

Bonaire August 2011 The Party is Over OP is OP!

Many of us have been witness to the never-ending flow of trucks that perpetually drive around the island loaded with stone or soil. Quite often, these vehicles are overloaded and seldom covered resulting in a hazardous trail of sand, soil and cement on our roads. In addition, the overloading of vehicles beyond their maximum gross laden weight damages the road surface, over-stresses the vehicle structure, causes instability & affects the stopping distance.

Recently, a tourist knocked on my door to tell me that a stone had been thrown up from the truck he was driving behind. The stone was hurled at such velocity that it smashed his windscreen & just missed his wife and child who were in the back seat. Despite the fact that the truck driver witnessed the incident through his rear view mirror, he did not stop to assist the tourist or to see if anyone was injured.

These are the everyday things that are witnessed by locals & tourists alike as they drive around Bonaire. What is not quite so obvious to the casual observer are the massive holes that are appearing all over the island. Huge craters can be found on farm land & throughout the countryside of Bonaire. In addition over the last 9-10 years, the coastline that includes historical sites such as Boca Onima has been systematically stripped of the stones which could have told so much of the islands history.

Some three years ago, Forum Antilles made a film called "Destruction for Construction". The film was viewed by some 860 people on You Tube and was sent to all the members of Government. It highlighted the long term effect of bad land management & the impact that this aggressive excavation would have on the island without taking into consideration the inevitable effects on our fragile eco-systems. However, the problem did not start three years ago! For the last two decades Bonaire has struggled to deal with the effects of increased tourism, the growth of road traffic and the construction industry that has grown much faster than most of the islands population could have imagined. Resorts grew and new ones appeared seemingly overnight. The golden belt that was Bonaire's coast line reached global recognition. "One of the last pristine islands in the Caribbean" or even the world!

The small population that inhabited the island in those early days is for me, what represents the core society today. Much like the islands landscape, they also have been dragged, pitched and tossed into this modern day crisis that was born from the absolute lack of understanding of the consequences of the actions taken by their Government in order to secure a safe financial future for the island. The governments total misunderstanding of the islands environment and its eco-systems that had sustained the people of Bonaire for hundreds of years, coupled with the eagerness to join the modern world and not be left behind, make these the main ingredients of a soup that could and has turned bad.

Now it would be unfair to blame the people or their Government as the colourful history of the Netherlands Antilles has many other factors that played a roll. The pressure of the former federal Government, the lack of development funds that came from the latter, and last but not least, the Dutch Government that "in my opinion" could have done a lot more to help. The statute of the Netherlands Antilles gave provision for "Higher supervision". However, this was only used in terms of finance and financial distribution and was mostly implemented towards St Maarten and the federal Government without any great benefit to Bonaire. Long term history aside, most of the damage, again "in my opinion" took place from the end of 1999 till 2010. In this short decade, massive changes came about that would put the islands safe future into question. It is worth noting at this point that some good things also came from this time of massive change. Bonaire harbours some of the strongest environmentalist's in the world, many of whom love this island and in some cases has given their lives and will continue to do so to the sustainability of this last bastion of eco richness. I think it also fair to say that many of the island residents having seen the great losses incurred in the name of progress and are also ready to take a different approach to the islands future.

10/10/10! This was the magic number that made many of us believe the future would be safe. Safe in the hands of the Dutch with our new status as part of the Netherlands. THE BES ISLAND DEAL WOULD SAVE US ALL! Unfortunately that was not the case and we now find ourselves once again relying on our own island Government to find a solution to the current financial and environmental crisis, a crisis by the way that could have been avoided had we not put the word "Financial" in front of the word "Environmental" without considering what the latter could "sustainably" provide.

Ok enough background info; let's get to the here and now! Recently the island council called a halt to stone quarrying and strip mining for building materials, this resulted in a protest by the truck drivers and the near complete stop of our construction industry. Now the situation has to be resolved.

Robby Beurkenboom and Michiel Bijkerk would be the main voices to be heard from the island council formed of a coalition that now represents the island people. To use a boxing analogy, you could say:.... "In the Red corner" (the Reds being the Demokrats) & 'In the "White corner" (the party for justice), the struggle would commence. Meetings were held and pressures were felt and what I feel are knee jerk reactions were announced by both sides. As I said earlier some good things did come from the last ten years and one of them was the "Nature Ordinance" or "Master plan" that would give guide lines to the development of Bonaire to ensure the future sustainability of both the community and the environment.

Knee Jerk! What came from the white corner can only be described as such, as Michiel endeavoured to introduce an emergency act that would allow the Government to circumvent any laws that stood in the way of the islands financial development. Needless to say there was a little more to it than just that. Provision would be made to compensate for nature lost either with money, (how much can you pay for a hole in the ground that will never produce anything again)? Or replacing trees where they were pulled down, palm trees were the suggested option. What a joke!

With an equally flippant hand it is suggested in this emergency act that the island council be given a free-hand for the next three years to do as they see fit with regards to the environment in order to achieve "the financial growth needed". This would bring a solution for all! The fact is the only people that would benefit from this would be the construction companies. Using the leverage of the people working in the industry "The party for Justice" would try and bully the emergency act through and with one stroke of the pen, throw away all of the efforts made to protect this island from those investors that are interested only in short term profits & do not have the best interest of the islands long term future in mind.

In the Red corner, under much pressure, Robby rushed to come up with some kind of compromise that would protect both the people's income and the environment, and with a similar knee Jerk reaction, came up with areas of land that could still stand further excavation. Albeit with the best of intentions, neither side had asked the questions; What is the ceiling on this? When will it stop? How long can we carry on like this and what damage will it do to the long term future of the island?

So now we stand betwixt the Devil and the deep blue sea. It is unlikely that Michiel will get his emergency act through, (thank whatever God you believe in) but it is also unlikely that a perfect solution can be found in Robby's proposal as the only environmental body that has been bought in to comment is the department DROBE, who in Robby's own words; 'gave no more than a quick scout around the proposed areas not with a view to sustainability but to the availability of the raw materials needed to carry on with the construction'.

I urge the Government to undertake an impact study on any proposed area before permission is granted, be it long term or short! In addition, more than one environmental body should be asked

for its opinion and assessment of the consequences of on-going extraction. This much is owed, not only to the island, but to its people & its forefathers who, for centuries were supported by this island's delicate nature and could be supported for the generations to come.

Realizing the gravity of the situation and the pressure that Robby was now under. I arranged a meeting with him and I must say I was relieved to hear what he had to say.

My first question was why Bolivia and Roi Lamunchi? Robby was quick to point out that these were not to be considered long term options. Robby is a man of the island and spends much of his time in the country. His family goes back many generations here on Bonaire. During his time on Bonaire, Robby worked as truck driver. One of his early memories was when spear fishing was outlawed, something he readily admits back then made him angry. He looks up and smiles. 'Now', he said 'I understand why, but in those days we did not know what we were doing, it was just a way of life'. He continued; 'Now, people do not realize what we are doing with the land'. 'I must consider the people who now can't work but also the future generations to come'. Robby agreed with me that we have to take a closer look before we jump.

In my opinion if Mr Bijkerk really had the best interests of the people at heart, he would have first tried to get some kind of payment for the people who now can't work. Some kind of short term social benefit is needed instead of pushing people into a corner to achieve his own objectives. The island is not only made up of truck drivers and construction workers.