East Abaco Creeks National Park Proposal

Submitted to the Minister of Environment
By: Bahamas National Trust
and Friends of the Environment
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Acknowledgements:
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Executive Summary

In the interest of long-term conservation planning for Abaco, Friends of the Environment and The Bahamas National Trust are proposing protection of coastal crown and treasury lands and cays from the area just south of the Snake Cay dock to the southern side of Cherokee Sound (Figure 1) on the east side of Great Abaco Island. Working from past experience in protected areas proposals, as well as with the advice of protected area managers and researchers, this proposal was developed with the community in mind and has evolved with significant community input.

This network of wetlands in East Abaco contains extremely important nursery habitat that is critical in the life cycle of many recreationally and commercially important species. Degradation of these areas will negatively impact fish and crawfish populations on the reef. These wetlands have been a source of food and recreation for Bahamians since the settling of nearby communities. Areas where Bahamians can pursue these cultural activities are rapidly disappearing. This proposal aims to protect the habitat while still allowing heritage fishing activities to take place. The proposal also envisions the area be used by entrepreneurs engaging in compatible nature-based activities; such as fly-fishing. Such nature-based tourism is a fast growing market and one that Abaco has all of the natural amenities available to support. In effect, this proposal is a framework providing for a balance between culture, economics and conservation.

A main objective for protecting the area as a National Park is to ensure the area is not destroyed by development. In recent years the area has been the target of several large-scale development projects which represent significant threats to the overall ecological integrity of the area. The creation of a national park would also result in better regulation of fishing activities, especially considering that there is very little enforcement of existing regulations in the area presently. The proposed national park would also protect important mangrove and seagrass habitats, which are extremely valuable for their juvenile nursery function for the adjacent Pelican Cays Land and Sea Park and other nearby reef systems.
Creation of the proposed national park would also help meet national protected area goals established under international agreements including The Convention on Biological Diversity and the Ramsar Convention. The park would also advance the national marine protected area system locally, and nationally, by protecting habitats and ecosystems which are largely underrepresented in the Bahamian protected area system, despite their importance to our country.

As The Bahamas moves to meet its protected area obligations under international agreements and conventions, we are in a position to benefit from the wisdom and avoid the same mistakes of our older and more experienced neighbors. As The Bahamas emerges from the current economic downturn it is of crucial importance to effectively plan for the management of our natural resources. Creation of the East Abaco Creeks National Park would be an important step towards planning a sustainable future for The Bahamas.
Introduction

This proposal is part of an effort by the Bahamas National Trust (BNT) and Friends of the Environment (FRIENDS) to increase awareness and protection of the Bahamian environment.

Location

The proposed protected area, located on the east side of Great Abaco, would include three wetland systems interconnected through an underground network of blue holes. The areas subject of this proposal are only the wetland areas themselves not the land in between the systems. A buffer zone on the mainland will be included to further ensure protection of the wetlands. The wetland systems are Snake Cay Creek (also known as Angel Cays), Bight of Old Robinson and Cherokee Sound. The northern boundary of the network begins approximately 7 miles south of Marsh Harbour (just south of Snake Cay Dock) to Wilson City; a boundary across the mouth of the Bight of Old Robinson; and a boundary across the mouth of Cherokee Sound ending approximately 18 miles south of Marsh Harbour. The proposed area is hereafter called “The Creeks”.

![Map of The Bight of Old Robinson and the Creeks](image-url)
Figure 1 shows a Google Earth satellite image showing Snake Cay Creeks, Bight of Old Robinson and Cherokee Sound.

Boundaries and Buffer Zones

The Network in general:

Both biodiversity conservation and ease of recognition and delineation were taken into consideration when identifying the proposed boundaries for the protected area. Where the proposed area abuts the mainland (to the west) the boundary is 100 feet landward from the high tide line. To the east (along the outer cays) the boundary is the high tide line. In addition, it is suggested that a buffer zone be implemented to mitigate the impacts of encroaching development. All crown or treasury owned cays are included. The community has been consulted regarding boundaries throughout the development of this proposal.

