



**The Honourable Penelope Beckles, MP
Minister of Planning and Development**

**Feature Address
at the Launch of the Marine Resilience Initiative (MARIN), Tobago Pilot
Project**

26th April 2022

**Heritage Pavilion
Pigeon Point Beach Resort**

The Honourable Farley (Chavez) Augustine, Chief Secretary of the Tobago House of Assembly and Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy;

Ms. Joanne Deoraj, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Planning and Development;

Secretary and Assistant Secretary for the Division of Food Security, Natural Resources, the Environment and Sustainability

Mr. Hayden Alexander, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Institute of Marine Affairs and other Governors of the Board;

Ms. Claire Fitzpatrick, Regional President of British Petroleum Trinidad and Tobago; and management and staff of bpTT

Dr Rahanna Juman, Director (Acting), management and staff of the Institute of Marine Affairs;

Specially invited guests and stakeholders

Those joining us virtually,

Members of the media;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

Good morning!

I am truly delighted to deliver the feature address today at the launch of the *Marine Resilience Initiative* or *MARIN* Tobago; a pilot study to evaluate the effectiveness of certain restoration methodologies for coral reef and seagrass beds on the island. Indeed, so much more is happening beyond the aesthetics of the sand upon which we stand, the surrounding lush foliage and swaying coconut trees, and the picturesque shores of the Pigeon Point Beach with its backdrop of aquamarine waters. Underneath that cover of beauty, nature is giving its all to maintain and preserve both the quality of life we live and our livelihoods. I was therefore heartened to learn of the collaboration between the nation's foremost marine environmental research organisation, the Institute of Marine Affairs (IMA) and leading global multi-national corporation in the energy business, expressed locally as bpTT. This study is a noteworthy milestone in our nation's quest to place the environment and its welfare at the centre of our sustainable development goals. It's evidence of the nation's commitment to the pursuit of synergy between growth and development and the health of the natural environment.

Unfortunately, this synergy I speak about did not always exist. Some amongst us may have held the view that our coral reefs and seagrass beds are infinite and perhaps indestructible. While others may have been of the view that

growth and wealth generation were perhaps more important than fostering equilibrium between our economic pursuits and our environment. We know better now!

The ocean is also one of the largest carbon sinks helping to remove emissions of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide, from the atmosphere. Our coastal ecosystems, particularly coral reefs and seagrass beds provide:

- coastal protection by dissipating wave energy especially by storm surges during harsh weather events;

- coastal erosion control; by stabilising the sediments at the bottom of the ocean

- food security as these marine ecosystems are habitats and nurseries for commercial species of fish and shellfish; and

- livelihood opportunities for many coastal communities, as our coral reef provides the natural infrastructure for our tourism sector and sands for our lovely beaches.

More specifically, a 2008 study by World Resource Institute ***Coastal Capital – Economic Valuation of Coral Reefs in Tobago and St. Lucia*** estimated that in 2006 at least 40 per cent of visitors to Tobago visited the island because of the reefs, the reefs being the major attraction. The study estimated that back then Tobago would have earned as much as USD43.5 million from direct visitor spending related to accommodation, reef recreation and other miscellaneous

expenses. While these figures are dated, it paints picture of value, both potential and realized.

Globally, studies show that these marine ecosystems are stressed and that they have been and are being degraded. Tobago is by no means, exempt. IMA research, as you have heard from the researchers earlier, have charted the progress and health of marine ecosystems in Tobago since the 1980s. A combination of climate change and human impacts, more so human, have had a debilitating impact of our marine and coastal ecosystems. Most notably being the loss of up to 50 percent hard coral cover as a result of a global bleaching event in 2010.

IMA scientists also inform that pollution from land-based sources have impacted our seagrass beds in Trinidad and Tobago. These ecosystems provide us with too many services to allow the degradation to go unaddressed. Our fisher-folk, tour operators, small traders depend on these marine ecosystems to remain at its optimum in order for their ocean-based business to grow and prosper. The importance of this assessment, therefore, cannot be over emphasised.

Further, a 2018 report published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, that a projected 1.5-degree Celsius rise in global temperature will be '*catastrophic*' for coral reefs while an increase by 2 degrees' Celsius can lead to

mortality of coral reef colonies. It is therefore critical to give our coral reefs and seagrass beds a chance to build resilience to climate change and other naturally occurring stressors; and restoration efforts afford them that fighting chance.

The UN Decade- Ocean Science for Sustainable Development 2021-2030, with its thrust towards using the science we have to get the ocean we want, is apt. Decade action focuses on bringing together science, management initiatives, and civil society for the purpose of promoting ocean health and sustainability. Scientific understanding of the ocean's responses to pressures and management action is now understood as fundamental to sustainable development. Observations and research on our oceans are also essential to predicting the consequences of change to the ocean's physical and chemical make-up and to designing strategies to aid and guide mitigation and adaptation. By changing humanity's relationship to, and perception of the ocean; it is hoped that systems that facilitate community resilience to some of the hazards of the ocean, economic growth and ocean health would all be at the centre of ocean management and governance going forward.

The restoration procedures as adeptly described by Wetlands Ecologist Dr. Rahanna Juman and Coral Reefs' Ecologist, Dr. Anjani Ganase only moments ago, offer hope for the future

conditions of our marine eco-systems, if all goes well in this pilot project.

At a time, when globally, many ocean-based economies are quantifying the value of their blue assets, building systems to harness its potential for the benefit of people, we in Trinidad and Tobago are well aware of the worth of our ocean and marine space. Our Exclusive Economic Zone is fifteen times larger than our land area, and it is home to our mainstay of our economy.

