

The Editor
The Anguillian Newspaper
Stoney Ground
Anguilla

Dear Sir,

“Responsible Development”

Over the past year there has been a lot of loose chatter about environmental agencies hindering or slowing up the process of development in Anguilla. In recent months, there have been more talk about why an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is necessary and the unwarranted burden or cost to potential developers in requesting an EIA. Therefore, by way of this letter I would like to highlight the importance of an EIA and to appeal to the powers that be not to see EIAs as a hindrance to development but rather as a useful process aimed at ensuring that we protect the livelihoods and well-being of all of the people residing in Anguilla.

An Environmental Impact Assessment is a management tool that has been around since the 1970s. It is an assessment of the potential positive or negative impacts that a proposed development or project may have on the environment. A widespread misconception of an EIA is that it only addresses the natural environment (i.e. birds, trees, fish, coral reefs, sea grass, etc.). However, this could not be further from the truth. In an EIA, the term environment is used to encompass both the natural and man-made environment. That is, it also encompasses the social and economic aspects of the society. The EIA process is useful in supplying decision-makers with an indication of the likely consequences of their actions. It ensures that decision-makers consider the potential negative environmental (to include socio-economic) impacts when deciding whether to proceed with a project.

What is now being argued in some circles in Anguilla is no different to what happened in America when the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 was being debated. In the beginning there was widespread opposition to EIAs; however, the people later realized that the purpose of the EIA was to improve and protect their lives and so it was accepted. They soon realized that with an EIA all of the potential negative impacts of a development could be identified and mitigated against during the planning stage of a project. With an EIA there is a win-win situation for all. Modifications are made in the planning stage to ensure that any damage to the natural environment is reduced and that the health and livelihoods of vulnerable groups in a society are not negatively affected. In essence, a proper EIA process should lead to the abandonment of actions that would negatively impact the environment greatly and to the acceptance of projects where the negative environmental impacts are at acceptable levels. The purpose of the EIA is not to stop development but rather to ensure responsible development.

In Anguilla, it is important that people realize that the Department of Fisheries and Marine Resources and other agencies responsible for environmental protection are not against development. Everyone working at these agencies is fully aware of the importance of tourism and tourism-related development. We recognise that tourism and tourism-related development are what feed and clothe our children. However, we are also equally aware that if done incorrectly this development can destroy the livelihoods and threaten the health of many Anguillians; as well as expose our beaches and properties to the damaging effects of high waves, due to the loss of our first line of defense, our coral reefs.

As Anguillians, we should become more aware that all life on this planet is interconnected. It is important to realize that in a natural setting when we die our bodies decompose and return to dust. During the decomposition stage our body becomes food for a number of bacteria and microbes which form the basis of a micro-food chain. Our decomposed body provides nutrients from which plants grow. All life on this planet is a connection of recycled energy. Energy passes from the sun to the plants and up through the animal food chain (which includes humans) and when we die the energy is recycled in the form of nutrients being passed on to other organisms. When animals breathe they take in oxygen and pass out carbon dioxide and when plants photosynthesize they take in carbon dioxide and give out oxygen. Therefore, from this, one can see that there is a symbiotic relationship between animals (which include humans) and plants; they both need each other to survive. We must become aware that a healthy environment not only provides us with the air we breathe but also with the food we eat and the medicines we use. Coral reefs, for example, not only provide us with food in the form of fish and other organisms, they are also the source of our white sand beaches which we use to attract tourists to our island. As mentioned earlier, coral reefs are also the first line of defense in protecting our white sand beaches and the multi-million dollar properties that line our shores.

In speaking to those persons in influential positions who continue to question the need for an EIA or who moan about the additional expense to developers, I say accept the EIA process and see it for what it is: an invaluable tool to protect the health of the natural environment and the health and livelihoods of persons living in Anguilla from the negative impacts of a proposed development. The cost of an EIA is often less than the cost of the various architectural drawings of a proposed development and is often no more than 0.1 to 1 percent of the entire cost of the project. Many of the developers coming to our shores have been involved in development projects all around America (and possibly the world) and are fully aware of the importance of and need for an EIA. In fact many developers in the US have built considerable lead-times into their project planning to accommodate the EIA process. Therefore, any developer that comes to our shores and complains about the need for an EIA should be treated as either a first-time developer, willful, or a speculator.

In closing, I call on all Anguillians to get involved in the planning or development process and to demand that an EIA remains an integral part of our planning process. The EIA process gives the public a chance to participate in the development of their country. In addition to demanding an EIA, persons should make it their business to ask for and read all EIA reports (even if only the Executive Summary) and to attend all public meetings held to discuss a particular project. There will always be negative and positive impacts resulting from any development and it is important that all of the potential negative impacts are addressed before the ground-breaking ceremony. It is the duty of any elected government to embark on the responsible development of our island and the EIA process is an invaluable tool that should never be side-stepped at the expense of irreparable damage to the health and livelihoods of present and future generations on Anguillians.

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