

Enabling the effective conservation and management of natural resources and within Montserrat's Centre Hills



Montserrat Centre Hills Project

Centre Hills and the wildlife of Montserrat: finding a way forward

Since 1995, major volcanic activity has destroyed much of Montserrat's natural environment. Today, the Centre Hills are home to the largest intact area of forest remaining on Montserrat. It is the last viable enclave for most of the island's wildlife, including those of global conservation concern such as the critically threatened Montserrat oriole, galliwasp lizard, 'mountain chicken' frog and an endemic orchid. The Centre Hills also provide essential environmental goods and services to the people of Montserrat. They contain the main water catchments on the island and provide protection from soil erosion, landslides and flooding during severe weather events.

Problems

The Centre Hills are under increasing threat as the island's infrastructure is rebuilt in the north. The reduction in available land is placing increasing pressure on Montserratians to convert previously natural areas for agriculture and housing. Additionally, the overharvesting of some species; presence of invasive species (eg rats and pigs); soil erosion; and poor condition of trails and access points to natural areas have contributed to habitat fragmentation, habitat degradation and declines in

Students enjoy a tour round the Botanic Gardens



populations of some threatened species. Tourism and development in general can also threaten the environment if not carried out in a sustainable manner.

The Centre Hills Project activities relate to six main areas of work.

An assessment of socioeconomic values of land use within the Centre Hills will advise policy makers about these critical factors. The primary socioeconomic uses of the Centre Hills at present are tourism and agriculture, and many visitors to Montserrat spend at least some time walking on the trails within the Centre Hills. Upgrades to the trail system will improve the recreational amenities that the island offers guests and residents alike. Dozens of farmers reap crops from the rich soil in lower elevations, and almost everyone enjoys the abundant seasonal fruit crops that the lush rivers and ghauts provide. A small amount of hunting occurs in the area, including the culling of invasive pigs that are encroaching from the volcano exclusion zone to the south. Seeds and other materials are collected for local crafts. An assessment of the socioeconomic values of land use within the Centre Hills will advise policy-makers about these critical factors.

Coconuts and other fruits are a prized treat



Review and revision of environmental legislation is being conducted, as environmental legislation in Montserrat is outdated and does not reflect recent research findings nor the obligations of regional and international environmental agreements. Stakeholders involved in extensive consultation will be able to provide information and feedback as to how laws and policies can be improved, and improved environmental legislation will be developed that is modern, relevant, and enforceable.

An outreach programme targets diverse audiences, including politicians, teachers, students, farmers, tourists and the general public. Knowledge, attitudes and behaviour relating to the natural environment will be enhanced, resulting in more environmentally literate and responsible citizens.

An extensive assessment of biological resources complements data collected for years by the Montserrat Forestry Department and associated scientific partners. Research has included work with the Montserrat oriole, 'mountain chicken' frog, birds, reptiles, amphibians, plants, bats and insects. Information about threatened species and habitats is critical in determining where human activities have the most negative impact.

There are many natural features to visit



Photos: Front cover – CHP

Produced by the RSPB, the BirdLife partner in the UK.

Registered charity no 207076

940-0143-06-07

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Additional research and support is provided by:
 GIS Centre, Physical Planning Unit
 Montana State University
 South Dakota State University
 Governor's Office



The project is funded by the Darwin Initiative, and is a collaboration between seven partner organisations, including:

Ecological research into relevant aspects of how the forest functions is another important area of the project. Understanding forest hydrology is one area of interest, another is in measuring the impact of invasive species on wildlife. In particular, rats are suspected of having a major effect on tree regeneration and the breeding capacity of certain species. Understanding these interactions is a critical part of the planning process.

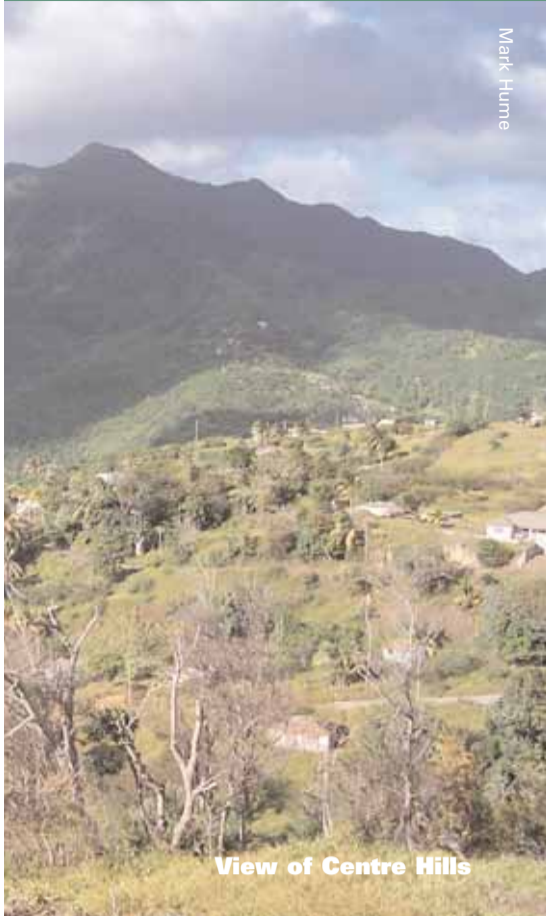
Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), the project is able to illustrate features and characteristics of the Centre Hills in a way that greatly assists in planning. Being able to combine maps of land use, land ownership, physical features and biological resources of the area can help to identify areas of potential conflict between humans and the natural environment. Data collected and integrated into the national GIS system will have many uses both within the project and in the wider community.

The integrated approach to conservation and natural resource management involves all levels of society, from political leaders and technical experts, to those working in the Centre Hills to the general public. In this way, the interests of both wildlife and people will be considered and included in an effective management strategy.



Andrew McRobb (RBG Kew)

Protect the unique flora and fauna of Montserrat's Centre Hills!



Mark Hume

View of Centre Hills



Andrew McRobb (RBG Kew)

Epidendrum montserratense, endemic orchid



Jurgen and Christina Sohns (FLPA)

Golden oriole



Mark Hume

Montserrat anole



Mark Hume

Mountain chicken



Chris Bowden

Heliconia



CHP

Galliwasp