

ST EUSTATIUS

A diamond in the rough

A diving paradise bordered by fascinating nature reserves. A crater one can walk on with trees as tall as sequoias. St Eustatius, affectionately called Statia, is just what the brochure claims: ‘The Caribbean’s hidden treasure’. With such incredibly diverse nature, the Netherlands has gained a diamond in the rough – one that can be polished into a glittering jewel.

BY BAUD SCHOENMAECKERS

The DHC 6 of the Caribbean airline Winair is flying at an altitude of 3600 metres. Landing has begun and the top speed of 133 knots rapidly declines to under 30. With 22 passengers on board, the two-engine propeller plane is completely full. Where the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean come together, the water turns a deep blue, a panorama of lyrical beauty. That is, until one spots an oil tanker at anchor and a series of oil storage tanks. Welcome to St Eustatius.

The oil industry is the odd man out within the magnificent nature of Statia. “But it’s also important for the island”, says Kate Walker. Since May 2010 Walker has been the director of STENAPA: St Eustatius National Parks. This organization manages 33 square kilometres of nature and sea on and around the island. Oil storage is the most important economic activity on St Eustatius and generates more money for the local economy than tourism does. The largest private employer is Statia Terminals, an oil terminal owned by the American company NuStar, and NuStar supports education and provides its employees with educational opportunities. Walker: “I’m happy that they’re here, but it’s . . . how shall I put it, strange in such pristine natural surroundings. You go swimming

eye to eye with a sea turtle and, when you resurface, you’re looking at the hull of an oil tanker.”

Mooring fees

The island authorities have commissioned STENAPA to manage the parks on land and under water. Some of the costs involved are paid by NuStar. The ships on the coast pay the island authorities mooring fees based on their tonnage, and part of this money goes to STENAPA. Because of some uncertainty about the agreement between NuStar and the authorities, STENAPA has been struggling with insufficient funds. NuStar has agreed to help find a solution and made a positive step on 6 September by donating ten thousand dollars for operational matters. Walker was extremely pleased by this: “The biggest deficit is in the daily management of the organization and the parks.”

Other sources of income are divers, pleasure yachts and hikers. According to Walker, there aren’t that many tourists. “But we did sell 800 hiking passes and 950 diving passes last year.”

Since 1998 the area known as Quill has enjoyed the status of a national park. Other parts of the island are on the list of protected areas that fall under the responsibility of the island authorities. There are now ongoing discussions about the development of Venus Bay. The present authorities want to build tourist accommodations and there are rumours about a golf course. Dutch policy makers are in favour of developing Statia. However, they don’t think that a golf course would be the right move because of the unique endemic species found at the location in question. The construction would harm the environment and the course itself would hinder passage to the park Boven. Moreover, a golf course prob-



Kate Walker: You go swimming eye to eye with a sea turtle and, when you resurface, you’re looking at the hull of an oil tanker



Jessica Berkel: Many people think that the nature they had as a child will also be there for their children and grandchildren no matter how it's treated

ably wouldn't generate much income for the island since there's really not a market for golfers on Statia.

Ecological wonder of nature

Ecotourism is the path that Statia should follow, an opinion that is shared not only by Dutch policy makers and STENAPA but also by NuStar and most of the island's 3400 inhabitants. Statia has special trees, snakes, sea turtles, birds, whales and fish. It is surrounded by coral reefs and meadows of sea grass on which the sea turtle feeds. On the island desert-like areas with cactus gradually make way for rainforest and primeval forest. The entire picture answers to the cliché of a tropical island paradise. There are complete ecosystems and habitats where the most exceptional sorts of plants and animals can be found. Threatened species such as the red-bellied racer snake, the lesser Antillean iguana, the giant queen conch shell and the brown pelican feel at home here. 'Or species that were believed to have become extinct, such as the Statia morning glory,' adds Walker. This is the most rare plant in the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

In the last inventory of the parks, held a few years ago, 14 species were found that are on the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) world list of plants and animals threatened with extinction and 108 on the CITES list (See also page 26 International treaties safeguard biodiversity.) The number of threatened species will increase once the park manager has enough funds for a new inventory. Walker: "Once we have enough money we can also set up a good monitoring system. If we want to be able to continue to manage the park, we have to have a good idea of the present situation: how many species are there on and around the island? What are the threats, where do they come from and how can we protect nature from them?"

Roaming cattle and choking plants

Two of the threats referred to by Walker are immediately visible: roaming livestock and an invasive climbing plant with the lovely name of Coralita. The wandering goats, sheep, cows and donkeys have to be fenced in because they're eating the island bare. The animals have owners and everyone knows who they are, but, as soon as damage occurs, no one is prepared to accept responsibility. "Most of the animals are poorly cared for and walk around aimlessly looking for food," says Gay Soetekouw. She has lived on Statia for over twenty years, writes about the history of the island and sets historical walking tracks.

