Exploring Pine Forests And Mangroves In Grand Bahama's National Parks

By Jennifer Bain
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At the Rand Nature Centre, education officer Ann-Marie Carroll strolls in the Caribbean pine forest/Jennifer Bain

The first thing I see when I land on Grand Bahama Island is Caribbean pine trees decimated by Hurricane Dorian in 2019. The impossibly tall evergreens line the highway, but all that's left is their slender, erect trunks. They look naked without their branches and needles. Naked, yet also defiantly still alive.

Still, it's a relief to arrive at the Rand Nature Centre in Freeport and find 100 acres of thriving pine forest. Wandering through its looped path with Bahamas National Trust education officer Ann-Marie Carroll, I learn that the tree also known as Yellow pine is essential to an ecologically, medicinally and commercially valuable ecosystem.

"As you can see, we have a lot of young pines coming up, which is really good. At least we know that they're thriving in this area," says Carroll. "During Dorian, a lot of areas lost their pines, especially the areas that were flooded. We flooded here as well, but I think it was freshwater flooding because none of the pines actually died in this area. But when you go to Lucayan National Park, you notice that we don't have any mature pines left in that area because that flooding was mainly saltwater."

The observation deck at the Watchable Wildlife Pond at the Rand Nature Centre/Jennifer Bain

As we walk down a pea-gravel path and hear more avian life than we can see, she adds: "It's really nice out here when it's super quiet and you can see all the birds flying around."

The Red Legged Thrush is top of every birder's list, but we don't get that lucky. We do spot a restless American Redstart foraging on the path, a chatty Gray Catbird in a tree by the arboretum, and a regal Yellow Crowned Night Heron in the Watchable Wildlife Pond. Endemic and migratory winter birds — including more than 30 types of warblers — love this refuge.

Bahamas is just east of Florida, and Grand Bahama is the most northerly of the 700-island archipelago that makes up the Bahamas. The island is divided into three districts — the West End, the East End and Freeport. Caribbean pine forests can only be found on Grand Bahama, Andros, Abaco and New Providence.

A Yellow-crowned Night Heron sits by the pond at the Rand Nature Centre/Jennifer Bain

The Rand labels many of its trees and plants, some with QR codes that link to fact sheets created by its sister park, the Leon Levy Native Plant Preserve on Eleuthera. The Five Finger Fern is a famous medicinal plant among Bahamians. Century plants are coveted in yards for decoration. Australian Pines — a deciduous tree that looks like a pine — are invasive.

The Rand was established in 1969 by Dorothy Rand as a living memorial to her late husband James H. Rand, a philanthropist and inventor who retired in Grand Bahama. It was originally run by the Rand Foundation, then transferred to the Bahamas National Trust (BNT).

The BNT is a non-governmental, non-profit, membership organization that manages 32 national parks and protected areas across the Islands of Bahamas. On Grand Bahama, that means the Rand, Peterson Cay National Park and Lucayan National Park.

"Our main issues are funding and getting people aware of our national parks," acknowledges Carroll. "But I do think we attract a special type of tourist that is interested in nature and are here because they like that vibe."

At the Rand Nature Centre, vintage stamps show birds found in the Bahamas/Jennifer Bain

I unfortunately don't make it to Peterson Cay, which protects a 1.5-acre, low and sandy island plus surrounding marine habitat. It's also an Important Bird Area that supports a nesting colony of Bridled Terns, and it's popular with snorkelers for day trips. Turtles and rays love the seagrass. Fish, juvenile sharks and even the occasional manatee can be found in the surrounding reefs.

But I do have time for Coral Vita, which bills itself as the world's first land-based, commercial coral farm for reef restoration. Coral restoration specialist Alannah Vellacott starts my guided tour by explaining that coral is part animal, part plant and part rock.

I learn how Dorian — the strongest hurricane on record to hit the Bahamas — caused record-breaking destruction and lasted more than 48 hours. Its 220 mile-per-hour wind gusts and storm surges covered 80 per cent of Grand Bahama in water and destroyed reefs the size of cars. Some 30 per cent of corals were destroyed, and more than 70 per cent of this island's mangrove forests.

