

Feasibility Study Report No. 2

LONG-DISTANCE TRAILS
IN GUADELOUPE AND MARTINIQUE: LESSONS
FOR THE WAITUKUBULI NATIONAL TRAIL

Yves Renard

**Waitukubuli Ecological Foundation
Roseau, Dominica**

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The feasibility study

A feasibility study of the proposed Waitukubuli National Trail in Dominica is being undertaken by the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI) on behalf of the Waitukubuli Ecological Foundation (WEF). This report has been prepared for CANARI and forms part of the feasibility study.

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Also in this series

Lane, B. 2001. The Waitukubuli National Trail: its market position and potential. Waitukubuli Ecological Foundation, Roseau, Dominica, Feasibility Study Report No. 1. CANARI Technical Report No. 288: 22pp.

INTRODUCTION

This report examines the experience of two Caribbean territories, Guadeloupe and Martinique, in the design and creation of long-distance trails, in order to draw lessons that could assist the process of establishing the Waitukubuli National Trail in Dominica. These two territories were selected because of their proximity to Dominica (see map 1), and because they represent the only two instances in the eastern Caribbean where long-distance trails have been proposed, studied and, in the case of Guadeloupe, actually implemented. These experiences are revealing in many respects, and it is hoped that this brief analysis will contribute to the current process of assessing the desirability and feasibility of creating the Waitukubuli National Trail.