For well over a century, Trinidad and Tobago has lifted petroleum deposits found firstly on land and more recently in the deep and shallow horizons surrounding our terrestrial borders. And our export of the country's hydrocarbon deposits account for some 40 percent of total exports. As a price taker, every shock on the global market, redounds in declining national revenues with consequences for our quality of life across the board, and while we make the shift to renewable and greener sources of energy in our matrix; the waters around us continue to hold new and emerging opportunities: marine genetic resources harvested from the millions of organisms that make their home among the reefs hold potential for the development of pharmaceuticals, personal care products and more. Admittedly, we are sometime away from exploring such options; but maintaining

a healthy marine environment ensures the building block of new initiatives are conserved and preserved.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is against this perspective that we acknowledge the significance of our marine ecosystems and coastal resources, which are crucial for food security, economic growth, and human health. It is for this reason that the Ministry of Planning and Development, envisioned the environment, inclusive of our marine and coastal areas as one of the pillars we can leverage synergistically for growth and economic development even as we conserve and treasure its ecosystem benefits.

The National Development Strategy- Vision 2030 as it is more commonly known; therefore, placed the ENVIRONMENT at the centre of our social and economic development. Theme 5, 'Placing the Environment at the Centre of Economic and Social Development' is aligned to the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among which is Goal 14- *Life Below Water*, which addresses management and the sustainable use of our oceans and marine resources. Theme Five underscores our commitment to formulate interventions and policies and put the necessary decelerate and reverse decline in our natural environment including our marine and coastal areas.

We continue to work with our key bodies, like the IMA, to establish and strengthen policy and regulation on the sustainable management and use of marine environmental resources. Here are some policies already in place:

- The National Wetlands Policy, which addresses the sustainable management of essential wetlands comprising mangrove forests, seagrass beds, coral reefs and marshlands and acknowledge how these resources contribute to our national Gross Domestic Product (GDP); and
- The National Environment Policy – which provides guidelines for developing strategic plans and programmes to achieve sustainable development and serves as benchmark to evaluate performance of all stakeholder groups.

An Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) Policy Framework has also been developed for the consideration for the Cabinet. Globally, ICZM has been acknowledged as the best approach to achieve balance between development and conservation goals by managing human activities within the coastal zone. ICZM also addresses conflicts amongst different resource stakeholders and users. It is a continuous and dynamic process that addresses all three dimensions of sustainability – socio-cultural, economic and environmental. Adaptation strategies and management initiatives to reduce climate change impacts and address the vulnerability of

coastal communities to coastal hazards, also form part of an ICZM strategy. The overall goal is the improvement in quality of life for citizens who depend on coastal resources by promoting economic development and sustainable livelihoods while maintaining the services provided by coastal ecosystems. The IMA is leading research initiatives in this area and is the deputy chair of an inter-ministerial team developing strategy and policy initiatives in this area.

Ladies and Gentlemen, plans and policies aside, they are not enough to secure environmental protection or to restore degraded natural resources. We must take the plan from the pages of a policy document and put them into action. This is where organisations like the Institute of Marine Affairs and the Environmental Management Authority are most valued. The IMA through its research and monitoring initiatives provide data and information necessary to develop policy positions, and shares that through its public education and awareness campaigns. In other words, true to the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, they deliver *'the science we need'* in order to transform the *'ocean we have'* into *'the ocean we want'*. The UN postulates that *"a transparent and accessible ocean made possible by applied knowledge derived from trustworthy data"*.

There is much to be done and Chief Secretary you have the continued support of the Ministry of Planning and

Development and all the agencies under its purview, working in collaboration with you, to preserve and conserve this island's natural resources. We must continue to collaborate to achieve the UN's sustainable development goals and withstand the ravages of climate change and its impacts. The Tobago House of Assembly in 2020 creditably secured the prestigious designation given to North-East Tobago- UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Reserve, joining a global network of 714 Biosphere Reserves. The UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme promotes a sustainable link between people and nature employing nature-based solutions in pursuit of sustainable development.

In 2019, Cabinet accepted a National Protected Areas Systems Plan, which proposed the establishment of approximately 20,000km square footage, increasing the number of marine and terrestrial protected areas in Trinidad and Tobago. The Government also proposed the pilot North-East Tobago Marine Protected Area – MPA, which covers an approximate 59,280 hectares, extending along the entire coastal strip from Roxborough to the North-east coast. The proposed MPA will encompass several coral reef colonies, such as those found off the Little Tobago Island, Goat Island inclusive of the Sisters and Brothers Rocks. The marine protected areas will help to protect important nursery habitats and marine life restoring the integrity of the oceans and averting further decline.

Indeed, strategic partnerships are necessary if we are to make the strides of which we dream. Partnerships between government and the private sector, such as the bpTT and the IMA ensures resources back the research and management initiatives needed to conserve our environment. Private-public-partnerships like this one, ensures our best and brightest scientific minds are engaged in addressing the some of our nation's most taxing issues.

BpTT, I laud and commend your commitment to this country and our sustainable development. Your support highlights your continuing commitment to put our nation on a safer, more sustainable, and equitable pathway. Far beyond the research aspects, your support will also uplift and improve the lives of our coastal communities and stakeholders who benefit from the livelihood opportunities presented by our marine ecosystems. I am certain that your partnership will serve to accelerate national progress towards realising sustainable development goals. BpTT, I thank you.

To the IMA, thank you for stepping outside of the box and exploring grant funding and collaborative opportunities for the benefit our nation.

I re-affirm the Ministry's commitment to actively support, foster and advance dialogue and action that will enable the delivery of our development goals within the shortest time

frame. create partnerships with an environmental purpose to conserve. I wish the parties, IMA and bpTT, much success on your 18-month long collaboration. I pray everything aligns to grant you success and I look forward to perusing a copy of your findings with recommendations for the way forward.

Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you