Snake Cay Creeks:

For the Snake Cay Creeks, the northern boundary would be the northern tip of Deep Sea Cay across to the point at Rouse’s Hole and following the coastline west. The southern boundary would be where crown land ends before Spencer’s Bight (note that this is estimated on Figure 2). The area would also include Suckingfish Creek and the spit of land to the east of said creek; and the Nurse Cays which are east of that spit. The western boundary would be a minimum of 100 feet landward of the high tide line to include the logging road which runs parallel to the Snake Cay wetlands (this may be lesser or greater than 100ft from the wetland in some areas). The eastern boundary will be drawn along the high tide line of the outer cays (e.g. Deep Sea, Iron Cay).
Figure 2. shows a Google Earth satellite image of Snake Cay Creeks and proposed boundary guidelines.

Bight of Old Robinson:

The boundary line would be drawn across the mouth of the Bight from Point A (unable to find common name on available maps) to Tom Curry’s Point (from 26°21.331’N, 77°0.239’W to 26°20.063’N, 77°0.032’W).
Figure 3. Shows a Google Earth satellite image showing the Bight of Old Robinson and proposed boundary guidelines.

Cherokee Sound:

The boundary line would be drawn across the mouth of the Cherokee Sound from Rocky Point towards Cherokee Point. The boundary would include the reef at Cherokee Point and the majority of the Sound, but exclude Duck Cay itself, which is a private island.
Importance of Mangrove Ecosystems

- Biodiversity.

Mangroves are a transition zone between terrestrial and marine habitats, and thus are integral to both areas. Mangrove roots provide shelter and habitat for juvenile fish, juvenile spiny lobster, Queen Conch, and other organisms. Mangrove trees themselves provide roosting and nesting habitat for many birds, including the White Crowned Pigeon. Seagrass and *Laurencia* algae beds can be found within the wetlands and at the creek mouths. These “beds” are critical elements in the life cycle of marine organisms.
such as Nassau Grouper and Spiny Lobster. Algae, such as Laurencia spp., are known to send out chemical cues which attract the juveniles towards the wetland and in some cases may initiate metamorphosis (e.g. Queen Conch) (Boettcher and Targett)

- Nursery Habitat.

Compared to coral reefs, mangroves have lower numbers of large predators, and thus provide a safe haven for juveniles to mature. Without the protection of mangrove systems, many fish will be less likely to survive to the point where they can venture out to reefs to reproduce. The health of wetlands is critical to the health of other marine ecosystems. Studies in Mexico, Belize and other areas of the Caribbean demonstrate that there is a higher biomass of fish on reefs when that habitat is connected to mangroves (Mumby, Edwards and Arias-Gona' lez). The biomass of bluestriped grunts may be up to 25 times greater in areas with mangroves (Mumby, Edwards and Arias-Gona' lez). Adult striped parrotfish (Scarus guacamaia) were found in greater densities on reefs adjacent to mangroves, than on reefs with no mangroves nearby (Mumby, Edwards and Arias-Gona' lez). The proximity of Sandy Cay Reef in the Pelican Cays Land and Sea Park to The Creeks strongly suggests that there may be a link between the two. However, the movement of fish from The Creeks to Sandy Cay Reef has not been researched directly.

- Ecosystem Services.

The Bahamas archipelago covers nearly 100,000 square miles and is comprised of numerous islands, cays and rocks. Many of these islands have coral reefs off of their shores and mangroves along the coast. The Bahamas, due to its geography, is subject to many hurricanes and tropical storms. Our coral reefs are the first defense against the bulk of the wave energy and storm surge that The Bahamas experiences. Mangroves are our second defense. Without this natural protection, The Bahamas would find that the repercussions from hurricanes and winter storms would be much greater, as was the case in South East Asia in the great tsunami of 2004. Mangroves also act as filters, collecting debris and silt from run-off. This limits erosion of the coastline, and minimizes siltation of adjacent seagrass beds.
• Local and National Economy.

