

**ADDRESS BY HON. ROBERT PICKERSGILL M.P.**  
**TO THE**  
**ST. THOMAS ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY**  
**BENEVOLENT SOCIETY (STEPA)**  
**WATERSHED/FORESTRY MANAGEMENT STAKEHOLDERS CONFERENCE**  
**“Protect our Forests, Protect our Watersheds, Protect our Environment**  
**And Protect Life on Earth”**  
**April 25, 2013**  
**@**  
**9:00 a.m.**  
**at the**  
**ANGLICAN CHURCH HALL, MORANT BAY**

Greetings and salutations.

Il am pleased to have been invited to attend this Watershed Management Stakeholders’ Conference of the St. Thomas Environmental Protection Agency Benevolent Society, and thank its members for inviting me.

As American Businessman and former Presidential Candidate, Ross Perot once said... **“The activist is not the man who says the river is dirty. The activist is the man who cleans up the river”**, and so I commend STEPA on this very worthwhile initiative.

I must admit that as an ardent history buff, I am particularly delighted to be here in Morant Bay which has special historical significance as the Rebellion on October 11, 1865 was a defining point in Jamaica's struggle for political and economic advancement and a significant turning point in the history of the island.

As many of you know, two of our National Heroes, the Rt. Excellent Paul Bogle and the Rt. Excellent George William Gordon were pivotal figures in that rebellion which eventually resulted in the Jamaica Assembly renouncing its charter and which paved the way for Jamaica to become a Crown Colony.

Apart from its historical and cultural importance, the beauty and environmental significance of Jamaica's ninth largest parish are unquestionable. It is home to large wetland areas, which comprise the coastal area between Morant Bay and Hector's River.

It is also home to a number of natural attractions including Bath Fountain and the Bath Botanical Gardens which were established in 1779 and are the second oldest in the Western Hemisphere. In fact, many of the plants first brought to Jamaica were introduced at Bath including the croton, the jacaranda, cinnamon, mango, jackfruit and breadfruit.

The mountain ranges spanning the parish include the Port Royal Mountains, the Queensbury Ridge, and to the extreme south, an isolated ridge called Yallahs Hill as well as the Blue Mountains which form your northern border.

I believe that the strength and resilience of the people of St. Thomas are a reflection of the strong mountainous backbone of this parish, and I have little doubt that from time to time you draw inspiration from them.

**As Psalm 121 says... “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.”**

Ladies and gentlemen, the need to **‘Protect our forests, protect our watersheds, protect our environment and protect life on earth’**, which is the theme of this conference, is very important as we consider the impact of Climate Change on our Island.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature, defines a watershed as an area of land that feeds water into a river, through the process of precipitation draining through the landscape, into tributaries and into the main river channel. The watershed is therefore sometimes called a catchment, drainage basin or river basin.

Jamaica has 33 watersheds which have been grouped into 26 Watershed Management Units (WMUs). These management units are based on the island’s 10 hydro-geological basins (rivers/streams).

Watersheds provide numerous functions and services including acting as the source of water for aquifers and rivers, protecting the coastal zone and providing a habitat for endangered and endemic plants and animals.

St. Thomas has 3 Watershed Management Units (WMUs). The Plantain Garden River WMU which includes the only river in Jamaica that flows eastward, the Morant River WMU and the Yallahs River WMU. Their function as sources of water for aquifers and rivers is clearly recognized, and indeed, St. Thomas provides water for Kingston and St. Andrew. The Morant, Yallahs and Plantain Garden Rivers are also significant as they drain to a number of wetlands including the Great Morass in Holland Bay and Bowden.

In addition to storing water, these WMUs are home to a number of Jamaica's endemic and endangered species. These include various orchid species; the Jamaican Boa or Yellow Snake, the Jamaican Coney, the Giant Swallowtail Butterfly, all of which are protected under the Wild Life Protection Act; as well as a number of bird species including the largest endemic species in Jamaica, the Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo which needs expansive forested areas, and the endemic Jamaican Elaenia.

In fact, Yallahs is an Important Bird Area commonly referred to as a "hotspot" and is recognized as an area of global significance for birds and biodiversity conservation. The Yallahs area is one of Jamaica's 15 critical bird habitats.

