

BUSINESS

IWEco project to bolster earnings, natural habitats in East GB

From destructive hurricanes, storm surges and flooding to salt intrusion in water resources and other development threats, East Grand Bahama has endured its share of challenges over the years. Yet, the willpower of its people to rebound has remained strong.

Developing resilience is at the heart of a three-year project which has been launched to restore major natural habitats in East Grand Bahama to increase residents' earnings through ecotourism and strengthen environmental monitoring and evaluation. Encompassing 49,000 acres of land and ecosystems, the Implementing Land, Water and Ecosystem Management in The Bahamas (IWEco The Bahamas) project is part of a larger, regional undertaking for the Caribbean entitled "Integrating Water, Land and Ecosystems Management in Caribbean Small Island Developing States" (IWEco). The project is funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and implemented by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). For The Bahamas, the Department of Environmental Planning and Protection (DEPP), the Forestry Unit, the Ministry of Public Works and Bonefish & Tarpon Trust are the leading partners.

"It is expected that the outputs of this project will be extremely beneficial to the sustainable development of East End Grand Bahama. The outputs will



Snapper Island, August Creek, East End, Grand Bahama. BONEFISH & TARPON TRUST

create a strong environmental baseline for what currently exists in the area," noted Minister of the Environment and Housing Romauld Ferreira. "With the new focus on community management, residential support would aid in maintaining and sustainably managing these resources, in addition to adding context to the relationship between livelihoods and the environment."

Communities in East Grand Bahama are in dire need. The area is still grappling with the lingering human and environmental impact of successive hurricanes, including Hurricane Dorian in 2019. As a result, economic activity for these communities has been sluggish. And much like the rest of the country, groundwater resources are scarce and under threat. Small island developing states in the Car-

ibbean region face similar challenges.

"The IWEco project will not only aid restoration efforts on the island of Grand Bahama, namely East Grand Bahama, but support the 'build back better' concept," explains National Project Coordinator Melissa Ingraham. "Focusing on restoring proper ecosystem functions, this project will enhance and guide human interventions via a watershed

management plan, biodiversity inventory and long-term monitoring and evaluation of the area in addition to the development of an ecotourism sector. It will benefit both residents' livelihoods and the environment of East Grand Bahama."

Under the IWEco The Bahamas project, in conjunction with the Ministry of Public Works, three major tidal creek systems have been identified for restor-

ative work including the West Gap Creek, Snapper Island and McLean's Town causeways at August Creek and Ridge Creek. A critical component also involves creating an inventory of all species in the area and developing a plan for managing water resources.

Project officials have already invited stakeholders and other residents to submit feedback via online surveys on ecotourism, watershed management and biodiversity inventory strategies. Consultations with the community are taking place over time.

"It is important in any project to get the input of local residents on how they will potentially be impacted," noted tourism specialist for the project Dr. Vikneswaran Nair. "A properly developed ecotourism development sector can bring tremendous benefits for the community and has traditionally been a key means of income generation for women and youth in particular in the form of community-based tourism. Their views on how feasible this is and any other valuable insights can inform how the community can derive benefits through job creation and an increase in alternative income."

Persons who would like to find out more about the IWEco The Bahamas project and actively participate are encouraged to visit <https://iwecoproject.depp.gov.bs/>, follow the project on Facebook and Instagram, or email iweco@depp.gov.bs.