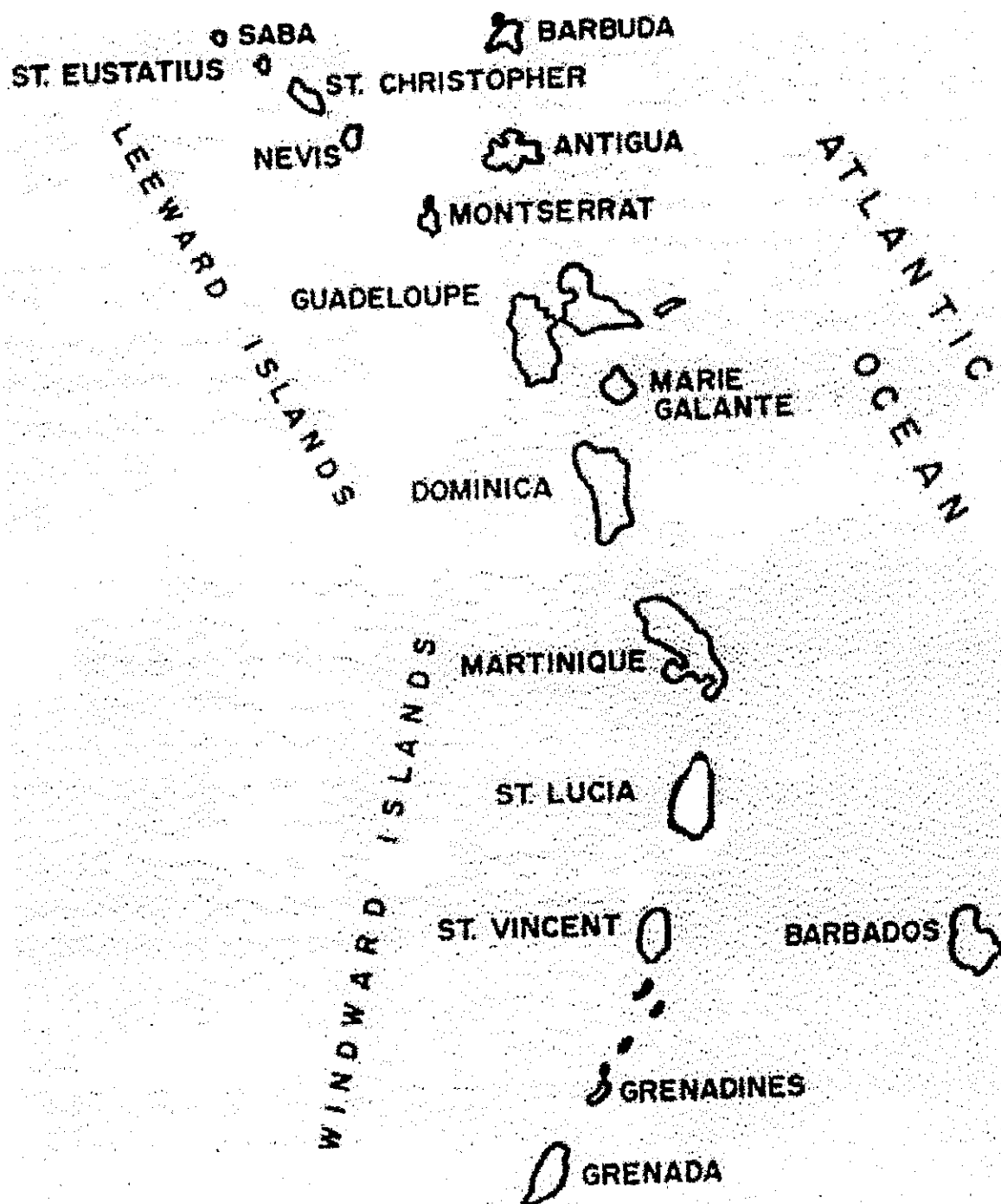
THE GUADELOUPEAN EXPERIENCE

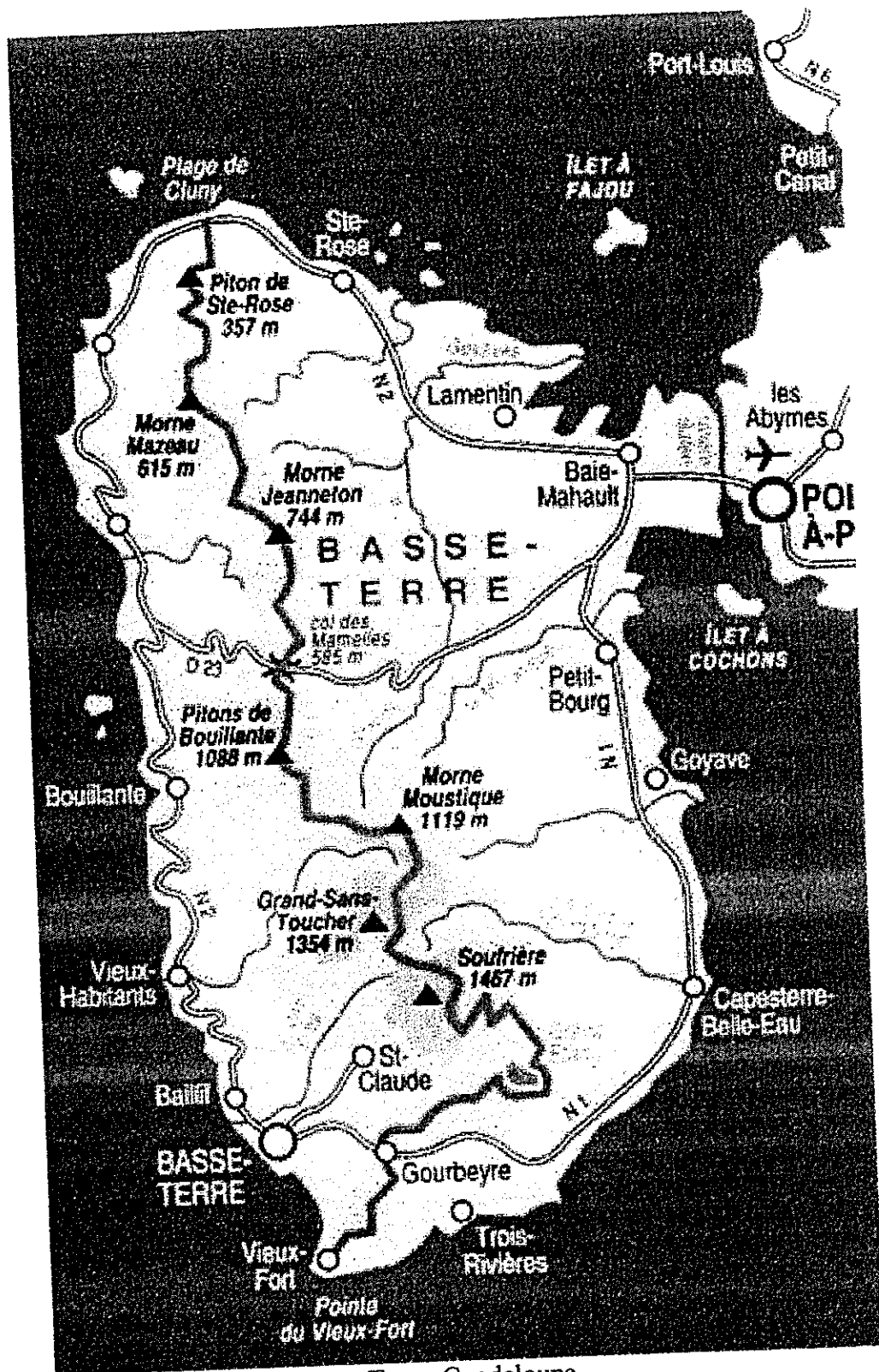
Guadeloupe has 247km of publicly managed and maintained trails, 104 of which are located within the *Parc National de Guadeloupe*. In 1995, Guadeloupe established a long distance trail, called *La Trace des Alizés*, modeled along the well-established *Sentiers de Grande Randonnée*, commonly known as GR, which have been created in many parts of France. The creation of the trail was made at the initiative of a voluntary organisation, known as *Club des Montagnards*, with active support from the forestry administration, the *Office National des Forêts*, and the *Parc National de la Guadeloupe*. The objective was to develop a new route, using existing trails whenever feasible, that would take the hiker from the South to the North of the island of Basse Terre, following the ridges (see map 2). It was conceived as a physical challenge, a seven-day trek that would keep the visitor in the mountains, far from human settlements and activities.

