

Refuge ecologist visits the Bahamas

by Ed Berg

The idea of a trip to the Bahamas came to my wife Sara as we laid plans for a January visit to Florida to celebrate my father's 100th birthday. A roundtrip ticket for the 45-minute flight from Miami to Nassau costs a modest \$160. We have often gone to Central America from Miami at this time of year but not so cheaply.

After the birthday celebration—and a trip to Disney World with our 6-year-old granddaughter—we landed on the 21-mile long island of New Providence which is mostly occupied by the old pirate and slave trading city of Nassau, capital of the Bahamas. Most of the 700 islands (40 are inhabited) of the Bahamas are remote and still more or less pristine. Nassau however is undergoing intense tourism development that would make even a coastal Floridian gasp with amazement.

We saw several huge cruise ships docking each day, disgorging hundreds of fellow tourists to explore the old town center and drop some small change in the duty-free diamond shops and casinos. Many of the tourists head for the huge Atlantis hotel complex on Paradise Island, across the harbor from Nassau. This 2317-room hotel was built at a cost of more than \$850 million, and houses a large aquarium, water park, and 50,000 sq. ft. of slot machines, roulette tables and black jack tables.

The beaches of Nassau are considered some of the most beautiful in the world, with miles of white sand and extremely clear blue water, under intense sunny skies. For a day of premium snorkeling we went to nearby Rose Island, a popular retreat for both locals and visitors. The beautiful island so far has very little development, but we were saddened to learn that it has been recently bought for another mega-hotel.

One highlight of our visit was an afternoon tour with local naturalist Carolyn Wardle. She came from England with her accountant husband in 1964 and has witnessed the radical transformation of the formerly slow-paced island. Most of the changes have occurred since the Bahamian government opened the island for foreign investment in the early 1990s with a variety of tax-free incentives for developers.

The new builders planted many exotic ornamen-

tal shrubs and trees, some of which have escaped and become quite invasive. Tall wispy Australian Pines (*Casuarina*, which has segmented needles like a horse-tail and is not a true pine) line the roadways but can grow like dog hair on beaches and wetlands. Fast growing *Melaleuca* trees, Brazilian pepper (*Schinus*), and white inkberry (*Scaevola*) shrubs are also found in great numbers, probably all originating from people's lawns and gardens.

Carolyn Wardle and other local conservationists are trying to get some old military land set aside as a nature preserve for native plants and wildlife, but just last week bulldozers lopped off an extra 200 feet along one side for a government housing project.

The Bahamas were a British colony up to 1973, so English is the official language. The population is 85% black, and we found everyone very friendly and helpful. We managed to get a room in the only low-cost guest house on the island (\$50/night) run by a delightful elderly Greek couple. We took our daily restaurant meal in the evening, but rarely got fed for less than a \$40 bill. The Bahamas are definitely not in the budget travel class like Central America.

I always ask the locals about climate change; is "global warming" a reality for them? In the southeastern U.S. people don't perceive the already hot climate getting any hotter, but they certainly talk about increased storm activity. Our favorite waitress Cherry (in her 50s) came from an outlying island. She said that for most of her life the weather had always been warm and sunny, with few storms. In recent years however the weather has "gone crazy;" she described how her sister's house was flooded in a storm surge and the family had to swim to higher ground.

Nassau showed little visible evidence of hurricanes; we saw no elevated buildings along the coast, no blown down trees, nor evacuation route signs. A check of the Nassau weather record showed that hurricanes brushed the island in 1992, 1999, 2001, and 2004. Hurricane Betsy in 1965 damaged Nassau with 126 mph winds, and hurricanes brushed the island in 1966 and 1979.

I typically associate underdevelopment with Third World countries. With tourism we now have the pos-

sibility of “overdevelopment” in countries like the Bahamas. This is a new variation on the “one crop economy” or “banana republic” theme. Tourism can provide lots of jobs, but the facilities infrastructure (hotels, condos, roads, harbors and docks, etc.) can destroy the natural environment in far more irreparable way than mono-crop agriculture ever did. The Bahamas vividly demonstrate that international tourism industry has amassed vast capital resources that can build mega-hotel complexes in any tourist-worthy part of the world. There are some very tourist-worthy

spots in coastal Alaska, and I hope that future Alaskans will consider carefully the consequences of accepting such development, regardless of how many jobs it might bring.

Ed Berg has been the ecologist at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1993. Ed will teach his one-credit course on Global Climate Change at the Kenai Peninsula College in Soldotna and Homer, beginning Feb 27 and Mar 1, respectively. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.