Bahamas Reef Environmental Education Foundation (BREEF) has noted that 80% of the marine life we eat spends some portion of time amongst the mangroves and seagrass beds. Species of specific importance to The Bahamas include snappers, groupers, Queen Conch, and crawfish (Spiny Lobster). Snapper and Nassau Grouper are the most common scale fish caught in The Bahamas and are an important food resource for Bahamians. Approximately 95% of the profit derived from total fishery exports can be contributed to crawfish. In 2007, 95% of crawfish landed in The Bahamas were exported, amounting to over $86 million in sales (Department of Marine Resources).

Figure 5 shows Juvenile Crawfish observed in Snake Cay Creek during a study on larval recruitment.

Mangrove wetlands and associated seagrass flats are also highly valuable to the economy because they are the primary habitat for bonefish. These wetlands, in particular, are one of the top bonefishing destinations in all of the Abacos. The current rate for a day’s bonefish charter is between $300 and $500 and some bonefishermen work more than 200 days a year. This means that a single bonefisherman can earn $60,000 to $100,000 a year, or more! This is a direct benefit from Abaco’s wetlands which becomes filtered through
the economy in the form of fuel purchases, food and other goods and services. As such, the habitats provided in the Creeks are an invaluable asset to the Bahamian economy as seen in the above examples.

*The Blue Hole System of East Abaco Wetlands*

Bahamian blue holes have the highest biodiversity of any underwater caves in the world (Iliffe). Blue holes are windows into the geology of our islands and often connect multiple habitats. The blue holes of Snake Cay Creeks and the Bight of Old Robinson are all part of the same fault fracture (Kakuk). This slump fault or bank margin fracture would have occurred when the sea level was much lower and the exposed land at the edge of the continental shelf shifted. The blue holes at Cherokee Sound appear to be part of a “cross fracture” as they are running perpendicular to the blue holes in the other two wetlands. These blue holes are hydraulically connected, so what affects one could affect another (Kakuk). Pollution is a particular concern in these cases, as well as silt from dredging.

There are many blue holes in The Bight of Old Robinson and Cherokee Sound. Andros Island is probably the only location in The Bahamas with a greater density of blue holes than these two wetlands (Kakuk).

In addition, blue holes provide an essential nutrient source that drives the growth of seagrasses and algae. On going research from Florida International University has identified The Bahamas as one of the most nutrient poor ecosystems in the world. Blue holes provide a critical source of nutrients that alleviates the nutrient limitation. Seagrass and the red algae *Laurencia* are highly productive around blue holes because of the nutrient influx, and thus the most valuable Queen Conch and Nassau Grouper nurseries may be immediately adjacent. At a larger scale, wetlands with blue holes are more productive than those without. As such, the density of blue holes helps explain why the proposed areas are such valuable nurseries, and thus the critical need for their protection.
Figure 6 shows a Google Earth image showing the density of blue holes in The Creeks. Each yellow pin represents the location of a blue hole.

Blue holes provide habitat to many organisms including fish, crawfish, and filter feeders such as sponges. Blue hole cave walls and entrances are literally carpeted with filter-feeding organisms that take advantage of the high movement of water through the area. Filter feeding species are particularly vulnerable to siltation. Species of sponges identified in blue holes of the East Abaco Creeks can also be found out on the reefs, yet the sponges in the blue holes have become particularly adapted to their environment and conditions. As such, these unique assemblages warrant specific protection.
Figure 7. Shows cave adapted sponges found in a Snake Cay Creek blue hole.

Widely promoted by the Ministry of Tourism as a part of the Bahamian tourist experience, blue holes support a somewhat elite industry of cave diving and research, both of which take place in Abaco. The blue holes near Snake Cay are known to be used by cave divers of a range of experience levels (Kakuk). Additionally, Snake Cay Creek blue holes have attracted attention from National Geographic Expeditions, and may be included in an upcoming article in the National Geographic magazine.

