



THE NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY FOR THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS

INTRODUCTION

The Bahamas comprises an archipelago of over 700 low-lying islands plus more than 200 cays, islets and rocks, covering approximately 100,000 mi² (260, 000 km²) mostly comprised of the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Atlantic Ocean. The total land area is small, approximately 5,380 mi² (13, 934 km²), and only a very small number, approximately 30, of the islands are inhabited. Coastal areas, holding the vast majority of the population and economic activity, are vital to the prosperity of these islands.

The archipelagic nature of The Bahamas creates a unique natural environment. However, The Bahamas natural resources are limited and its size, complexity and ecological isolation have important implications for biodiversity, and human development. With some 80% of The Bahamas landmass within 5 ft (1.5 m) of mean sea level, its fragile coastal ecosystems are extremely vulnerable to the effects of global climate change and sea level rise. In addition, water pollution, land degradation, destruction of wetlands and introduction of invasive species are all issues of growing concern for The Bahamas. Addressing these environmental issues together with growing developmental pressures on the limited land base, declining populations on several of the inhabited islands and the need for a more diversified economy, requires a comprehensive integrated long-term planning and management strategy that is consistent with the goal of sustainable development.

The Government of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas (GOB) recognizes that a healthy and safe environment - reflected in biological diversity and functioning ecosystems, clean water,

clean air and productive soils - is essential to the economic and social well-being and health of its citizens and that its citizens influence and are influenced by their environment. It also recognizes that its citizens must live in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and allows the attainment of the highest possible level of health and well-being; and that this can only be achieved if economic and social development is in harmony with ecological principles.

Chapter V of The Bahamas 1973 Constitution grants the Parliament of The Bahamas the authority to make laws and policies with a view to maintaining a safe, productive and healthy environment that will enhance the health and well-being of its citizens and sustain a high quality of life.

Vision

The Government envisions a Bahamas in which all people and institutions treasure its unique natural environment and voluntarily choose to act in a manner that contributes to its conservation, protection and enhancement. We foresee a time when all our people, rich and poor, young and old, show respect and appreciation for their natural environment, and share in the benefits that maintenance of a healthy, safe and productive environment provides to present and future generations.

Policy Goal and Objectives

The Government of The Bahamas recognizes the fundamental rights of its people to a healthy and safe environment that is essential to sustaining the quality of life to which all its citizens are entitled. The GOB is committed to the sustainable use of the environment and consequently the promotion of economic and social development that fully integrates the environment in a manner consistent with the goal of sustainable development. However, the fundamental rights of the people are accompanied by certain responsibilities –a solemn duty of all who reside in The Bahamas to share in the stewardship of its unique natural environment and resources so that these are sustained and available for the benefits of future generations.

The goal of the GOB is the sustainable use of the environment of The Bahamas to meet the needs of present and future generations.

Government's approach to attaining this goal is to pursue a strategy of sustainable development, meaning improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems. Its specific objectives are to:

- prevent, reduce or eliminate various forms of pollution to ensure adequate protection of the environment and the health of its citizens;
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- conserve the biological diversity of the country and the stability, integrity, resilience and productivity of ecosystems; and
- provide for environment to be fully integrated in policies, plans, programs and development project decisions that might be detrimental to the continued health, safety and productivity of the country's environment.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

The Government of The Bahamas' environmental policy will be guided by the following basic principles:

Respect and Care for the Community of Life

An ethic based on respect and care for each other and for nature is the foundation of sustainable development. Development ought not to be at the expense of other groups or future generations, nor significantly threaten the survival of other species. The benefits and costs of resource use and environmental protection, conservation and enhancement should be shared fairly among different communities, among men, women and children, among people who are poor and those who are affluent and between our generation and those who will come after us.

All life, with soil, water and air, constitutes a great, interdependent system - the ecosystem. Disturbing one component can affect the whole. Our survival depends on the use of other species, but it is a matter of ethics, as well as practicality, that we act as stewards to ensure their survival and safeguard their habitats. Implementation of this principle requires that:

- all sector of society (industry, citizens' groups, non-governmental organizations) incorporate the ethic of stewardship and sustainability into their own policies and practices; and
- people in all walks of life incorporate the ethic of stewardship and sustainability into their personal behaviour and conduct.

Improve the Quality of Human Life

The aim of development is to improve the quality of human life. It should enable people to realize their potential and lead lives of dignity and fulfillment. Economic growth is an essential part of development, but it cannot be a goal in itself.

Development should result in long and healthy human lives, improved education, access to decent housing, adequate nutrition and safe water, political freedom, guaranteed human rights,

cultural and religious freedoms, and freedom from violence. Development is only real if it makes our lives better in all these respects.

Conserve the Diversity, Integrity and Productivity of Natural Resources

Development must strive to:

- a) Conserve life-support systems, i.e. the ecological systems that cleanse air and water, regulate water flow, recycle essential elements, create and regenerate soil and enable ecosystems to renew themselves.
- b) Conserve Biodiversity. This includes not only species of plants, animals and other organisms but also the range of genetic stocks within each species, and the variety of different ecosystems, including those in protected areas. This may also include national parks and conservation areas.
- c) Use renewable resources sustainably. These resources include soil, wild and domesticated organisms, forests, agricultural land, and the marine and freshwater ecosystems.
- d) Conserve non-renewable resources. The use of these resources will be optimized to obtain the best possible benefit for all citizens and without impairing the value of other resources.
- e) Utilize alternative technologies. The use of alternative, less harmful technologies for exploiting natural resources.

Keep within the Country's Carrying Capacity

There are finite limits to the carrying capacity of The Bahamas' ecosystems so its renewable resources must be used sustainably. This must be linked to a humane, proactive population policy, which seeks to stabilize the population. We must also recognize the special role of Bahamian youth and that the need for their empowerment is integral to success in attaining sustainable development. In order to keep growth within the nation's carrying capacity, the following are required:

- National physical development and planning policies must address in a realistic way the need to stabilize population growth, reduce poverty, promote equal access to all national services and engender sustainable tourism. An ecological approach to human settlements planning must be implemented in order to make our settlements, towns and cities clean and safe. Strategies and plans must also be introduced to use land and water optimally.
 - Resource conservation, waste minimization and recycling must be promoted as a way of life. Economic incentives, environmental taxes and use of environmentally-preferred
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products and services must become an accepted part of our environmental management strategy.

- Family planning services must be strengthened and linked to improved care and education for mothers and children.

Change Personal Attitudes and Practices

If the ethic for sustainable development is to be widely adopted, people must re-examine their values and alter their behaviour. Information must be widely disseminated through formal and informal education campaigns so that stewardship of the environment and the required actions are widely understood.

Environmental education for children and adults must be integrated in education at all levels. Extension services must also be available to help farmers, fishermen, contractors/builders, artisans, the urban and rural populations and other groups to use natural resources more productively and sustainably.

Empower Communities to care for their own Environments

Local communities, non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations provide the easiest channels for people to express their concerns and take action to create sustainable societies. However, such groups need the power to act. Communities should be given an opportunity to share in managing their local resources and the right to participate in decisions. Local government bodies, communities, businesses, non-governmental and community-based organizations and other interest groups should become partners with the Government of The Bahamas and its agents in decisions about policies, plans, programs and projects that affect them, their environment, and the resources on which they depend.

A national forum for Government, business and the environmental movement to have ongoing dialogue in achieving environmental sustainability will help build confidence by discussion of objectives, processes and practices and the open disclosure of the results of monitoring. It will be adaptive, continually re-directing its course in response to experience and to new needs.
