

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations proclaimed May 22 The International Day for Biological Diversity (IDB) to increase understanding and awareness of biodiversity issues. The International Day for Biological Diversity was observed on Monday, May 22, 2017 with the theme; 'Biodiversity and Sustainable Tourism'. Sustainable Tourism is defined as "an industry committed to making a low impact on the environment and local culture, while helping to generate future employment for local people." ¹ According to the Barbados Tourism Investment Inc., Barbados welcomes approximately 1 million visitors annually, generating over 50% of the country's foreign exchange. Funds from tourism provide in some instances funding for conservation and provides local people with an economic incentive to protect biodiversity.

In the spirit of the theme for the year, the activity chosen was a tour of Harrison's Cave which reflected Barbados' vital ecosystems that are an important foundation for tourism. Harrison's Cave is considered one of the Seven Wonders of Barbados and is a popular tourist attraction, giving visitors to the island an opportunity to view the cave's natural ecosystem while generating foreign exchange for the country.

As has become the custom, public awareness and education activities were planned for four primary schools: Wesley Hall Infants School, Ellerton Primary School, St. Bartholomew Primary School and St. Christopher Primary School. The tours were conducted at Harrison's Cave during the period Tuesday 23, May to Friday 26 May, 2017.

On each day of tours, students were separated into groups and taken on guided tours through Harrison's Cave. St. Christopher's Primary attended the tours on May 23; Wesley Hall Infants attended tours on May 24; St. Bartholomew Primary on May 25; and finally; Ellerton Primary attended on May 26.



Picture 1: Image of the "Great Hall" at Harrison's Cave ²

ACTIVITIES



Picture 2: Students of the Wesley Hall Infants accompanied by their teachers observing the displays at Harrison's Cave

Visit to Harrison's Cave



Picture 3: Students of St. Christopher's Primary lined up to enter the Visitor's Centre to enter the cave

Harrison's Cave is a naturally occurring underground cave situated at 700ft above sea level. It consists of stalactites hanging from the roof of the cave, and stalagmites that emerge from the ground, with streams of crystal-clear running water that drop from waterfalls to form deep emerald pools. Visitors are driven in electrically operated trams down through the extensive system of caves and at the lowest level point in the cave. Visitors are also invited to leave the tram and walk alongside a spectacular waterfall which plunges into a deep pool below.

Before the start of the tour, the students were given a brief introduction on Biodiversity and its importance as it relates to sustainable tourism. The students then entered the Visitor's Centre where they self-toured the various rock formations that would be found in the cave and pictures of the Speleologists who explored the caves. The students were then taken to view a short film on the formation of Harrison's Cave over thousands of years ago as well as some of the formations that they would see during the tour. At the end of the film, the students boarded the trams and began to travel through the cave. The tour guide explained the history of Harrison's Cave, its discovery in 1795 and its re-discovery in 1974 by Speleologist Dr. Oke Sorenson from Denmark and Barbadian Mr. Tony Mason. After 1974, the Government of Barbados began to develop Harrison's Cave as an attraction for tourists and locals by excavating shafts and tunnels that could accommodate trams. The cave was then opened to the public in 1981.

As the students travelled further into the cave, they entered an area known as "The Great Hall", measuring over 50ft in height with a freshwater stream as well as stalactites and stalagmites. The students were given the opportunity to disembark from the tram and explore the area within the Great Hall. After their visit to The Great Hall, the tram travelled onto the next area known as "The Village". Within this area, there are stalagmites and formations joined together to form columns over thousands of years.

As the tour continued deeper into the cave system, the students observed the freshwater streams including the thick layers of mud that proved dangerous for the first explorers going through the cave. Another area the tram stopped at that allowed the students to disembark from the tram was the "Rotundra". This area contained a large underground stream where persons trek through on the eco-adventure tour to explore some of the cave's natural passages. When the students returned to the trams, it was at that point that the tour guide allowed the students to experience what the cave would look like without artificial lighting. When the lights were turned back on, the tram began its journey back to the surface. On the way back to the surface, the tram stopped at an area known as "The Altar". This is a small group of stalagmites of which two of the larger ones resemble a man down on his knee proposing to a woman.



Picture 4: Students of the St. Christopher's Primary boarding the tram to enter into Harrison's Cave



Picture 5: Students of the St. Christopher's Primary School standing next to the underground stream within the area known as the "Rotundra".



Picture 6: "The Altar." It is said the left stalagmite is the woman, and the right stalagmite is a man on his knee proposing.



Picture 7: Students of the Wesley Hall Infants interacting with each other during the lunch break

Upon completion of the tours, the students enjoyed lunch on the grounds at Harrison's Cave and were allowed to enjoy the facility under the supervision of their teachers. The total number of students that attended the tours was 243.

References

- 1 *Wikipedia; Sustainable Tourism.*
- 2 *Viator Inc. USA; Best of Barbados Tour.*