Following initial field studies, a route was selected, using mostly existing trails, with very few new sections. These new sections were constructed over a short period, allowing the *Club des Montagnards*, the *Parc National* and the *Office National des Forêts* to submit a request to the *Fédération Française de la Randonnée Pédestre (FFRP)* for the formal registration of the trail as a *Sentier de Grande Randonnée*, in accordance with *FFRP* standards. In April 1996, the *FFRP*, in partnership with the *Parc National de la Guadeloupe*, produced a booklet in its *Topo-guide* series, and the trail was opened to public access, with standardised *FFRP* signage along its route.

The responsibility for the maintenance of the trail was shared among the *Parc National*, the *Office National des Forêts* and private contractors. It was also expected that the *Club des Montagnards* would play a role in management, but that role was never clarified nor specified. Soon, severe problems were experienced, principally because of the costs involved in maintaining a trail that was so inaccessible, since its route followed the central mountain ridge. Because of the lack of clarity of their roles, none of the various partners fully accepted the responsibility for these difficulties, and users began to complain. Meanwhile, many visitors found the trail too difficult, a difficulty that was increased by the impact of inadequate maintenance, and they felt cheated by the promotion which had attracted them to that product in the first instance.

Map 1: location of Dominica, Guadeloupe and Martinique in the eastern Caribbean





Map 2: La Trace des Alizés, Basse Terre, Guadeloupe

At the same time, a number of conservation measures introduced with the creation of the *Parc National* actually had negative impacts on the ability of the various management agencies to maintain the trail properly. For example, these regulations prohibit the use of cutlasses on the Park's territory, and trail maintenance teams have been forced to replace the use of tree ferns (because of their protected status) by imported lumber when constructing steps and drains.

During the short period during which the trail was operational, it was proposed that guides be given a role in management, but this never materialised, principally because guides were not sufficiently well organised, and management agencies felt that they should formulate an agreement with an organised group, not with individual guides.

The trail had limited economic impact, and this was largely due to its design. Shelters were built that allowed hikers to overnight in the forest for the entire duration of the walk, thus eliminating the need for food and accommodation services along the trail. Because of the small demand for the product, the trail had only a small impact on employment (guides), and much of the guiding was actually done by personnel attached to management agencies.

After four years of difficult operation, it has recently been concluded by all parties that this GR was simply too hard and too difficult to maintain, and it has been abandoned. Late last year, the *FFRP* and the *Parc National* even decided to pulp the large stock of the *Topo-Guide*, in order to eliminate the product. All agencies involved have indicated that they do not intend to re-create a long-distance trail, but that they will continue to maintain the extensive network of trails which exists, and to keep it as an important element of the island's tourism product.

THE MARTINICAN EXPERIENCE

In Martinique, the idea of a long-distance trail has been in discussion since 1986, and it has been actively promoted by a small group of enthusiasts with extensive hiking experience. Over the years, a consensus has been created among key institutions, focusing on the concept of a five-day route that would use as many existing trails as possible, going through the entire northern mountain range. Its stated objective is to offer a new tourism product with a defined image and international standards of quality.

