

PANORAMIC: Asa Wright Centre nestled in the flower and fauna of the Northern Range.

COZY PLACE: A journalist takes a photo of the cabins along the trail.

Save Asa Wright Centre... Our 'global treasure'

A TWO-PART REPORT BY MARK MEREDITH—Part I

THE news that the Asa Wright Nature Centre (AWNC) is to close has drawn a chorus of shock and dismay from nature tour companies across the globe, which regard such a situation as an unmitigated disaster.

Regarded as iconic, legendary and one of the finest places in the world to see birds, AWNC is also the glue that holds the rest of Trinidad and Tobago's nature tourism business together.

Asa Wright's demise will be felt far outside the Arima Valley.

But, behind the scenes, a hornet's nest of recrimination is tearing at the fabric of our venerable and much-loved institution.

Why did it need to close and how can it be saved?

Do you remember the impact Asa Wright had on you the first time you visited? How, after driving through tropical forest on the hilly, winding Arima to Blanchisseuse road, you suddenly came upon paradise? Right here in T&T?

Maybe you recall the walk along the polished wooden floorboards of the elegant old estate house past paintings and photographs of birds, the estate and its royal visitors?

And when you reached that famous veranda and looked out, were you, like me, transfixed by the astonishing spectacle before you? How a flurry of colour whirled around right there, just in front of you, so close you could almost touch?

Hummingbirds in rainbow colours, so many shapes and sizes; tanagers, honeycreepers, bananaquits and others dazzling in their plumage, putting on a scintillating show for you.

Remember how the wonder didn't stop there? On the pathways below, golden tegu lizards as long as your arm prowled for fruit scraps, like miniature dinosaurs. While out in front of you the rainforest tumbled down the valley in a green haze of a hundred hues, the nests of crested oropendola swaying lazily in the breeze, Ornate Hawk-eagles soaring, and everywhere a myriad species flitting busily about.

There are, according to the Asa Wright Nature Centre (AWNC), 166



DOWN THE LANE: Media personnel walk along the trail at the Asa Wright Centre. —Photos: ROBERT TAYLOR

bird species to be seen in its 1,500 acre grounds, as well as many visiting species, bringing numbers that can be viewed to over 200 species. Added to that are the attractions of the many bird trails, the clanging of the forest's loudest resident, the bearded bellbird, and the cave dwelling oilbirds, the most accessible colony in the world.

The sheer concentration of birds and sense of exhilaration draw international tourists here from across the globe. That is why AWNC's closure has come like a hammer blow to international and local tour operators.

The primary booking agent for Asa Wright for the past 40 years has been Caligo Ventures based in Arizona. It acts as AWNC's exclusive booking agent for North America. In a typical year it sends 1,000 high-spending tourists to Asa Wright.

"The centre is truly a global treasure. We tell people it is the best place on the planet to learn tropical birding," said director Peg Abbott.

"Every major tour company in the UK and USA brings tours almost every year to Trinidad and Tobago. The AWNC is the anchor of that stay. It certainly puts Trinidad and Tobago on the map for aspiring naturalists, photographers, and birders."

Calling AWNC's closure "deeply shocking", Caligo, like other operators, will offer alternatives to a closed-down Asa Wright, said Abbott.

"Our clients will also simply choose other destinations, of which there are many. They will take Trinidad off the

list, and something else will slide in. So a portion of our business will simply go elsewhere, and that is sad for Trinidad and Tobago, but a boon to other locations. Without the Asa Wright Nature Centre, Trinidad risks losing its strong global position with that audience."

American Bill Murphy, an entomologist and Smithsonian Institute member, has led 94 birding tours to AWNC over 40 years, bringing over 2,000 high-spending guests to T&T. When he heard about the closure, he posted on Facebook that he wept. He regaled me with stories of his love of Asa Wright and how it evolved from simple beginnings to what he regards as the finest ecolodge he knows today.