The Government of Jamaica in recognition of the need to protect these resources declared Forest Reserves in the 1950s under the Forest Act and the Blue and John Crow Mountains National Park in 1993 under the Natural Resources Conservation Authority Act.

These areas have contributed to the protection of the Plantain Garden, Morant and Yallahs Rivers, the headwaters of which are located in the National Park.

The National Environment and Planning Agency (NEPA) has also sought to protect resources within the parish for *inter alia* species conservation and water retention, through the identification of conservation areas in the draft St. Thomas Development Order. These areas are the Northern Forests, Cambridge – Albion, Belvedere-Creighton Hall, Cow Bay and Great Morass Conservation Areas.

Ladies and gentlemen, one of the reasons we are here this morning, is the recognition that while a number of protective measures have been implemented, St. Thomas' watersheds are degraded. A study in 2000 on the status of Jamaica's watersheds resulted in the Yallahs River Watershed Management Unit being classified as severely degraded while the Morant River and Plantain Garden River were considered degraded and less degraded respectively.

A 2010 assessment conducted by NEPA of the watersheds in St. Thomas revealed that the Morant River was in urgent need of immediate attention, while the Yallahs River had not improved and the Plantain Garden was still the least degraded of the three watersheds.

The assessment identified 5 major issues affecting the Watershed Management Units they are:

- Landslides due to deforestation and inappropriate agricultural practices, as well as high rainfall intensity and duration.
- Cultivation on steep slopes that are highly susceptible to erosion due to soil type and rainfall intensity. The over use of agrochemicals pollutes groundwater that adversely affects downstream users.
- Fires that are used to clear fields cause severe soil degradation. After the vegetation on steep slopes is removed by burning, intense rainfall usually accelerates soil erosion.
- Over-grazing by cattle on steep slopes and on fallow and rinate lands especially those on shale, conglomerates and tuff slopes, creates serious erosion problems.
- Several of the homes in the rural communities are built along the road near hill ridges. The construction of these homes quite often disturbs the stability of the slopes leading to landslides and slippages. The improper disposal of household wastes and other activities by the inhabitants of these homes also affects the quality of the water resource.

Some of the communities in St Thomas with the most critical issues are

- Hordley which is affected by flooding
- Holland Bay which has seen extensive mangrove destruction

- White Hall which has been plagued by bush fires, deforestation, land slippages, and loss of biodiversity

In the Plantain Garden Watershed Management Unit, the community of York has been affected by flooding, while the Spring and Dunrobin communities have been affected by bush fires, deforestation, land slippage, and loss of biodiversity

Similar issues have plagued Hillside and Somerset in the Morant River WMU; while Richmond Gap in the Yallahs River Watershed Management Unit has experienced deforestation and land slippages.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have our work cut out for us indeed. The government in partnership with groups in St. Thomas has been implementing projects in order to reverse the negative impacts on these important watersheds and associated resources.

Some of these projects include

- The Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction Project a joint venture between the European Union, The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Government of Jamaica;
- Alternative Livelihood Grant Programme in St. Thomas and
- The Global Environment Facility (GEF)/Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) Project Management of the Yallahs River and Hope River Watersheds.

## **1. Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction Project (EU/UNEP/GOJ): Alternative Livelihood Grant Programme in St. Thomas**

The Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction Project started in 2010 and is being undertaken by a number of organizations, including NEPA. It seeks through its implementation to:

1. Reduce downstream run-off and associated negative environmental and human impacts through the rehabilitation and improved management of selected watersheds.
2. Increase the resilience of coastal ecosystems to climate change impacts through the restoration and protection of selected ecosystems; and
3. Enhance institutional and local-level capacity for climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction through increasing capabilities.

One of the components of the project that is being implemented by NEPA in the parish is the alternative livelihood grant programme.

Under this grant programme, persons making a living for example from fishing and charcoal burning, are introduced to alternative sources of income. It is hoped that the successful implementation of this programme will reduce the impacts and pressures on the parish's coastal and marine resources such as; coral reefs, fish stock and mangroves.