In the process of creating this long-distance trail, Martinique has defined a strategy which rests on the following elements:

- To the maximum extent possible, existing trails should be used
- Formal rights of way should be negotiated with all private and public land owners, with financial compensation whenever appropriate
- The trail should be designed in a way that makes use of local accommodation and food services
- The route should cross rivers whenever necessary, even if this has to be done at high altitude

- The trail should be registered as a *Sentier de Grande Randonnée* under the French system managed by the *FFRP*
- It should have good signage, following French standards

In order to advance this and other initiatives, and to promote hiking in Martinique, a *Comité Martiniquais de la Randonnée Pédestre* was created in 1996, with formal affiliation to the *FFRP*. Over the past two years, a dossier has been put together, and a formal application has recently been made to the *FFRP* for endorsement, and to local elected assemblies for funding. The exact responsibilities remain unclear, and there is some level of competition among the various agencies involved. There has however been a recent decision that the *Parc Naturel Régional de la Martinique* should take the lead in project implementation.

In this context, a financing proposal has recently been submitted and approved, and its budget is instructive. It envisages that the initial cost of creating the trail will amount to FFR2.7 million, or approximately USD500.000, allocated as follows (rounded estimates):

- Field reconnaissance and final design: 2%
- Legal issues, land surveys and agreements with owners: 5%
- Trail construction: 25%
- Bridges: 15%
- Publications: 18%
- Parking and road access: 28%
- Launching and initial promotion: 4%
- Administration and coordination: 3%

LESSONS APPLICABLE TO DOMINICA

There is no model, but there are many cases to learn from

An examination of the experiences gained in these two territories, coupled with a comparison with similar initiatives in other parts of the world, suggests that there is no single model or simple recipe that Dominica could apply to the design and creation of its national trail. Each experience is unique, and the approaches taken must be suited to local environmental, social, cultural and economic conditions. What works well in one location could fail in another context. Dominica will therefore have to develop its own path, drawing lessons from all relevant cases, but defining its own solutions to its unique needs, and resting its initiative on clear objectives.

The route should not be confined to the central mountain range

The Guadeloupean experience confirms the views of the proponents of the Waitukubuli National Trail: the route should not simply follow the central ridges, as it makes it too difficult to maintain and reduces its economic impact on communities. This experience also suggests that a "Caribbean trail product" should not be a difficult trail, it should be compatible with the established image of Caribbean tourism destinations. (In this regard, guides and tour operators note that visitors, including experienced hikers, generally

perceive the islands as easy, warm and accessible; they are often taken by surprise when experiencing the climatic and physical conditions of a Caribbean mountain environment.)

There is need for a strong organisation to spearhead the process

Creating a national trail is a complex undertaking, which requires financial and technical resources, political skills, and sustained efforts over a long period of time. The creation of the Guadeloupean trail happened quickly because there were strong governmental and non-governmental organisations involved. In Martinique, the process has been slower, and the absence of strong organisational leadership appears to be one of the reasons for this.

The trail and hiking product must be a local product before it is shared with the rest of the world

In Guadeloupe, the trail was the fruit of the passionate work of a small number of individuals, supported by strong and well-established organisations, but it was perceived by many as a tourism product, not a facility that would serve the needs of local people. The GR came and the GR went, largely unnoticed by the large majority of the population. In order to avoid a similar situation, there is need for Dominica to generate public support for the Waitukubuli National Trail project, there is need to promote a culture of walking and hiking (based for example on the tradition of the *bèl maché*), and there is need to develop a sense of ownership and commitment among the Dominican masses. This has implications for the strategic plan that will be prepared following the completion of the feasibility study, as one of the strategies that will be required in the short-term will precisely be the promotion of hiking as a recreational activity among Dominicans. It also has implications for design: for example, Martinique is currently exploring the concept of trails for kids, as a way to nurture interest in walking and hiking among young people.

Traditional uses of trails should as much as possible be integrated in the design of a National Trail

There are four central reasons why it is important to respect, integrate and maintain traditional uses of trails, whenever these trails become portions of a new national trail, as long as these uses remain compatible with national trail objectives and conservation requirements. The first reason is that traditional users actually contribute to management. In Guadeloupe and Martinique, hunters have historically played an important role in keeping trails open and passable. In Dominica, people who use trails for normal communication on a regular basis are helping in their maintenance, if only because they prevent overgrowth of vegetation. The second reason is that some traditional uses actually enhance the product. Hikers on a forest trail will always be happy to encounter local people who use the same trail to reach a nearby village or go to the city to sell produce. Thirdly, local uses help enhance security: a trail that is used normally by local people will be more secure than an isolated track that is used only by foreign visitors. Lastly, local uses increase popular acceptance and support, they make the trail part of the local landscape, instead of allowing it to remain a mere tourism product.

