

***Antiguan women scientists championing locally led conservation***

**Port of Spain, 28 June 2024** – “Growing up, people weren’t telling us to be marine ecologists; people weren’t telling us to go out and study the environment”, recalls Johnella Bradshaw of the Environmental Awareness Group (EAG) in Antigua and Barbuda. Instead, Johnella and her peers were encouraged to pursue careers in law and medicine. But once Johnella discovered her passion for the environment, she realised the importance of conservation. “We understand why people were pushing those career paths our way, but we survive on this earth, on our island, and if we are not protecting it, who else is going to do that job?”

***Leading the way: Young women at the forefront of conservation efforts in Antigua and Barbuda***

*Shanna Challenger and Johnella Bradshaw.*  
Credit: Sherrel Charles/EAG

Johnella is one of the young women scientists in Antigua and Barbuda doing that job at EAG and leading conservation actions in two of Antigua and Barbuda’s Key Biodiversity Areas along with her childhood friend, Shanna Challenger. Friends since they met in primary school in 2000, they seemed destined to be colleagues. Initially, Johnella aspired to be a psychiatrist, while Shanna was on track to become a medical doctor. However, today, Johnella is the Redonda Ecosystem Reserve Coordinator, and Shanna is the Offshore Islands Conservation Programme (OICP) Coordinator. Both play key roles in the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF)-supported project, “Accelerating Locally Led Conservation Action in Antigua and Barbuda,” running from May 2023 to April 2026.

Established in 1989, the EAG has been at the forefront of conservation work in Antigua and Barbuda, and it is the country’s oldest environmental non-governmental organisation. From restoring offshore islands and saving species from extinction to education, community engagement, and influencing environmental policy, the EAG works collaboratively to bring about environmental change in Antigua and Barbuda. Core to the EAG’s work is an aspiration to have “a society with individual and collective responsibility to care for and value biodiversity and ecosystems for the long-term benefit of people and wildlife”.

The CEPF-funded project is supporting conservation planning in the North East Marine Management Area and Redonda KBAs and strengthening conservation management for critically endangered species like the Antiguan Racer, Redonda Ground Lizard, and Redonda Anole, taking into account the impact of climate change on these species. The project also supports biosecurity monitoring for invasive alien species, building on work funded by CEPF during its first investment in the Caribbean Islands Hotspot between 2010 and 2016.

One of the first major activities of the project was a census of the Antiguan Racer. Once a top predator throughout Antigua and Barbuda, the population of this endemic snake dwindled after the introduction of Asian mongooses in the 1890s and other human pressures. Declared extinct in the

1930s, a few individuals survived on Great Bird Island, a small cay in the NEMMA that remained mongoose-free. In 1995, when only 50 individuals were found in the wild, the Antiguan Racer was called the 'world's rarest snake'.

Although the population has since rebounded thanks to the conservation efforts of the EAG and partners, periodic censuses are needed to provide information about population trends, distribution, effectiveness of conservation efforts, and the impact of human threats. The data from the census is informing a long-term conservation action plan. The EAG has bolstered its technical capacity through longstanding partnerships with many international organisations. However, for the young scientists involved in the project, the ability to now take the lead is a source of pride. "Having this work locally led, not having somebody come in and write this for us but doing it ourselves and doing it in a collaborative manner is important," says Johnella.



*Antiguan Racer Census. July 2023.*

*Credit: Sherrel Charles/EAG*

### ***Integrating citizen science into local action***

Locally led action extends beyond the EAG's technical staff to include a network of volunteers that is a vehicle for citizen science and community collaboration within the NEMMA. Citizen participation in the recent Antiguan race census is one example of how this is put into action. With support from CEPF, EAG will strengthen its volunteer programme and formalise it as the Offshore Islands Guardians Programme, which will include structured, certified training that builds competencies that will allow non-scientists to make a meaningful contribution to EAG's technical work. Beyond monitoring and community awareness, the programme is also about developing the next generation of local conservationists.

### ***Catalysing conservation efforts with CEPF support***

"Every time I look at the CEPF project name, and I see 'accelerating local conservation action'", says Shanna, "I think yes, that is exactly what we are doing. CEPF is helping EAG achieve strategic objectives, including filling critical personnel gaps and implementing early management actions in Redonda, a recently declared protected area. "We've been going along and making inroads," notes Shanna, "but this feels like we have been able to fill up our tank, put the pedal to the metal and go full steam ahead. We will be able to achieve a lot of the things we want to do from a programme and organisational standpoint."

The impact of the CEPF-funded work on EAG goes beyond finances. It has prompted a more deliberate focus on gender and youth inclusivity, ensuring activities are accessible to all. Johnella and Shanna are excited to be at EAG at this juncture and to be able to contribute to their country and community as young female conservationists. "We are so happy about what we have been able to do and that it will be amplified by this CEPF-funded project," says Shanna.



*Wildlife Monitoring Team, Redonda. Credit: Lawson Lewis/EAG*

### ***Shaping a new generation of Caribbean conservationists***

Both Johnella and Shanna agree that exposure and representation matter. They wish they had been exposed to conservation and its career opportunities earlier. Shanna was studying biology and chemistry at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, when a course on the diversity of life hooked her. Fieldwork sealed the deal, and she left the "doctor track." Johnella's epiphany came in sixth form at Antigua State College when she took an environmental science course to avoid chemistry. She realised her desire to help people could be channelled through conservation. Shanna now holds a master's in conservation biology, and Johnella has a master's in sustainability studies and environmental management. The duo is encouraged by the recent involvement of sixth form students in the Antiguan racer census, believing hands-on experience is crucial in showcasing conservation as a viable career path. CEPF support is helping EAG to expand its work in this area.

When asked what advice they would have for other young women considering careers in conservation, the friends agree it is important to take advantage of internships and volunteer opportunities to explore what is a vast field and find a mentor who can offer guidance. "Try everything," says Shanna. "If you don't try everything, you won't know what you might gravitate to. Your passion may be plants; it may be marine. Get as much exposure as you can until you find your niche."

"Don't limit yourself, don't doubt yourself," says Johnella. "There are many ways to contribute to conservation, not just as scientists; we need writers, photographers, data analysts, accountants. If this is something you want to do, chase after it!"

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