NEPA along with the St. Thomas Environmental Protection Association Benevolent Society have facilitated several workshops with community members geared at increasing their capacity to write proposals and report on the funds received. One of the successful proposals, is Apiculture Beekeeping and Honey Production which will be implemented in close proximity to the Bowden Morass. It is expected that 25 to 30 persons from nearby communities will receive apiary equipment and to be trained as beekeepers. A total of JMD\$ 3,000,000 will be disbursed for this project.

## **2. GEF/IDB Management of the Yallahs River and Hope River Watersheds**

The Global Environment Facility(GEF)/Inter-American Development Branch (IDB) Project Management of the Yallahs River and Hope River Watershed will run for 5 years and is a new project which is expected to commence this year.

These two Watershed Management Units, provide 37% of the water supplies for the Kingston Metropolitan Region, as well as the basic water resources to sustain the agricultural livelihoods in the area. However this area is being impacted negatively by deforestation and forest degradation, land degradation and soil erosion.

This has led to a change in the hydrological regime of both WMUs due to increased sediment content during intense rainfall and a decrease in water quality.

The Yallahs/Hope River Watershed Project will be executed by the Ministry of Water, Land, Environment and Climate Change (MWLECC), through the National Environment and Planning Agency (NEPA) and will affect an estimated minimum of 300,000 persons whose receive water from these watersheds.

Components of the project include:

- a. Institutional strengthening and capacity building for integrating biodiversity into watershed management which includes as one of its activities a public awareness campaign on soil conservation and biodiversity values.
- b. Creating economic and financial mechanisms that support sustainable biodiversity and watershed management which includes a financial, legal and institutional mechanism to support watershed and biodiversity conservation design.
- c. Improving community awareness, sensitivity and understanding of sustainable land management techniques.
- d. Implementing Sustainable Livelihoods, Agriculture, Forestry & Land Management practices in watershed communities which includes communities that have a reforestation component.

Government agencies implementing the project are the Forestry Department, which will be responsible for implementing the agro-forestry and reforestation activities; the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries along with the Rural Agricultural Development Authority (RADA) which will implement the sustainable agriculture and alternative livelihood components, and provide technical support, extension services as well as training to farmers.

In addition to these projects the Government has increased its presence in this area through NEPA.

The Agency has been implementing a watershed model developed under the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Integrated Watershed Coastal Area Management Project that was initially implemented in the Drivers River. The model seeks to engage communities, identify the watershed issues and as well as develop and implement a programme to correct these issues.

The model is being implemented in nine parishes and NEPA has plans to roll out implementation in the remainder of the parishes. NEPA will be increasing its presence in the parish through the Yallahs and Hope River Project and assigning an officer to identify and commence implementation of the model in the Morant and Plantain Garden Rivers.

I encourage each and every one of you as citizens, partners and stakeholders, to participate in these initiatives as well as others being undertaken and planned in this special parish.

Indeed, I am heartened by the presence of our many partners and stakeholders represented here, as dealing with some of the issues that I have mentioned, will require a communal approach and will entail co-operation, communication and consistency of effort from all partners and stakeholders .

As Cultural Anthropologist Margaret Mead said...**“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”**

I hasten to add that in a developing country such as Jamaica, government on its own, cannot address all the challenges inherent in achieving what we refer to as “sustainable development”.

As we walk the fine line between our economic development agenda, and the preservation of our environment, much of the impetus for the adoption of a collaborative approach has its genesis in the realization that partners bring to the table, unique and diverse strengths which may provide the requisite political, social, financial, and technological tools to address our challenges and promote our sustainable development goals

I therefore commend and thank all those who have partnered with us over the years including the citizens’ organizations such as the St. Thomas Environmental Protection Association Benevolent Society; the non-governmental organizations which are in essence our environmental foot soldiers; our international partners which have provided technical expertise and funding for key projects, and of course, the members of academia whose research provides a catalyst towards meaningful action.

Ladies and gentlemen, the slogan of my ministry is **“Partnering for Sustainable Development”** and I truly believe that this is the approach we must take if Jamaica is truly to be, **the “Place of choice to live, work, raise families and do business”**.

I encourage you therefore to share your knowledge, learn as much as you can from each other and continue to partner with government agencies and non-governmental organizations in these important initiatives to ensure the resilience of your communities so that we may indeed **‘Protect our forests, protect our watersheds, protect our environment and protect life on earth’** .

Thank you.