The roaming animals are a plague even though they could be an excellent source of income. They provide meat, milk and hides, products that Statia itself imports. There's an unused slaughterhouse on the island that could be renovated and cold-storage facilities and a veterinarian service are needed before the island can be self-sufficient in the supply of meat and milk.

Disappearing vegetation and erosion

The roaming livestock eat the existing vegetation. Young plants never have the chance to reach maturity. Native plants are disappearing and erosion is increasing. If a plant survives being attacked by a goat, it will be choked by the Coralita vine. The disappearance of native vegetation makes it difficult for iguanas and various sorts of birds to find food. In the end, this is a threat to the nature parks as a whole. "It's high time, also for politicians, to take action", says Soetekouw.

The problem isn't easy to solve. Soetekouw: "Coralita likes to grow in fences. If you've managed to keep your livestock out of your yard with a fence, then the fence is covered in Coralita. Just one storm can blow down such a top-heavy fence, and then the livestock are free once again to

Historical awareness

The island inhabitants are proud of their history and (very often) descent from slaves. In the 17th and 18th centuries Statia was the most important centre of trade in the region. It was a time of prosperity for the island's 20,000 inhabitants. In 1756 it became a free port (free passage) and replaced Curacao as the principal slave trading post. At the height of its fortunes at the end of the 18th century, the island was called The Golden Rock. Remains of this period can still be found at sea – the hulls of sunken ships attract divers. Also, a group of archaeologists that is permanently based on the island itself has unearthed tens of thousands of objects. Partly because of this past there is now a widespread attitude of 'I couldn't care less' and 'why should I care, I'm happy with what I have'.

eat whatever hasn't already been eaten." Coralita or Mexican creeper is an invasive species from Mexico and Central America. The plant is grown there for its luxurious, nectar-filled flowers and its roots, which grow deep under the ground, expand rapidly and taste like peanuts. The plant grows quickly on Statia and threatens all other species, indigenous or exotic. It is internationally recognized as a pest but there is still no adequate method of combating it.

Irrigation

Because of the processes described above, the fertile volcanic soil runs off. An effective system of irrigation would help restore agriculture to the level that it once had.

The need for this is becoming increasingly critical. As a result of erosion, the soil can no longer retain water and the fertile top layer is disappearing. One possibility would be to repair the network of cisterns, underground water tanks. Constructing a water supply system is also an option, but a costly one. It would be easier to clean the existing cisterns and to set up a system to guarantee water quality.

Soetekouw advises Dutch people to listen to the people of Statia and to read up on the history of the island and its inhabitants. "Take what is good about Statia, with respect for and knowledge of the culture, and combine this with Dutch expertise. Don't apply a purely Dutch approach. A lot can be gained from the mutual differences in culture." She hopes that the expected influx of Dutch people won't adversely affect the mentality of the people of Statia. "Their hospitality, warmth, satisfaction, solidarity. The Dutch should take care not to arouse aversion to themselves. Some of the people on Statia already think that the Dutch 'are grabbing all of the jobs'."

The optimistic Soetekouw has another piece of advice for the Netherlands. "There are undoubtedly many priorities, but put education at the top. From now on: good education that is structured and that cannot be walked away from. This has been lacking for the past ten or fifteen years, and

that's a terrible pity because knowledge is progress."

Rangers

Education and awareness are and will remain spearheads for STENAPA's work. On this subject the manager of the marine park, Jessica Berkel, says: "Many people think that the nature they had as a child will also be there for their children and grandchildren no matter how it's treated. Of course that isn't true. That's why STENAPA makes educational programmes and tries to show the value of nature management for the island. We have a junior ranger programme for children. We take them on walks and let them study the sea. And we give informative talks at schools, we distribute folders and we hang up posters at the airport."

Turtle Bay shows the result of this approach. This year the beach was home to 51 nests of turtles: 39 green turtles and 11 leatherback turtles. Cars aren't allowed on the beach, digging is prohibited and dogs have to be on a leash.

Value

Statia will have to make a large effort to really get ecotourism going. That means no more litter and becoming more aware of the value of the surroundings. An American researcher has calculated that, in addition to its priceless natural value, the reef



around Statia has an economic price tag of between eight and twelve million dollars. This was determined through talks with owners of hotels and shops and with local fishermen. By attaching a price tag to the reef, STENAPA hopes to be better able to manage activities and to convince policy makers of the importance of preserving the reef as a source of income. The existing accommodation needs to be renovated and the most important boulevard needs repair. If money could be found, the renovation of the centuries-old warehouses on the boulevard could restore the island's former glory. (See box Historical awareness). ■

St Eustatius National Parks Visitor Centre
Gallows Bay, St Eustatius
Tel: +599-318-2884
manager@statiapark.org
www.statiapark.org



Gay Soetekouw: Plants and animals that were believed to have long become extinct feel at home on Statia