Proposal Development

Community Consultation

When a development was proposed for the area north of the Snake Cay Creeks, concern about protection of The Creeks heightened and Friends of the Environment felt the timing was right to start a conversation with the community about their future. Local interest has been generated due to the historic use, enjoyment and understanding of the area’s importance to fishing stocks.
Table 1 contains a list of Community meetings held in Abaco to discuss the East Abaco Creeks national park proposal. (see Appendix “Community” for details of all meetings).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
<th>Meeting Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 Aug 2008</td>
<td>7:00 p.m.</td>
<td>FRIENDS Education Center, Marsh Harbour</td>
<td>93 (81 signed in)</td>
<td>Presentation and open forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Oct 2008</td>
<td>7:30 p.m.</td>
<td>Community Center, Cherokee Sound</td>
<td>75-80 (33 signed in)</td>
<td>Presentation and open forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Dec 2008</td>
<td>7:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Community Center, Cherokee Sound</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Presentation and open forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Dec 2008</td>
<td>7:00 p.m.</td>
<td>FRIENDS Education Center, Marsh Harbour</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Presentation and open forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Jan 2009</td>
<td>12 noon</td>
<td>FRIENDS Education Center, Marsh Harbour</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Stakeholder discussion group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Jan 2009</td>
<td>7:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Fire House, Casuarina Point</td>
<td>14 (13 signed in)</td>
<td>Presentation and open forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Jan 2009</td>
<td>12 noon</td>
<td>FRIENDS Education Center, Marsh Harbour</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Stakeholder discussion group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Jan 2009</td>
<td>6:30 p.m.</td>
<td>Pete’s Pub, Little Harbour</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Presentation and open forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 Jan 2009</td>
<td>12 noon</td>
<td>FRIENDS Education Center, Marsh Harbour</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Stakeholder discussion group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Jan 2009</td>
<td>7:00 p.m.</td>
<td>FRIENDS Education Center, Marsh Harbour</td>
<td>6 (4 signed in)</td>
<td>Presentation and open forum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Friends of the Environment organized a meeting in August 2008 to assess the community’s interest in protecting the Snake Cay wetlands. All 93 of the community members who attended were in favor of some sort of protection. From that meeting a dedicated, diverse group of local residents volunteered to help to draft this proposal, select the proposed protected area and take part in the management.
This group suggested the inclusion of the Bight of Old Robinson to the conservation area. The Bight was one of the areas seriously considered by the Department of Marine Resources for a Marine Protected area, although another location was eventually proposed. This mangrove wetland is recognized by conservationists, scientists, locals and visitors as a place of special importance.

The town of Cherokee had asked for protection of their wetlands during a meeting with the Bahamas National Trust in 2006. With the creation of this proposal to protect areas that are connected to Cherokee Sound, it was only natural to consult the Cherokee community. A meeting was held in Cherokee Sound in October 2008 to assess their interest in having Cherokee Sound become part of the proposed protected area. While only 33 people wrote their names on the sign-in sheet, attendance was estimated at 75-80 people. An article in The Abaconian by a Cherokee resident noted the meeting as “one of the largest gatherings of Cherokee residents to turn out for a public meeting” (see Appendix “NEWS” for all newspaper coverage). All in attendance, save one, voted to include Cherokee Sound in the park proposal and indicated interest in assisting with management.

With the completion of the first proposal draft a second round of meetings was held in Marsh Harbour and Cherokee Sound for consultation with the respective communities (December 9 & 10, 2008).

