

Statement in the Legislative Assembly

by the Honourable Charles E. Clifford, JP

Minister of Tourism, Environment, Investment and Commerce

18 January 2008

Proposed Amendments to the Wildlife Interaction Zones

Madam Speaker, as Minister with constitutional responsibility for Tourism and Environment I rise to address this Honourable House with regards to the establishment of the Wildlife Interaction Zones in the North Sound.

Honourable Members will recall that in December of 2006, the Legislative Assembly passed amendments to the Marine Conservation Law in order to provide a framework for the regulation of water sports activities involving the interaction of divers and snorkellers with marine life.

In March of 2007, Regulations to this Law were passed by Cabinet however, prior to the passage of these Regulations, consultations were held with Members of the Opposition and several amendments were made based upon their input.

Madam Speaker, Stingray City and the Sandbar are two of our most visited tourism attractions and it is critical that we manage these areas in a way that ensures their viability in the long-term. With this goal in mind, the Regulations designated these two areas as Wildlife Interaction Zones under the Marine Parks Regulations in order to address three main areas:

- (i) protection of the rays through controlling the way that people interact with them,
- (ii) protection of the reefs and natural environment in and around the designated zones and
- (iii) the licensing of tourist boats entering the areas.

The enforcement of the Wildlife Interaction Zones came into effect in June 2007.

As we continue to employ more sustainable practices in the management of our Tourism product, we have found the implementation of the Wildlife Interaction Zones to have struck a healthy balance between our Tourism related obligations to improve the management, safety, and overall experience of visitors to the North Sound and our Environmental obligations to protect and relieve human induced stress on some of the unique marine life such as stingrays and coral reefs within the Zones.

Furthermore, the creation of the Wildlife Interaction Zones is a testament of what can be accomplished by broad consultation. The matter of instituting better controls on these activities, particularly at the popular Sandbar Stingray City location, had been under

consideration for a number of years by a stakeholder group comprising representatives from the water sports industry, the Marine Conservation Board, the Land and Sea Cooperative and the Department of Environment. This group formulated recommendations to better manage activities at the Sandbar and deep Stingray City sites which have now been incorporated into Regulations that are currently in place.

However, as is sometimes the case with new regulations and policies and despite comprehensive consultation, once in operation new issues may arise. In this case, stakeholders have identified a few incidental matters and have brought these to the attention of this Ministry.

The present coordinates of the Wild Life Interaction Zone which encompasses the Sand Bar and Coral Gardens has inadvertently included a conch bed traditionally used by local fishermen and tour operators during the open season. Because of the wording of the regulation, conch cannot be taken in this area. Among other things, the Regulations prohibit the removal of a stingray or any other marine life from the water and prohibit fishing or the taking of any form of marine life by any means.

Therefore, since this matter has come to my attention, we will seek to consult with the original stakeholder group and if necessary the Opposition in order to seek a possible re-configuration of the coordinates to the south of this zone that would still protect the Sand Bar and Coral Gardens, while allowing fishermen to access a portion of the conch beds in this area.

It has also been brought to the Ministry's attention that visitors in the Wild Life Interaction Zones sometimes stand up on the coral heads, while swimming and snorkelling in the area. We must discourage this practice and will seek to amend the Regulations in order to make this illegal and enforceable by our Marine Enforcement Officers.

Finally, there are wide concerns about allowing waverunners and other small personal watercraft operated by inexperienced drivers into the Wildlife Interaction Zones. During the original consultation with the stakeholder group, the licensing of guided tour groups on waverunners and other small personal watercraft to enter the WIZ was not envisioned. Therefore, we will fully consider the matter and communicate a decision shortly.

Madam Speaker, these three specific matters may all be addressed by Cabinet as they are part of the Marine Conservation (Marine Parks) (Amendment) Regulations, 2007.

Given the importance of the Wildlife Interaction Zones to our tourism product I am satisfied that, this limited review of the Regulations is warranted. Once the recommendations are brought before Cabinet, and the requisite changes are approved, I will make a further public statement.

Thank You.