Moreover, as a Small Island Developing State, we have collectively 704 km of coastline and about 15 times more sea than land; which indicates the importance of the marine and coastal sphere to the country.

There is no question though, that in our quest for economic prosperity over the years, we have degraded the very same natural resources that sustain us, and on which we will depend for our future. Like oil and gas, our marine and coastal resources, if not carefully husbanded, will one day be no more.

This will, of course, place in serious jeopardy the Government's ability to implement our new economic policies aimed at diversifying the economy, as these will focus on investments in the tourism, agriculture, aquaculture and maritime sectors, all of which require a healthy marine environment.

The presentation we have just seen could not have depicted this state of coastal erosion and marine degradation any better, and makes a greater case for us to be more proactive in protecting the natural resources of Trinidad and Tobago. Our actions, ladies and gentlemen, and in many cases, our inaction, have made our coral reefs in Tobago for example, more susceptible to impacts from climate change and disease. These reefs are nurseries for our fish, provide sand for our beaches, protect our coastline, and provide the natural infrastructure for our tourism sector. Many tourists come from far and wide to take a front row seat to the magnificence and beauty of the largest brain coral in the world, currently located in Speyside, Tobago.

In a similar way to how we have hunted our iguana, lappe, manicou, deer and other "wild meat" almost into extinction in some cases, so too we see that our fisheries, are being exploited, and for some commercial species - even overexploited.

Over the last few months there has been much discussion in the public domain, with regards to the safety of the seafood we consume, especially that emanating from certain sections of our 704 km

coastline. Though fuelled in part by incendiary and ill-informed statements from persons within the industry, the concerns were sufficiently serious for my government to appoint an inter-agency team to collect fish and shellfish samples and send to USEPA approved laboratories in the United States for testing. Ladies and gentlemen, the results we received have indicated that the fish is safe to eat.

Ladies and gentlemen, Trinidad and Tobago is currently experiencing the effects of a global economic crisis which has negatively impacted our economy and stymied our development thrust. There is an absolute need to diversify our economy and strengthen other areas of revenue generation, whilst simultaneously improving the standard of living for some of our marginal communities. Many of these are located either in the vulnerable areas on the coast, or in rural settings dependent on coastal resources for their livelihood. A key challenge for these communities would be minimising and adapting to sea level rise, and in particular the increased coastal erosion and salinization of coastal aquifers that may result.

In September 2015, our government joined the rest of the world in committing to 17 Global Goals to achieve 3 extraordinary things in the next 15 years – to end extreme poverty, fight inequality & injustice and fix climate change. These 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are unlike the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), derived in 2000, as they take into consideration the environment and its link to economic and social development. Goal # 14 - Life below waters - speaks to the conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. This goal has 10 targets, one of which speaks to sustainably managing and protecting marine and coastal ecosystems to avoid significant adverse impacts, by strengthening their resilience and taking restoration action in order to achieve healthy and productive oceans by 2030.

Before taking this State of the Marine Environment Report (2016) to Cabinet for its approval, I asked that a Plan of Action be developed to address the issues highlighted within the report. Cabinet has since agreed to an action plan for implementing the Integrated Coastal Zone Management Policy Framework to mitigate negative impacts on the coastal and marine environment for the period 2017-2020. The Integrated Coastal Zone Management Policy Framework was developed by a multi-sectoral steering committee in 2014. Cabinet has also

agreed to the establishment of an Inter-Ministerial Committee to guide the implementation of this action plan.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Cabinet immediately recognized the significance of this groundbreaking report produced by the IMA, and the urgency required in arresting further degradation of our coastal and marine environment. The Inter-Ministerial Committee has therefore been tasked with developing indicators, as well as overseeing the monitoring and reporting of these indicators. We are convinced that, if properly executed, we will definitely see tangible positive changes in our ocean's health.

Many national development goals are interlinked, and achieving the goal of coastal and marine conservation will not be possible if other related goals, including poverty reduction, are not met. Newly emerging ideas, for example the measuring of coastal community and the environmental dimensions of livelihood, go beyond using solely GDP as an indicator of development, and are gaining traction internationally.

Experience from many nations has shown that quality of life can be expressed beyond the measure of GDP per capita and that the integration of social and environmental factors are equally important in ensuring wider development goals are reached. Going beyond government-led mainstreaming, innovations such as “green jobs”, social enterprises, and wealth accounting are among other initiatives which are increasingly being seen as ways to address the integration of true social and environmental costs for a better quality of sustainable development.

We need therefore, to be more creative and innovative in our approach to natural resource management utilising the best available technology and sound scientific information. The IMA might have lead the way in such innovative and creative thinking when, during the course of the last year, the IMA partnered with the private sector to promote the Lionfish as a high end food item, referring to it as ‘the new lobster.’ I understand that they have developed a research project with key stakeholders in Tobago to design a fish pot to capture these invaders, remove them from our reefs, and take them to our restaurants.

Scientific research undertaken by state agencies such as the IMA needs to be policy-driven and policy-relevant, using sound methods. Data has to be readily available, and translated into pertinent information that can be used by the decision-makers and civil society when developing policies. Monitoring and evaluation of management interventions will be critical to facilitate adaptive management in an uncertain future.

In order to foster science-based management, and to support the Science-Policy nexus, we recognise that more resources for scientific research is required but these must be rationalized. We encourage research institutions like the IMA and the academic institutions such as UWI and UTT to work closer with State entities with responsibility for resource management such as the Environmental Management Agency, Fisheries Division, Maritime Division and Coastal Protection Unit so that they can make informed interventions, without having to duplicate research efforts.

In closing, I once again want to commend the IMA for producing this State of the Marine Environment 2016 Report. The IMA has almost 40 years research experience, pioneering and participating in numerous programmes locally and regionally. I recognise that the IMA continues to be faced with many challenges and is still awaiting the appointment of a Board of Governors, but rest assured that my government appreciates the value of the research conducted here and the IMA's contribution to National Development, and these matters will be sorted out in the not too distant future.

I thank you, and may God continue to bless your efforts and reward your contribution to the national development.