On a tour of Coral Vita, restoration specialist Allanah Vellacott shows how the land-based commercial coral farm works/Jennifer Bain

Coral reefs give us protection from storm surges and waves, biodiverse ecosystems, fisheries that feed millions, organisms that can be used in life-saving drugs, tourism and cultural heritage. But scientists estimate that without action, more than 90 per cent of the world's coral reefs will be dead by 2050. Threats include climate change, coral disease, coastal development, overfishing, pollution, invasive species and careless recreation.

To protect coral reefs, Vallacott says, we need to do things like reduce carbon emissions, conserve water, eat sustainable seafood, support reef restoration and visit responsibly (especially when snorkelling or fishing).

The mission-based private company collects coral fragments, cuts them and attaches them to coral "plugs," grows them in tanks, and eventually outplants them. It says its process is up to 50 times faster than normal and makes coral more resilient to climate change.

Coral Vita regrows coral in land-based tanks up to 50 times faster than normal and makes it more resilient to climate change/Jennifer Bain

"Reefs are dying throughout the tropics and this is our way to try and tackle that," says Vallacott. "A lot of this work that we're doing is selfless work. It's totally not for us. It's for our children and our children's children, because we may not see the real success that we're looking for in our lifetimes. It's for future generations to build on."

Coral Vita has also a small mangrove nursery that's run by partners. A mangrove is a small tree or shrub that grows in coastal saline or brackish water in tropical and subtropical areas. Here on Grand Bahama, there are red, black, white and button wood mangroves.

The mangrove swamp ecosystem — known as the "rainforest by the sea" — is critical to fighting climate change and is interconnected with coral reefs, coastal ecosystems and ocean ecosystems.

Coral Vita is also home to a small mangrove farm, which is run through a partnership/Jennifer Bain

"Mangroves can be up to 10x more efficient than terrestrial ecosystems at absorbing and storing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere," interpretive signage explains. "The mangroves are the first line of defence for coastal communities. They stabilize shorelines by slowing erosion and provide natural barriers protecting coastal communities from increased storm surge, flooding, and hurricanes by their incredible root system."

Vallacott gets me pumped about my impending visit to Lucayan National Park.

"It's an amazing transition between the karst landscape that the Bahamas is, with really cool underwater caves and caverns, to then a mangrove ecosystem, to then the wrack community on the beach (that line of goopy seaweed that nobody likes interacting with), sand, seagrass and coral reefs all in one rectanglen (of land)," she enthuses. "Actually, even before the cave you'll have the pine barren."

Lucayan National Park is found on both sides of the highway/Jennifer Bain

Lucayan, in the island's East End, is spread out over both sides of Grand Bahama Highway. Established in 1982 and expanded in 2015 to 40 acres, it protects one of the world's longest charted underwater cave systems, preserved remains of the Lucayan Indians, and a prime combination of natural environments.

On the north side of the highway, I do spot pine barrens, but the trees are once again ailing from Dorian. I read how this tree can grow to a height of 82 feet, is important for timber and grows in small pockets of soil on limestone. The Caribbean pine has adapted to survive natural fires, which allows pine seedlings to germinate and the undergrowth to flourish.

Ailing Caribbean pine trees on the north side of Lucayan National Park/Jennifer Bain

The big draw here is a short, looped trail that takes people to Burial Mound Cave and Ben's Cave.

As I learn at the Bahamas Maritime Museum in Freeport's Port Lucaya Markeplace (walking distance from where I stayed at Lighthouse Pointe at Grand Lucayan Resort), the first inhabitants of the Bahamas were the Lucayans, a branch of the Taino people who occupied the Caribbean before European settlers arrived in the 15th century. Drawn by abundant fisheries, salt and wild game (like iguanas and hutias), they came from Hispaniola and/or Cuba from 700 A.D. and canoed between islands to fish and trade.

The remains of several Lucayans were found in a water-filled cavern near the entrance to Burial Mound Cave. The bones were perfectly preserved under a mound of rocks in about six feet of fresh water. At the Rand Nature Centre, you can see a photo that shows how the bones were originally found. It also notes that "it is impossible to tell whether the Indians were ritually buried or whether they met a violent end."