At the end of the year it was felt that further consultation with the community was needed, so meetings were arranged for Cherokee Sound, Marsh Harbour, Casuarina Point and Little Harbour. Both communities of Casuarina Point and Little Harbour were in favour of the proposal. A series of informal stakeholder discussion meetings was held, realizing that some community members were unable to attend the evening meetings while others simply do not feel comfortable speaking at a community meeting. This provided another opportunity for the community to talk about the proposal and to raise general environmental concerns.
Private Land Owners

During the development of this proposal, FRIENDS and BNT investigated privately owned lands within the proposed network area. The following is a list of known privately owned cays and land within the proposed network:

- Iron Cay (Snake Cay Creeks)
- John Doctor’s Cay (Snake Cay Creeks)
- Buccaroon Bay (Snake Cay Creeks)
- Noah Bethel Cays (Cherokee Sound)
- Della Cays (Cherokee Sound)
- Abaco Club on Winding Bay (Cherokee Sound)
- The western rim of The Bight of Old Robinson
- Tom Curry Point

Attempts were made to contact private owners through letters, phone calls, emails and media publicity. The concept of a national park was presented and an offer made to meet in person or on the telephone to discuss any concerns.

Creek Usage

A survey was created to assess usage of the proposed area. The survey gathered data on demographics, activities taking place in The Creeks, willingness to pay, as well as economic valuation of The Creeks (see Appendix “SURVEY” for a copy of the survey and a report of all responses). The survey was administered in hard copy format and online versions were sent to FRIENDS’ email list and to BNT Abaco members. A total of 84 persons replied to the survey. Seventy percent (70%) of respondents were from Abaco, the majority of which were from Cherokee Sound. Some of the U.S. respondents identified themselves as second home owners, which is why they were categorized. It is possible that more second home owners replied to the survey than were identified.
The Creeks are used in a variety of ways. According to the survey, the most popular activities were boating, fishing (scale fish, conch, crawfish, and turtle) and snorkeling. The uses of the creeks include exploring/site-seeing, orchid viewing, research, tours and blue hole exploration.

Figure 8. Shows a chart showing the home town representations of survey respondents (n=84).

Figure 9. Shows a chart displaying activities that take place in The Creeks. For this question respondents were allowed to choose multiple answers.
Survey respondents were asked “How much money do you think The Creeks contribute to Abaco’s economy each year?” Responses are shown graphically below and range from $10,000 to $50,000 per year.

![Value Placed on East Abaco Creeks](chart.png)

**Figure 10.** Shows a Bar chart showing how survey respondents value the economic contribution of The Creeks (n=84).

A range of local stakeholders and visitors were surveyed to determine the general opinion on which user groups should pay user fees if implemented. The majority of respondents suggested “everyone” should pay fees, while “Tourists and Businesses” and “No one” were also popularly suggested. None of the respondents suggested that “locals only” pay user fees. The issue of user fees will be revisited during community consultation for the management plan.

**The Bahamas National Parks System**

The Bahamas National Trust has the mandate and authority to build and manage the National Park System of The Bahamas. Created in 1959 by an Act of Parliament, the Bahamas National Trust Act defines the leading role of the organization by stating, the Bahamas National Trust “shall be established for the purpose of promoting the permanent preservation, for the benefit and enjoyment of The Bahamas, of lands and tenements
(including buildings) and submarine areas, for the preservation (so far as practicable) of their natural aspect, features and animal, plant and marine life”.

The Bahamas National Trust has earned a national and international reputation of excellence. The Trust has an outstanding track record in conservation and resource management. It has set conservation examples and provided protected area models for similar organizations around the world, the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park being a notable example.

The Bahamas National Trust currently manages 26 national parks throughout the country, covering over 700,000 acres of land. The Trust prides itself in working co-operatively with groups around the country to accurately and effectively establish the needs of our environment in order to best manage our national resources. The Trust aims to maintain, rehabilitate and perpetuate the inherent integrity and biodiversity values of our ecosystems.

