

# A New Chapter in Conservation Education in the Cayman Islands

## The new Cayman Turtle Farm at Boatswain's Beach

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**The government-owned Cayman Turtle Farm on Grand Cayman has recently expanded its operations to include new nature/culture Exhibit Park with an overlying Cayman/Caribbean theme. The Education Programmes Unit at the new park is working to change public perception of the facility as merely a commercial venture and to establish its place as a local resource and authority on environmental conservation.**

The Caribbean's newest theme park, Boatswain's Beach, is an expansion of the renowned Cayman Turtle Farm (CTF) on Grand Cayman in the Cayman Islands. The new Boatswain's Beach (BB) is determined to be viewed as more than a just a zoo or theme park attraction. A coordinated and cooperative approach to public education is an essential ingredient in achieving this objective. The maxim of the two-year old facility can be summarised as "Conservation through Research, Release, Education and Utilisation".

In keeping with the park's motto, vision and mission statements, promoting conservation through public awareness is at the forefront of the park's programming. Having the CTF, the world's largest and only commercial sea turtle farm, as a central feature of the park

means that the issue of protecting endangered species is always at the forefront.

Using the approach that "Everyone is an Educator"; the Education unit works closely with all departments in Boatswain's Beach to practise conservation awareness both at work and at home. Office practises such as reusing one-side printed paper, and turning off lights when leaving offices can be carried from work into the homes. In this way the message continues to be passed on.

Conservation issues vary in their significance, but tend to be fairly similar across the Caribbean region. In the Cayman Islands, the main issues relate to land development, exploitation of limited natural resources, and protection of endangered & endemic species. In an environment with limited land space and resources housing a growing population and economy, conservation education of local community needs to be a persistent, multi-tiered approach. At the BB Park, the majority of the effort is directed towards the school age populace. Overseas tourists still account for the largest visitation numbers to the park, the majority being short-stay cruise ship passengers. For this target group, the message is simple and to the point: "If you enjoy your visit, then learn more and become better informed, so you can make educated decisions that can positively affect our natural resources".

Marine biologist conducts a Shark Class at Boatswain's Beach







Education Programmes at Boatswain's Beach:

- The **Annual Turtle Release** has been a major public event in the Cayman Islands since the early 1970's. Each November a number of farm-raised turtles are released publicly by luck of the draw. This event is widely promoted and scheduled on the Cayman tourism events calendar, offering an unsurpassed opportunity to educate and emotionally involve large numbers of the wider local community as well as overseas visitors in the subject of sea turtle and marine conservation. Along with the free public release, individual and corporate sponsored turtle releases occur throughout the year.
- **Sponsor-a-Breeding Turtle**: The concept is utilised by zoos and aquariums around the world, but is still fairly new in the Cayman Islands. The project has been designed so that both local and overseas sponsors can avail themselves of the opportunity to become more directly involved in conservation of an endangered species. Individuals in the breeding herd of 500 green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) housed at the CTF Breeding Pond may be sponsored. All sponsors receive the usual background information package on their charge along with personal audio-visual presentation and further information on sea turtle biology and conservation, including simple actions that empower the individual to become more

conservation active. The first turtle sponsored under this project was by a local private school. Interestingly, since that occurrence was published, much more local corporate interest has been forthcoming.

- **Keeper Talks** at the new park are revised and refined to become better oriented to the non-scientific general public. Presenters are all qualified biologists using live exhibits, and delivering talks that inform and help the public to relate to the animals and their environment, convey the message that conservation involves everyone, and finally empower with action steps. Current presentation topics include: "The Truth about Sharks", "Meet the Endangered

Park visitors at the Caribbean bird keeper talk.



A high school education tour.



Visitors enjoy the Education Center.



Cayman Iguanas” and “Meet the Birds of the Caribbean”. Talks on marine turtles are presented by trained tour guides. Future presentations currently being developed include endemic and native plants.

- **School Tours** since the 1970's were traditionally limited to recreational class outings or short field trips to identify turtle or reptiles for Science class at Primary school level. Today's structured education approach utilises scheduled Keeper Talks, wider in-house staff expertise, as well as facilities of a dedicated Education Center to design field assignments, tours and presentations to meet the requirements of the National Curriculum – all with an underlying conservation message. There was a definite challenge for the BB programme to attract the High School/teen age faction; traditionally an elusive age group as far as partaking in environmental/conservation efforts. In order to resolve this, the park's Education programme charter was expanded to include real world High School level subject material for Biology, Chemistry, Social Studies and Mathematics. Combined with the distribution of a Teacher's Resource List, this approach has met an enthusiastic response from the local High School community.
- The **Annual Summer Camp** is fast becoming a popular venue for interactive learning and entertainment. The underlying message is “Each one, tell one”.

The camp agenda is being revised such that at the end of each week-long programme, the campers are given the opportunity to become tour guides themselves and share their new found knowledge with visitors to the park. No formal measurement of the effectiveness has been done, but informal observations have noted a profound positive impact on the attitudes of both visitors and their minute guides to share what they have learned.

The current Education Unit staff is two persons, including the Curator and Education Officer. The “Everyone is an Educator” approach has proved to be a successful strategy that maximises personnel and resources, allowing everyone to become involved and share their expertise. The Education Unit is currently in the process of producing publications and developing BB certification courses in environment and ecology. As the programme develops, the next step will be to publish more research, implement and collaborate on community outreach projects, and devise teacher training forums, all to help continue to introduce the conservation message deeper into the Cayman community. ♦

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For more information on the Cayman Turtle Farm and Boatswain's Beach visit <http://turtle.ky> and [www.boatswainsbeach.ky](http://www.boatswainsbeach.ky)

Education officer Sasha Appleby conducts a Q&A with a local primary school.



A primary school education tour.

