



Address to the Annual General Meeting

of the

**Caribbean Conservation Association
The Garrison, St. Michael, Barbados
3 February 2006**

by

***His Excellency Michael I. King*
Ambassador of Barbados to the United States of America
and Permanent Representative to the Organization of
American States**

It is indeed a great pleasure to deliver the keynote address at this year's Annual General Meeting of the Caribbean Conversation Association (CCA) and I wish to thank the President and the Board of CCA for believing that I might have something to contribute to your meeting today. Having served as Executive Director from 1986–1989, one can say that today we are witnessing the return of the prodigal son, but I must confess that for the past 17 years the mission of the CCA has never been far from my mind, especially during my professional assignments in The Bahamas, Brussels and Washington, D.C.

When your President and Executive Director visited me a few months ago in Washington I knew that I really had no choice but to take up their offer to speak about "*Accepting the Challenge*". It suddenly dawned on me that the late *Laurance Rockefeller* had the vision in 1965 to accept a challenge to convene a meeting of conservationists, politicians and senior civil servants from the Eastern Caribbean at Caneel Bay, St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands. Within two years CCA was born in the U.S. Virgin Islands and in 1974 the Secretariat moved its operations to Barbados when *Justice John Connell* became President. For those among you who might not be aware the late *Jill Sheppard*, who was appointed Executive Director that year, started the operation by "squatting" in a small office at the Caribbean Tourism Research and Development Centre (now the Caribbean Tourism Organisation).

From its humble beginnings this Association has performed an important and complementary role in assisting governments of the region in their national development strategies. Of course, this is a well-kept secret but I can assure you that you are sitting here in a building whose restoration, indeed the restoration of this historic area, became a reality as a result of the vision and commitment of the CCA officials who worked closely with the Government of Barbados on the project.

The changing development priorities of the Caribbean countries are driven by the need to survive, as small states, in a globalised environment that forces even the smallest among us to compete with the largest, most powerful and richest states of the world. This first decade of the Twenty-first Century has seen political, economic and social conditions develop in a manner that requires our citizens to be disciplined, proactive and visionary while not losing sight of what took us through the last 50 years of the Twentieth Century.

The old cliché, that with challenges there are opportunities, is applicable to what the CCA is trying to accomplish. Of course, one can step back from the challenge and complain about the lack of financial resources. Or one can become more frustrated because of a lack of interest by the many decision-makers. We all must step up to the plate – to use baseball parlance – and meet the challenge head on if CCA is to play a more meaningful role in the development of the Caribbean.

Never before has the international development community worked more closely with the members of civil society and with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Indeed, many donor governments, especially in North America and Europe, encourage such participation and prefer to finance programmes executed by civil society groups that are well managed. There is no doubt that some groups have difficulties with national governments, but CCA is a special entity which embraces governments, institutional members and individuals. It is uniquely placed to promote cooperation in the development of strategic partnerships.

Your past experiences in successfully developing national conservation strategies, country environmental profiles, institutional capacity building among your broad-based membership, suggest to me that you should never be too far removed from the region's development agenda. What is required at this time is your willingness to aggressively strengthen your ties with the development community both regionally and internationally.

As the depository of many studies and experiences related to the conservation and management of the environment of the Caribbean, you are best placed to distill the lessons learnt over the past 40 years. Too many initiatives come to a screeching halt after the projects have been

completed and the project reports and other related documents continue to gather dust in the archives. Too often we find ourselves re-inventing the wheel and forgetting what we have done in the past.

From Belize and Jamaica in the North, to Trinidad and Suriname in the South, the Caribbean region has been experiencing relative significant growth. That growth, in all instances, has been and will continue to be dependent on the exploitation of natural resources. In Jamaica, Bahamas, Barbados, St. Lucia and Trinidad, there has been an explosion in the real estate markets, primarily for local housing development, but also to meet the demands of tourism.

In Trinidad, the lucrative oil windfall has created opportunities for downstream investments which will likely result in industrialization and manufacturing which will not only utilise scarce and sensitive environmental resources, but will require safe disposal of waste by-products as well as protecting against negative impacts on the health of populations in nearby communities.

