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Community involvement in marine national park planning in Abaco

[Abaco, The Bahamas] (March 28, 2014) *The draft management plan for the Abaco Marine Parks managed by The Bahamas National Trust is currently undergoing review and comments are being sought from local community members.*

Prepared in 2012, the draft management plan covers Pelican Cays Land & Sea Park, Black Sound Cay National Reserve, Walker's Cay National Park and Fowl Cays National Park. The plan is notable as it is the first time that the Bahamas National Trust has embarked on including multiple parks in one management plan.

"Although each park is unique in its own way, and they are distributed widely across the Abaco cays, all are managed by the Bahamas National Trust. By considering them together we hope to bring clear and effective management to the parks as a system," explains Parks Planner Lakeshia Anderson.

"We're currently establishing the long-range vision for the overall management of the parks, which means thinking about the coming 5 to 10 years. This helps us in prioritizing management activities and in seeking necessary support to promote conservation and to ensure the sustainable use of marine resources".

"Involving the communities is a vitally important step in this work. We want to identify the current users of the parks and wish to encourage them to participate in the planning process. We hope to build agreement about the path ahead to ensure a solid foundation for future management activities," she added.

The management planning team, consisting of representatives from The Bahamas National Trust, Friends of The Environment, and The Department of Marine Resources, recently met to discuss the management objectives of the plan, and the collaboration across agencies to facilitate effective management.

According to Mr. David Knowles, Director of Parks for the Bahamas National Trust, "Some 30 community representatives and local agencies came together in Abaco to take part in a series of meetings. Amongst them were local residents, fishers, officers from the Department of Marine Resources, Port Department staff, and Ministry of Tourism representatives."

"We touched on many issues during these meetings," he commented. "We are pleased to give local communities an opportunity to review the draft management plan and to help shape future management activities."

The Bahamas National Trust is now incorporating the input received into the updated draft management plan. The draft management plan will be made available for public comments for a 30 – 45 day period, before being finalized.

The review of the management plan is made possible with support from NOAA's Coral Reef Conservation Program and the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute (GCFI), as part of their assistance to Marine Protected Areas in the Caribbean to help build local capacity for effective management. The Trust expresses its gratitude to all individuals and groups who are participating in the review process, and is committed to working along with the Abaco communities to advance national park management objectives

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Elkhorn coral in Pelican Cays Land and Sea Park, The Bahamas (Photo: Z. Khan)