Justification for Proposed Area

Existing Threats

Development

Development is a necessary component of Abaco’s future growth. Like most of The Bahamas, Abaco currently lacks a comprehensive land use plan and as such it is difficult to ensure effective planning for developments. As a result of the lack of a comprehensive land use plan, coastal areas throughout Abaco, including the proposed East Abaco Creeks Park, are at risk from small and large-scale development. The area is also threatened by pollution and further habitat loss and fragmentation, with a resulting loss of biodiversity. Additional protected areas such as the East Abaco Creeks must be created to ensure the sustainability of Abaco’s fragile environment.
Illegal Harvest of Juvenile fish

The wetlands are primarily a nursery ground and thus the majority of the fish found there are in the juvenile stage. Both FRIENDS and BNT receive regular reports of the harvesting of juvenile conch from the area. Once the park is created, the area will be more closely monitored to safeguard marine resources, including juvenile conch and crawfish.

Commercial Fishing

Several reports have been made at community meetings that persons are engaging in commercial fishing activities in The Creeks. Activities that have been reported include:

- Hauling (netting) at creek mouths and bottlenecks
- Harvesting of bonefish for sale
- Harvesting of juvenile conch in large numbers
- Mortality from by-catch – during the netting process, many non-target species are also collected. Piles of unwanted juveniles are often found discarded along shorelines because they are deemed by fisherman to have no monetary value. Recent reports have also indicated that there is now a market for small fish (wrasses, sergeant majors, etc. within the Haitian community).
- Use of chlorine bleach to kill fish

Many stakeholders hold the view that commercial fishing in The Creeks is the largest threat to species diversity and abundance.

Invasive species

The lionfish invasion is impacting all areas of Abaco, creeks included. Lionfish are indiscriminate invaders, taking advantage of all habitat types including patch reefs and artificial structures (e.g., docks, crawfish traps). Lionfish have no natural predators in The Bahamas, and there are no natural controls on their population locally. They are voracious
predators and have been documented to feed on large numbers of juvenile fish including commercially important species such as Nassau groupers and snappers. Their rapid habitat expansion and population increase poses a serious threat to marine resources, including those that are of economic importance. Once the park is established aggressive control and eradication will be initiated in the East Abaco Creeks.

Future Plans/Park Management

Once the park is established a management plan will be created by the Bahamas National Trust in consultation with Friends of the Environment and with local stakeholder communities. BNT’s management planning process involves effective stakeholder consultations, including nearby communities. The management plan may include some of the following components:

- Park Sustainability
  - User Fees (individuals or businesses)
  - Operator licenses
- Enforcement strategies
  - BNT presence
  - Volunteer/Community involvement
- Education and Awareness
- Zoning
- Invasive species removal and control

Park Sustainability

BNT has a goal to maximizing the revenue generation potential of national parks to ensure that as many of them are self-sustaining as possible. Those conducting business in The Creeks, such as nature tour operators or fly fishing charters for example, could pay an environmental impact fee. Visitors to the park could also pay a user fee.
Enforcement

Once the park is established, the Bahamas National Trust will establish rules and regulations for its use. As with all management planning activities, the public will be invited to provide comment. In an effort to maximize scarce resources and emphasize partnerships, enforcement could involve support from The Department of Marine Resources as well as mobilization of some volunteers who have an interest in seeing the area effectively managed. Volunteers have been used to support enforcement of park rules and regulations in other National parks including the Exuma Cays Land Sea Park and the Lucayan National Park.

The BNT will likely establish a Park office at Snake Cay to support enforcement.
Benefits of the location include:

- Deep water access for boats
- Launching ramp
- Sheltered creek area for storing a warden’s boat
- Close proximity to Marsh Harbour and easy access to Great Abaco Highway (10 minutes to Marsh Harbour, 40 minutes to Abaco National Park)
- Direct access to Pelican Cays Land and Sea Park (less than 10 minutes)

Education and Awareness

Once the park is established, a community consultation campaign will commence, explaining the boundaries of the new park and initiating discussions about possible regulations for its use. These discussions will also introduce the concept of a park management plan, and the important role that stakeholder consultation will play in its development. In meetings in nearby communities (Cherokee Sound, Casuarina Point, Little Harbour and Marsh Harbour) stakeholder groups will also be involved
fishermen, tour operators, business owners, community recreation groups, scientists and
cave divers. Special effort will be made to include individuals that participated in the
proposal development process.