Two visitors stand at the mouth of Burial Mound Cave in Lucayan National Park/Jennifer Bain

As interpretive signage there reveals, the bones belonged to adults, the skull to an 11 or 12 year old, and the post-cranial bones to a 6 year old. The Lucayans, cousins to the Taino/Arawaks, "practiced skull deformation in infancy which writers have suggested was to make them appear more handsome."

Try as I might, I don't spot the rare crustacean — *Speleonectes lucayensis* (a swimming centipede) — that lives in this cave. Nor do I see the migratory bats that sometimes call Ben's Cave home. I do take a spiral staircase in to see where fresh water floats on top of salt water. There's no swimming and I learn that from here, six miles of underwater passages have been charted.

To get into Ben's Cave at Lucayan National Park, you must climb down a spiral staircase/Jennifer Bain

It takes more time to explore the part of the park that's on the south side of the highway.

This is where a lengthy looped boardwalk guides you through all those ecosystems that Vallacott detailed. Gold Rock Creek winds its way through the "mangrove swash" and "coppice forest" (full of poisonwood trees, ferns and cabbage palms) to the sandy dune area. The area attracts insects and raccoons, which I see enough of at home in Toronto but am sad not to spot here.

The boardwalk leads to Gold Rock Beach, which was named for the way a sunset can illuminate a small offshore cay. The beach is secluded and spectacular as promised, but we haven't timed it right. It's not low tide and so we miss the chance to walk out towards the reef and explore the intertidal zone.

Gabrielle Moxey, of the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism, shows off Gold Rock Beach at Lucayan National Park/Jennifer Bain

People do love to cite the fact that the 2006/2007 *Pirates of the Caribbean* films *Dead Man's Chest and At World's End* were either shot on this beach or near it (the exact location is hard to pinpoint years later). Dig a little and the story is complicated by the fact that the now defunct Bahamas Film Studios at Gold Rock Creek once leased decommissioned U.S. Air Force missile tracking station land for a movie production facility with a stadium-sized outdoor water tank, and some of the open-water scenes for the *Pirates* franchise were filmed there.

But whether Johnny Depp/Jack Sparrow once walked on this exact stretch of sand or just one nearby, BNT parks planner Chantal Curtis assures me that Gold Rock Beach is the most visited beach on the island and "often called the welcome mat of Grand Bahama." Since Hurricane Dorian decimated the area more than three years ago, the beach and its precious sand dunes have started to recover, and restoration activities have included replanting native species that were lost, like ceodes (flowering plants) and seagrapes.

"It's a work in progress," admits Curtis.

This part of the Lucayan National Park boardwalk meanders through Gold Rock Creek among mangroves/Jennifer Bain

As I pass by an area where the fragile dunes are roped off for restoration work, I notice important messages, people's names and company names etched into the boardwalk.

"Enjoy your visit to the park."

"Protect our environment."

"Donate generously."

A vintage sign details bird life in Gold Rock Creek in Lucayan National Park/Jennifer Bain

The BNT has been collecting $50 donations to replace some 500 boardwalk planks here in the wake of Hurricane Dorian. "Many in the Grand Bahama community depend on the environment to make a living," the trust stresses in an online request for help, pointing out that ecotourism is critical to people like taxi drivers who bring people here from Freeport and only "need one fare per day to make a reasonable amount of money to survive."

It's a good reminder that while Parks Canada and the U.S. National Park Service are government agencies with annual budgets, not every country can follow that model and some must rely more heavily on donations to protect nature. It costs $12 to visit Lucayan or the Rand, while an annual BNT membership is a steal at $30 (the Bahamian dollar is equal to the American dollar) and gets you into all 32 parks. The Rand also has a gift shop, with books, local crafts and branded clothing.

I leave Grand Bahama with guides to the seabirds and land birds of the Caribbean, glad that at least a few of my tourism dollars will help conserve and protect a 2.2 million-acre national park system.

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