

next few years may be of the utmost significance for the long-term ecological future of the Cayman Islands.

DoE staff in charge of the project has been planting a number of mangroves and monitoring the site. H.E the Governor, Stuart Jack, and his wife, Mariko became part of the 'planting process', on Friday 19 January, when they visited the mangrove site.

According to Tim Austin, Assistant Director of Research and Assessment (DoE), the Governor was invited because they wanted him to be part of an important process.

During his brief remarks, Governor Jack pointed out that it quite important that 'we look after our mangroves'. He was also pleased that 'a lot of young people are involved in the project.'

Gina Ebanks-Petrie, Director of the Department of Environment, Matt Cottam, Terrestrial Ecologist, and James Gibb, Research Officer were also present to lend a helping hand.

The project involves the implementation of a high-survivorship head-starting protocol, using Reef Ball technology. This involves using reef balls to headstart and anchor the seedlings in place, re-establishing mangroves in denuded areas.

While the initial outlay per seedling is high, once pioneer seedlings are established, they will provide shelter for further back-planting.

This novel methodology additionally has the potential to showcase a restoration technique which may be implemented, by private landowners, and will be accompanied by an ongoing monitoring programme to evaluate comparative survivorship and cost-effectiveness.

Restoration activities will be supported by an extensive interactive website, interpreting projects in the context of local biodiversity and international environmental responsibility.

The DoE reported that in the Cayman Islands, as in many areas of the world, traditional under-valuing of mangrove habitat as a natural resource has contributed to a precedent for rapid wetland reclamation and development.

The mangroves play a very significant role in the Cayman's ecosystem. They are a critical habitat for key local species including the Yucatan Vireo (*Vireo magister caymanensis*), the (near-threatened) Cayman Parrot (*Amazona leucocephala caymanensis*), and the main breeding site for the (vulnerable) West Indian Whistling-

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duck (*Dendrocygna arborea*).

The mangroves are also an important stop-over and over-wintering habitat for migratory birds:

waterfowl, waders, raptors including Osprey, Merlin and Peregrine Falcon, and passerines including, most commonly Northern Parula, Yellow-throated Warbler, Palm Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler, American Redstart, Ovenbird and Northern Waterthrush. The mangrove wetlands are also an integral component of Cayman's marine environment.

The idea for the Mangrove Restoration Project began on Earth Day 2005, when over a hundred members of the public planted 650 seedlings. However this effort was in vain as the subsequent intensity of the 2005 hurricane season, coupled with the exposed nature of the site, resulted in very poor survivorship of seedlings.

But the current project is doing well and will hopefully survive through bad season.

The funding agency for the project is the US Fish and Wildlife's Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act.

Our partners are the Reef Ball Foundation who have provided additional funds and logistical support in conjunction with assistance from the CI Sailing Club (donated the site), Foster's Food Fair (donated 200 wooden pallets) and local schools and support groups who have volunteered their time and effort to plant the mangroves.

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