CCA, because of its unique and interesting membership configuration, is in an enviable position of having the types of audience that can both advocate and implement.

In the past, very little, or insufficient use was made of that membership base. The CCA has to find its voice, as that search for a voice is likely to determine the present and future of the organisation.

Having gone through a period of dormancy, the organisation must act quickly not just to confirm its relevance, but to provide the mechanism whereby it can become the catalyst for a resurgence of the environmental movement in the Caribbean.

As stated earlier, our development priorities are being changed as a result of a global agenda which, to put it mildly, now see our countries having to trail behind a fast-moving vehicle. Our communities are becoming more urban, our lifestyles and consumption patterns are changing and the demands of our citizens in knowledge-based economies will mandate our governments to provide educational services which produce skills that are transferable globally.

Your goal should include the development of policy guidelines for sustainable development, especially in the area of tourism and coastal zone management. The vulnerability of our states has received global attention in recent times as a result of the devastating hurricanes that have been descending upon us with monotonous regularity.

The destruction of Grenada in 2004 by Hurricane Ivan has made it clear that Caribbean governments can be completely overwhelmed by a major disaster. Better preparedness on the part of governments may alleviate the situation but the impact will still be enormous. Civil Society – and I include all private sector organisations and your corporate sponsors in this grouping – has to recognise that it cannot depend on government exclusively to deal with disasters. Members of such organisations must play a more active role in anticipating the impact of disasters, in reducing the vulnerability of their homes and their businesses. Governments, with their limited resources and many other priorities, need all the help they can get in dealing with this very important challenge to the sustainable development of the Caribbean.

Another major environmental threat comes from the impact that climate change has on our resources. And here the members of CCA, as true custodians of these resources, can play an important role in helping Caribbean communities adapt to this impact. Specifically, members could monitor the changes in climate and the impact these changes have on the parks, conservation areas and the natural resources that you manage. You should also devise strategies to adapt to such things as increasingly erratic precipitation patterns and other climate extremes, heat stress and sea level rise. And equally important, you should use your capacity to reach out and educate communities about climate change and the best way to adapt to its multiple impacts.

You must not underestimate the importance of your advocacy role in working with other regional and international organisations and in the education of young children, adolescents, adults and the key decision makers with whom you interact.

The age of the Internet and the information highway, could be termed the single most influential impact on the organisation. It's negative impact can be traced to the fact that people now have available to them a means of accessing information from sources other than the CCA. There is not much one can do to stop that. If anything, it means that you have to get on the bandwagon. However, information alone is of little significance, if one is not in a position to use it for mankind's benefit.

With a membership base scattered all over the Caribbean and the wider reaches of North and South America and Europe, The Information Highway must be viewed as a benefit.

Unfortunately there is little evidence to indicate that the best use has been made of this medium in order to benefit the membership.

In order to be a strong advocate for conservation, preservation and sustainable development of the bio-physical and social environment one has to be informed.

So if it is determined that the CCA has not been as strong as it could be, one has to ask why and to seek answers as to why it has not been the vehicle of information sharing and why it has seemed to have lost its voice, particularly at a time when the assaults on the environment, both in terms of development and the impacts of development are most acute and very visible.

A strong and vibrant in-country membership will provide great weight to CCA's attempt to become an advocate for Sustainable Development.

In order to be a strong advocate, one must also be seen as a partner. The organisation must therefore begin to seek information that will allow it to understand the complex environment in which decisions about growth and development are being made and become a partner in this exercise by making available, as much as possible, the information needed to allow those directly affected and impacted, to understand the reasons for the action being discussed and to take a position in support for or against.

I recall that when I last spoke at an Annual General Meeting of the CCA in 1988 in Trois Islets, Martinique, I was presumptuous enough to suggest that the time had come for Caribbean governments to charge each visitor, who stayed in hotels, 25 cents (US) per day as a conservation tax, with proceeds going to support NGOs which assisted governments in the promotion of sound conservation and environmental management policies.

Many Caribbean tourism policy-makers were worried that the tourism industry was already too heavily taxed and saw no need for such an imposition. However, I have always held the view that such a fee was a small price to pay to allow civil society to contribute effectively to the sound management of the Caribbean environment for the benefit of our citizens and future generations.

