



## **Bahamas National Trust Press Release** **November 2, 2011**

### **Update Bell Island**

The Bahamas National Trust welcomes any discussion of environmental issues. One of our chief goals is to raise public awareness and understanding of these issues. The BNT places a high priority on environmental values because they are the necessary foundation for human happiness, health, livelihood and security.

Last September, the BNT published a detailed fact sheet on the Big Bell Island project in the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park which is available on our website or from our headquarters on Village Road.

Recent public discussion has raised a number of inaccuracies that were dealt with in the fact sheet, and added some new ones that require clarification.

The owner of 349-acre Big Bell Island received government permission last year to expand an existing service/utility area for his vacation home, excavate an inland yacht basin, and dredge a portion of the seabed to provide navigable access for his 150-foot private yacht.

About a third of the land within the Exuma Park is privately owned (including Big Bell Island and Little Bell Island.) This land was not included in the 1958 Crown lease to the Bahamas National Trust, and no legal restrictions have ever been placed by any government on private land transfers within the park.

The BNT is strongly opposed to any commercial development anywhere within the park, and no such development either exists or is proposed. However, over the years there has been limited development on and around some private islands.

In the case of the current project on Bell Island, an environmental impact assessment was undertaken at the owner's expense, and strict environmental conditions and protocols were stipulated by both the BEST Commission and the BNT in the form of a detailed Environmental Management Plan.

The impact of offshore dredging and excavation on land is very limited. Dredging of an existing service area, and to create a navigable channel, is affecting less than five acres of seabed. About 40,000 cubic yards of spoil will be removed, some of which will be taken at the owner's expense either to Black Point or to Nassau. The balance will be used for beach replenishment or construction purposes on Bell Island.

It should be noted that the areas of the seabed affected by dredging were substantially reduced and modified from the original plans due to the intervention of the BNT, based on scientific advice.

The net area of impact from development on land is also five acres. A shallow salt pond near the coast is being excavated to create a private yacht basin. The excavated material is being transported at the owner's expense to Black Point or Nassau.

A detailed study determined that the pond was not a "thriving habitat" for animals or plants. Mitigation for this excavation will include removal of three acres of casuarinas north of the salt pond. This area will be restored with native species.

There has been no "widespread destruction" of marine habitat for turtle, lobster or conch.

A survey around Bell Island found no significant conch populations in affected areas. Any conchs that are found in these areas are relocated on a daily basis to suitable sites nearby. Small patches of coral have also been relocated. No lobster or turtle habitat is affected by the operations.

Conch Cut is not being dredged. Conch Cut is a natural deepwater channel that has no direct connection to Big Bell Island.

The developer is in full compliance with the Environmental Management Plan - there have been no violations of the EMP to date. The BNT receives daily progress reports and is fully prepared to suspend operations to ensure that environmental guidelines are met.

In terms of the amount of silt produced by offshore dredging, the EMP sets a turbidity level of 29 NTU as an upper limit to prevent coral damage. On most days the level is under 4 NTU, representing background levels of turbidity only.

It is true that the EIA underestimated the velocity of the current in the yacht basin access channel that is being dredged, which made silt curtains ineffective. The curtains were damaged as a result.

Work was immediately stopped and re-started some 50 feet to the south, where sand rather than rock is being dredged. This modification was approved by the BEST Commission and the BNT as provided by the EMP.

Turbidity monitoring continues on an hourly basis throughout the construction shift. If levels ever exceed 29 NTU's, activities will be suspended until the affected-zone readings are reduced to permit levels.

It is also important to note that Bahamians are currently working on the development, and others will be employed at Bell Island once the development is completed - just as with any other development project in the Bahamas.

The BNT is fully supportive of Bahamians benefitting as much as possible from the environmental resources of the park. We will soon be introducing tour guide training programmes to expand these opportunities.

The BNT is also reviewing ways to sustainably harvest palmetto fronds (for straw work) so that a proper licensing programme can be implemented. Palmetto fronds were being harvested unsustainably, resulting in the destruction of trees within the park.

To put the Bell Island project in some perspective, the total sea bed affected is less than .0038% of the Exuma park's 112,000-plus acres. And the land area impacted by the project is 0.1 per cent of the Island's 349 acres.

Clearly, Bell Island and the Exuma park are not being destroyed.

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