"I have stayed at a dozen ecolodges in Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana and Panama. While each of them offers some of the attributes that birders desire—safety, cleanliness, comfort, plentiful safe food, and of course a lot of birds—no other ecolodge comes close to Asa Wright in hitting home runs in every aspect.

"With so many potential destinations throughout the world, why have more than 2,000 people chosen to join my tours to Trinidad and Tobago? Only one reason—Asa Wright. I have yet to meet anyone who has returned from a visit to Asa Wright and said, 'It was okay'. Instead they return as evangelists intent on persuading all of their friends to hop on the next flight to Piarco."

Murphy is devastated for the staff

at AWNC who, he says, are one of the best reasons for visiting. "I worry greatly about the tremendous negative impact these firings will have on the entire Arima Valley. About 90 per cent of the staff live within a few miles of the Centre. Many of them have spouses and children, and they based their lives and financial futures on their jobs at the Centre.

"Anyone can tell that these workers—the receptionists, drivers, trail guides, kitchen staff, house cleaners and ground crews—love their jobs and love the place itself."

Vaughan Ashby of Birdfinders, a UK-based company, said: "From the perspective of nature lovers and, in particular, birdwatchers, it is a disaster." He said it was a blow to the T&T economy as nature tourism was significant, as was the loss of associated jobs that would follow from AWNC's closure.

Megan Crewe of Texas-based Field Guides said she had led 18 tours to AWNC, bringing some 180 people to T&T. "In international birding circles, AWNC truly ranks as one of the legendary destinations."

She emphasised the importance AWNC had on other aspects of the local tourism economy. "The lodge brings hundreds—maybe thousands—of birders a year to the islands. Those birders spend thousands of dollars each—and not only at Asa Wright. We rent vehicles. We stay at other hotels on the islands. Our groups also spend two nights on Tobago and a final night near the Piarco airport. We eat at restaurants. We hire local guides. We rent boots before walking Tobago's Gilpin Trace. We take boat trips to Caroni Swamp and Little Tobago. The list goes on."

Dale Dunlop from Canada, who leads Maritime Explorer tours, fell in love, like his wife, with Asa Wright, Trinidad and its people. He said: "This is terrible news. The AWNC is one of the top ten birding destinations on earth and one that every birder aspires to visit one day. With the rapid development of a vaccine it would be very short-sighted on the Government's part not to see it through."

Chris Lotz of UK-based Birding Ec-

otours said: "I think Trinidad and Tobago have now lost their most famous attraction to birders and nature lovers, and a great many of these people will simply go to competing countries such as Costa Rica, Panama, Jamaica, Cuba, etc, and just forget Trinidad and Tobago now that the prime lodge has gone. "We were just about to re-add Trinidad and Tobago to our repertoire, but won't now. It won't be the same without Asa Wright. It no longer has that edge, so we won't market it any more. We have plenty of other destinations to market. It's horribly sad for the people of T&T."

"For the sake of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, I would really hope that the Government would make a way—for their people."

Similar sentiments came from Rockjumper Worldwide Birding Adventures in South Africa. Asa Wright was on MD Keith Valentine's bucket list: "Seems as though that may never happen now," he said. "Very sad indeed as it feels like it is not only Trinidad and Tobago that is losing one of its most well-known birding locations but the entire world...a reputation like theirs doesn't happen without good reason." Lisa Sorenson, executive director of BirdsCaribbean in Boston was devastated to hear the news. "We were planning to hold our next international conference in Trinidad and include pre- and post-conference day and multi-day field trips to Asa Wright," she said.

Currently the buildings and 1,500-acre grounds are being manned by a skeleton staff of 12, which include five security guards and a trainee.

In a recent TV interview, AWNC chair Dr Judith Gobin said the centre was looking at a "new business model" and mentioned that "there were some lands that we may consider for sale". I put it to her: "I'm sure any reduction in the conservation estate would have a very negative impact on the wildlife of the area? After all, we know how developments in Trinidad go—with very little thought for the surrounding environment."

She replied: "I assure you the board and trustees are very well aware of your concern, which is also ours."