There is need for facilities that inform the public about hiking and other nature tourism opportunities

Both Guadeloupe and Martinique offer excellent examples of facilities that encourage both locals and visitors to use trails and discover natural sites and features. These include information centres, such as the *Maison du Tourisme Vert* in Fort de France, which is jointly managed by a number of organisations involved in nature tourism and recreation. Dominica may find benefits in such an option, by establishing, at an early stage in the process of creation its national trail, a central facility that would serve as a source of information and orientation, and as an administrative base for the coordination of activities related to the trail.

Local organisations, including local government agencies, must be involved at all stages of the process

In both territories, the nature tourism ventures that are successful generally depend on a strong involvement of local organisations, especially the local municipalities. They play a role in maintenance, facilitate local participation in design, and promote integration in the local economic and cultural landscape. This suggests that the Local Government agencies in Dominica, as well as community-based non-governmental organisations, should be given a prominent role in trail design and management, and should be given an opportunity to participate at all stages in the process.

The design of use and management systems must be suited to the cultural realities and preferences of the various users

A future Waitukubuli National Trail will have to cater to different tastes and preferences, without compromising its Dominican identity or its overall objectives. One issue which it will have to address is that of the payment of user fees, as some of the potential users of the Waitukubuli National Trail, and notably the French, are not accustomed to paying user fees. This does not mean that user fees cannot be charged, but it means that proper explanation would have to be given to the visitors, and that these visitors should be satisfied that their financial contribution goes towards trail and product maintenance. Another issue is that of accommodation, because the hiking public has specific needs (for example single bed accommodation) which can be different from other clienteles.

The role of guides must be carefully evaluated

The role of guides is a critical issue, and there are divergent opinions on this matter. Operators in Guadeloupe and Martinique indicate that many of their hiking clients prefer to walk on their own. But they also suggest that these clients can easily be convinced of the need for guides. Experience shows that there are several advantages to making the use of guides compulsory: guides can play a role in maintenance and other aspects of management, their presence increases security, they can enhance the quality of the visitor's experience, and the use of guides increases economic benefits to the host country. But if guides are used, they must be very good, well-trained, and properly organised. Standards must be set and respected, and the guiding activity must be properly monitored and managed.

Need for a management plan

Because of the complexity of issues and elements involved, it is necessary to address all management issues early in the planning process, and to develop a comprehensive management plan. Such a plan must be extremely clear on the institutional responsibilities, and it must avoid, to the maximum extent possible, gaps, overlaps and conflicts among partners. The plan must ensure that management arrangements are put in place early, with adequate capacity at all levels. Careful attention must also be given to legal issues. In this regard, we note that one of the difficulties encountered in these and other French territories is the absence of jurisprudence to deal with issues of liability. These questions must be examined very closely during the planning phase.

Management and maintenance are more difficult, and more costly, than creating the trail
This is one of the clearest lessons of the Guadeloupe experience, a place where financial resources are far greater than they are in Dominica. Yet, financial considerations have been at the centre of the decision to abandon the GR in Guadeloupe. Dominica must learn from this experience, and ensure that budgets and revenue generation systems are in place before maintenance costs are incurred. Otherwise, the trail will not be maintained, and the overall tourism product will suffer. It is better to delay the establishment of a national trail, than to establish one and be unable to manage and maintain it properly at all times.

Once a trail becomes operational, managers are confronted, on a continuous basis, with a range of technical issues

The construction and management of a long-distance trail requires the use of a range of tools and techniques, some of which are quite sensitive and complex, and some yet untested. There will necessarily be plenty of trial and error, there will be need to learn from others continuously by networking with similar initiatives in other parts of the world, and there will be need for on-going training and capacity building to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of maintenance and management. It will be somewhat easy to get external grants to purchase specialized external expertise to assist with the design and construction of new sections and new facilities. But it must be kept in mind that the maintenance of these will depend solely on the resources, expertise and capacity available within Dominica.

