

“Nature-based tourism as a way to strengthen biodiversity conservation and provide a sustainable alternative income for the residents of the Cockpit Country, Jamaica.”

Port of Spain, 28 June 2023 – Extending over 500 square miles in Jamaica’s heartland, Cockpit Country is home to the country’s largest limestone rainforest. It provides habitat for more than a hundred endemic plant and animal species. Cockpit Country is also the source of six major rivers that supply approximately 40% of Western Jamaica’s water needs, serving communities in Montego Bay, Windsor, Falmouth and beyond. The biodiversity within the unique Karst landscape of the Cockpit Country Forest also provides sustainable alternative livelihood opportunities through income generated from developing eco-friendly attractions and hosting guests.

Despite being officially declared a protected area in November 2017, the Cockpit Country is still facing major threats that range from bauxite mining and subsequent pollution of groundwater supplies to habitat degradation due to agriculture and development for short-term economic gain. One Cockpit Country-based organisation is trying to counter these threats by demonstrating just how communities within the Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) can derive economic benefits from keeping this very distinctive area intact.



Cockpit Country Hillocks. © Stanford Mitchell/STEA

The Southern Trelawny Environmental Agency (STEA) is currently implementing a one-year CEPF-funded project, “Using Nature-Based Tourism to Strengthen Biodiversity Conservation in the Cockpit Country”, which aims to strengthen its eco-and community-based tourism programme that operates as part of STEA’s social enterprise, Cockpit Country Adventure Tours (CCAT).

This innovative model promotes managed exploration of the Cockpit Country landscape, led and curated by members of Cockpit Country communities. Visitors are encouraged to see, experience and appreciate the unique ecology and biodiversity of the area without negative effects on the environment. In return, the community residents benefit from the income generated from hosting guests. For them to play their hosting and guiding role well, they are encouraged to learn about the biodiversity and species richness of the area so they can share their knowledge with visitors, even as they build their own appreciation for the Cockpit Country and its unique features.



STEA Team exploring and assessing a potential attraction and guests visiting one of the newly identified attractions.
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To date, eleven potential nature-based attractions have been identified in the three Cockpit Country communities targeted by the project, namely Sawyers, Bunkers Hill and Madras/Gibraltar. In addition, the STEA team has identified, tested and received positive reviews from visitors to attractions in two other Cockpit Country communities: Carambie and Bamboo Spring. This will allow for the expansion of the STEA/CCAT model to a total of five new communities.

The CEPF-funded project is not only identifying additional community-based ecotourism sites and attractions but is also helping to build awareness in these communities about the value of the Cockpit Country's biodiversity and how it can be used sustainably and conserved through training and information-sharing sessions and targeted publications.

The training programme was initiated in late April 2023 in the Bunkers Hill community with the assessment of local sites, locating important species and analysing their sensitivity to human use of the area, then employing and conveying strategies and best practices for protection and conservation.

"This training programme focuses on how to incorporate these sites into STEA/CCAT's ecotourism programme and achieve conservation of species richness and alternative livelihood benefits at these Cockpit Country community sites sustainably," said Hugh Dixon, STEA's executive director.

Sessions are ongoing and will be extended to the other targeted communities in the next few months.

For further information, please contact: Hugh Dixon, STEA Executive Director – info@stea.net

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