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Local/National News

Plea to protect rare bird

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Dr. William Hayes, a noted Zoologist performing research on the Bahama Nuthatch – a rare bird found only on Grand Bahama – told Rotarians yesterday that the fate of this bird rests in the hands of Bahamian citizens.

He maintained that it is not up to foreign scientists to come and tell Bahamians that they need to save this bird. Instead, he said it is up to those concerned to decide whether or not they want to protect it and how to make it happen.

Dr. Hayes, who was addressing members of the Rotary Club of Lucaya at their weekly meeting, is an associate professor in the Department of Natural Sciences at Loma Linda University in Loma Linda, California and has a Ph.D. in zoology and physiology.

He has been observing the behavioural ecology and conversation of the endangered Bahamian iguanas for many years and recently began collecting data on the taxonomy and conservation of rare and endangered Bahamian birds.

"Because this bird is unique to The Bahamas and is one of the rarest birds in the world, I think it is one that could be saved, it is just going to take dedication and commitment and some serious planning," Dr. Hayes said. "We scientists are happy to contribute to the plan by providing basic details on its biology, but when it comes to the politics of saving the species, it is really going to be up to the Bahamian people here on Grand Bahama."

Dr. Hayes commended the support of the Grand Bahama Power Company (GBPC), whom he said were very instrumental in assisting the current research project on the island.

He said some of the main things his research team want to do is evaluate the taxonomic status of the bird by looking at its body measurements, vocalizations and eventually DNA. Continuing, he said they want to observe how many birds are here and how they can find them as well as find ways of ensuring a future for the bird so that it does not become extinct.



PREVENT EXTINCTION — While addressing the Rotary Club of Lucaya yesterday, Dr. William Hayes, a noted Zoologist, informed Rotarians about the importance of preventing the extinction of the Bahama Nuthatch, a rare bird found only on Grand Bahama. Pictured from left to right are: Past President Ambrose Guthro, Michelle Thompson, Rotary Club of Lucaya President, and Dr. William Hayes. (Staff photo by Lisa King)

GBPC Environment and Safety Coordinator Hailond Nottage said the company was very happy to come forward and donate funds to assist Dr. Hayes and his research team with conducting studies on the Bahama Nuthatch.

He said the company has a positive attitude towards the environment and is willing to help and educate those who wish to preserve it.

In his report to the GBPC about the need to save the Bahama Nuthatch, Dr. Hayes said this bird is found only on Grand Bahama and nowhere else. He said it was seemingly forgotten and neglected over the years and will soon move to the forefront of conservation science as a recent study has confirmed its taxonomic distinctiveness.

Dr. Hayes informed that his research team has begun a long-term conservation programme that would involve the collaborative expertise of bird and conservation experts from both the United States and The Bahamas.

He said they chose to approach the GBPC because of its reputation for caring about environmental issues.

Additionally, he said they were aware of the commitment GBPC employees have toward conservation.

According to Dr. Hayes, James Bond, the famous West Indies ornithologist, first described this bird in the 1930s based on two specimens. At the time he believed it was a distinct sub species of the Brown-headed Nuthatch which is wide spread but declining in the southeastern United States.

However, Dr. Hayes noted in his report that more recent taxonomic study of the birds by he and his wife Patricia Barry, based on a much larger sample of specimens, confirm that the Bahama form is at least a distinct sub species and suggests that it may be a full species as it can be distinguished by its longer bill, shorter wings, whiter belly and possible distinctive voice.

"High profile efforts to save endangered birds, whether in The Bahamas or elsewhere, generate considerable publicity. As such, these efforts have deep and long-term positive effects, with much potential to influence the general populace," he mentioned in the report. "Such rescue attempts provide excellent opportunities to educate the public, fostering goodwill and sentiment toward the environment. Because the Bahama Nuthatch is endemic to Grand Bahama and is also the rarest bird in the Bahamas, it represents in our minds, the ultimate conservation issue."

Its highly unusual behaviours include nesting in cavities or nest boxes; use of helpers at the nest and is one of the very few bird species that use a tool to extract food from trees.

Current threats to the survival of this bird include the cutting of lumber for development as the bird will last only if the pine forest last. Dr. Hayes said major native predators would be snakes and raccoons.

"So this little bird may be very small, may seem non-descript but this bird has character," Dr. Hayes said. "Your Nuthatch is the fourth endemic species in the Bahamas. This is a very rare bird as there is none like it. We need to do a lot more research to save it, we need some local education to get folks aware of this bird and get the word out that you have something unique. You also have to figure out a way to protect its habitat."

Other endangered birds in The Bahamas include the Bahama Yellow Throat, Bahama Swallow, Bahama Parrot, San Salvador Woodpecker, Kirtland Warbler, West Indian Whistling Duck.