Good publications, including maps, are essential parts of the product

The experience of the *Fédération Française de la Randonnée Pédestre* shows that users of long-distance trails demand information of quality, and that good publications are critically needed. In the case of Guadeloupe, an excellent illustrated guide was produced in 1996; although its stocks have been destroyed for reasons explained earlier, it could be useful for Dominica to obtain archive copies in order to use it as one example of what could be done. Martinique also has good quality trail guides, including one published by a private editor in collaboration with the *Parc Naturel Régional de la Martinique*. One should however keep in mind the fact that publications become obsolete quickly, and that an outdated or inaccurate hiking guide is worse than no guide at all. This raises the need to control these publications: it is the national trail, not the private publisher, that will be hurt by the negative impact that an inadequate or obsolete publication will have on the visitor.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has confirmed that there exist many opportunities to link the Waitukubuli National Trail project with similar initiatives in Guadeloupe and Martinique. Located as it is between these two islands, Dominica can find many good reasons to develop links between its Waitukubuli National Trail project and similar initiatives in these territories. These reasons include:

- Potential of that market, as there are many hikers in these islands, and as there are organisations specifically dedicated to hiking
- Opportunity to access a francophone European market via Guadeloupe and Martinique
- Availability of valuable expertise, within Guadeloupean and Martinican institutions, and in the *Fédération Française de la Randonnée Pédestre*
- Opportunity for a combined trail product

Yet, the main lesson from these and other cases, especially in the developing world, is that the creation of a national trail in a small tropical developing island nation like Dominica is a complex undertaking, which will require an enormous amount of dedication and commitment. Indeed, the experience of many trails around the globe demonstrates that successful long-distance trails are always the products of a unique and timely blend of passion, professionalism and excellence.

The experience of Guadeloupe and Martinique should in no way discourage Dominica and prevent it to proceed with its own plans for a long-distance trail. The problems encountered in these two islands are not insurmountable and have been successfully solved elsewhere. Dominica must therefore also learn from successful cases and use their experience to guide its planning and management processes.

The Waitukubuli Ecological Foundation (WEF)

(economic development through environmental conservation)

The Waitukubuli Ecological Foundation (WEF) was established as a charity under the laws of England and Wales by Dominicans and friends of Dominica resident in London in 1996. In 1999 it was registered as a Non-Profit Organisation under the Companies Act of the Commonwealth of Dominica.

The Foundation aims to contribute to the holistic development of Dominica by developing, discussing and disseminating through public education and practice the approach that the development of the economy and the conservation of the environment should be conceived of together as an interconnected whole, a concept which should apply in all our strategic planning and thinking. It recognizes as a fact of reality that the effective conservation of the environment can only be achieved with public support which itself will depend on effectively addressing the people's concerns for their livelihood. The effort to conserve Dominica's God-given, wonderful natural environment should proceed by identifying those projects and areas that are simultaneously income generators as well as conservation measures.

One of the WEF's objectives is to do just that. The national trail is a case in point, for not only will it establish a key facility for the development of the tourism sector of the economy – ecotourism, but it will also be a significant conservation measure since it would create a benign conservation logic in giving the people a vested interest in maintaining the natural beauty and integrity of the environment in order to attract visitors to the trail for the economic benefits they would bring to rural communities and the island as a whole.

The choice of the words “ecological” and “Waitukubuli” in the name of the Foundation connotes the concept of environmental conservation as embracing more than just the natural environment, but includes all aspects of human socio-economic and historical-cultural activity. The WEF is therefore particularly interested in those areas where history, economics and environment converge. Such a juncture is provided by a project aimed at the discovery and restoration of the many Maroon ruins and caves around the island, which would not only create new and more interesting tourist attractions, but would also greatly enhance public appreciation of the island's history and heritage which would impact on the effort of nation building as well as of environmental conservation.

But perhaps the most significant project along these themes is the advocacy and promotion of the gradual transformation of the island's agriculture from its present reliance on artificial chemicals and poisons to a wholly or mostly organic culture. Organic agriculture would not only be the single greatest environmental conservation measure, but would also provide the basis for the revival and recovery of the island's agricultural economy. By these means we hope to contribute to the creation of a happier, healthier and more humane society within one of the most wonderful natural environments available anywhere in the modern world in the 21st century.

Membership to the WEF is open to Dominicans and friends of Dominica at home and abroad on subscription both to the finances and philosophy of the Foundation. For more information contact Bernard Wiltshire at the address below:

***C/o P.O.Box 673, Roseau, Commonwealth of Dominica, Eastern Caribbean
Tel: (767) 448 0346; 446 0129; email: bernardwiltshire@cwdom.dm***

Bernard Wiltshire

President of WEF and former Attorney General of the Commonwealth of Dominica.