I must confess that I often cringe when I hear officials in the tourism sector focus primarily upon increasing the number of tourists to some Caribbean destinations when it is quite obvious that some places just do not have the carrying capacity to welcome more visitors without compromising the environment and the delivery of quality services.

Too many properties in the Caribbean have poor infrastructure arrangements in place. What is the use of building 800-room hotels and the employees and visitors to the properties have parking facilities that have never been paved? (I apologise if I sound somewhat anecdotal, but in too many destinations such situations recur too often!)

What role can CCA play in countries which are facing the stark reality of a rapid transformation from agriculture to services-based economies, especially tourism-based economies? The need to work on a horizontal basis with organisations such as the Inter-American Institute for

Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) in promoting the linkages between tourism and agriculture has never been more critical.

I have taken the liberty to highlight a few issues, some very old, which in my opinion could enhance CCA's effectiveness as an institution of relevance to the Caribbean. In order to be relevant, you must play a prominent role in environmental leadership.

You must place yourself in a position to understand the trends which are shaping our future and provide a forum where those issues can be discussed and solutions found for anticipated problems.

For example, in 1989 the CCA convened the International Conference on Ecology and Economics, a Conference which sought to show the tangible links of environment and development and how economic tools can be used to help influence the decision-making process. Unfortunately, almost 17 years later, there is still no recognisable and acceptable standard for assessing our performance in preserving and protecting our resources. Our most valuable resources, our sun, sea and sand, are being utilised and we do not know whether or not the "rent" charged for the use of these resources are adequate.

In order to stay on the cutting edge of environmental leadership, you must seek to attract some of the best and brightest in the field of natural sciences but more importantly, establish alliances with those institutions doing research on environmental matters (Universities, Regional and International institutions). However, it should not be research for research purposes, but research which would demonstrate the relevance of particular issues and their relevance to our physical and social development:

- CCA should be a vehicle for interventions related to community-based educational programmes and should work more closely with the fledgling NGOs that are involved in such activities.
- CCA should have a role that is not based primarily upon short-term projects; it should be part of any long-term programmes aimed at institutional building and human capital development.
- You must never abandon the historic preservation ethic at a time when too many properties of historic and architectural significance have been disappearing or have been abandoned. There are many young, outstanding tropical architects in our region and their creativity should not be overwhelmed by tasteless designs that have no place in this part of the world.

- You must strengthen your fund-raising capability both for activities related to the built environment and to the natural environment.

- Use the expertise available in the region – even on a voluntary basis. Call upon your members to expand their roles on the Executive Board in a transparent manner!! Your membership is your greatest resource.

- On the subject of philanthropic giving: Our tax laws must be changed to encourage more giving by the wider community. We must move from the practice of small covenants to larger commitments especially from the many indigenous conglomerates which have benefited from the stewardship/leadership of this body in making the Caribbean a more liveable place and a paradise well sought after by the rich and the famous.

I want to conclude by saying a few words in tribute to the late *Desmond Nicholson* who died last week in Antigua. *Desmond's* contribution to our appreciation of the development of heritage sites and heritage tourism in the Caribbean should never be forgotten. I think of Desmond and many others including: *Ed Towle, Euam McFarlane, John Connell, Yves Renard, Penny Hynam*, the late *Jill Sheppard* and the

late *Calvin Howell* – to name a few - who have quietly made similar contributions to making our countries more liveable places. The challenge to all of you here today is to do something extraordinary following the example of *Desmond Nicholson*. Be bold and ask our governments that are spending hundreds of millions of dollars in preparing for Cricket World Cup 2007 to consider earmarking at least 2% of all revenues towards programmes that enhance the natural and the built environment of the Caribbean.

After all, we cannot strive for excellence in showcasing our countries to the rest of the world on a one-off basis. We need to ensure that our children, our leaders, every citizen of the Caribbean understand that we all have a role to play in helping our governments deliver quality services directly and indirectly to our people. Your role is to ensure that your collective efforts are sustained in a truly satisfying partnership!!!

I thank you!