The wetlands outlined in this proposal are excellent examples of viable ecosystems and
they will serve as outdoor classrooms to support other BNT and FRIENDS environmental
education programs for schools and the general public. FRIENDS and BNT share the
belief that teaching young people is one of the best long term investments that we can
make in conservation.

Zoning

The management plan for the park will include a detailed zoning plan. The zoning
concept has already been used successfully in the Exuma Park and in marine protected
areas worldwide (Great Barrier Reef MPA, Australia; Florida Keys National Marine
Sanctuary, USA; Cape Peninsula MPA, South Africa; St. Lucia Soufriere, Virgin Islands).
Zoning is an important tool for managing user conflicts, and for balancing user needs
with habitat protection and monitoring and helps provide the balance between recreation
and conservation.

Potential zoning categories:

• No take
• Subsistence fishing only (eg. Line fishing)
• Catch and Release (for creek interior, to allow bonefishing to continue)
• Recreational Zone
• No development
• Seasonal closures (to provide protection curing critical stages of species’ life
cycle).

During the proposal development consultations, some residents actually made
preliminary suggestions of certain restrictions they wanted to see in certain areas. In such
instances, we advised that the management planning process will address these issues, and that we will be coming back to the stakeholders to guide this process.

Conclusion

While this proposal is a new concept for marine protected areas on Abaco, there are many examples of similar successes throughout the world. A key element of these successes has been the demonstration that community support is vitally important. Effective involvement of communities helps ensure they have greater buy-in and respect for the protected area. Such sense of ownership provides great support for community acceptance of protected areas.

In the process of development of this proposal, we assured stakeholders that we have full understanding that fishing and recreational uses of the area are important to Abaco residents. This commitment by the BNT and FRENDS has secured overall widespread community support for protecting The Creeks. In our discussions however, we have also said that extractive use cannot be sustained in all areas at present levels and management prescriptions may be required. Stakeholders have offered the view that we should seek to enforce, as a minimum, regulations in line with existing Fisheries Act regulations, but there has also been support for the development of catch limits and other similar restrictions to support the recovery and replenishment of some species. Issues like this will be addressed in the management planning process for the area – the community will be fully consulted for their input into final management prescriptions for the area. The proposed area was chosen because it is the largest wetland system on the eastern side of Abaco, and of critical ecological importance as a marine nursery area. It is also of significance that the area contains sensitive habitats representative of their ecosystem type and that the three wetlands are interconnected biologically, hydrologically and geologically by a network of blue holes and underground caves. Protecting these
wetlands from destruction is of utmost importance to protecting the future of Abaco’s fisheries.

This proposal will advance implementation of the Program of Work on Protected Areas under the Convention on Biological Diversity, and will support wise use of wetlands which is a commitment under The RAMSAR Convention on Wetlands of International Importance.

History has taught that we need to be proactive to protect these important wetland systems. In the past, the full value of wetland habitats was not fully known and as a result, many have been lost – not only in Abaco but throughout The Bahamas. There are many current scenarios in which we are undertaking actions to mitigate against past mistakes. Creating the East Abaco Creeks National Park offers us a great opportunity to be proactive and forward thinking and would be a bold step towards conserving our future.
Bibliography


Photo credits:
Brian Kakuk
Thomas Bethel
Lory Kenyon
Kristin Williams
Appendices

(A) LETTERS: Letters of Support from community, students and scientists
(B) COMMUNITY: Announcements and flyers, sign-in sheets and comments from meetings
(C) Comments and Map drawings from attendees of Marsh Harbour Community Meeting (13 AUG 08).
(D) NEWS: Newspaper Articles and advertisements
(E) SURVEY: East Abaco Creeks Survey and Survey Report
(F) BNT Selection Criteria