

'We'd be crackers to harm environment'

■ By NEIL HARTNELL
Tribune Business Editor

SAN Salvador residents yesterday expressed concerns about the impact a potential resort development may have on the island's eco-sensitive Pigeon Creek area, saying efforts to obtain information on the proposed project have met with a wall of silence from various government agencies.

Jermaine Johnson, proprietor of Lagoon Tours (Bahamas), which takes tourists on eco-tours and diving trips in the Pigeon Creek area, said "85 per cent of our ecosystem depends" on it, being an important area for bird nesting and fish breeding.

Mr Johnson, who is vice-president of the San Salvador Living Jewels Foundation, a group dedicated to preserving the island's culture and heritage, said islanders had resubmitted to the new FNM government a proposal to turn the Pigeon Creek area into a National Park administered by the National Trust, having not received any reply to a similar proposal sent to the previous Christie administration.

Potential San Salvador investor reassures over plans for resort development at Pigeon Creek, regarded as island's 'most ecologically sensitive area' responsible for 85% of ecosystem

"Our greatest fear is that these developers will come in here and start tearing down, and even if they stop we've still lost," Mr Johnson said.

"Nothing is being said. There have been no Town Meetings. Nothing has been submitted to the Local Government. I'm calling the government agencies in Nassau and they're not telling me anything."

However, an investor in the company that has acquired 550 acres at Pigeon Creek and is planning the resort development, yesterday told The Tribune that the developers were especially sensitive to the environmental aspects of any development.

John Mittens said the devel-

opers had not applied for any government permits or approvals, as they were still planning the layout of their project, which will include a small, boutique hotel, spa, low-density residential component, and small, non-commercial marina that would be for resort clients only.

The project would target high-end, upscale clients, and not include "hundreds and hundreds of homes" as that would be "totally inappropriate".

"We're looking at land planning at the moment, and when we think there is something that looks good and is sensitive to the environment, we will go to the Government and ask them for their views," Mr Mittens

said, "then start the long journey that includes all the approvals and the BEST Commission."

Mr Mittens is the main shareholder behind Montana Holdings, the company behind the \$700 million Rum Cay Resort Marina project on Rum Cay. Yet he said yesterday that Montana Holdings and Rum Cay was a totally separate venture from the Rum Cay project.

"What development does go forward at Pigeon Creek will be hugely sensitive to the environment," Mr Mittens added. "You'd have to be crackers to smash the environment."

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"The fact is that Pigeon Creek is a very sensitive area, and quite possibly will be made into a National Trust area. That's the beauty of the place, and we would be moronic to damage in any way that beautiful area."

"You can reassure people on San Salvador through my comments that we will be as sensitive as possible. The creek is an absolute joy. It is full of marine life. We'd be crackers to destroy it or harm it in any way."

Mr Johnson said persons associated with the project had been regularly visiting San Salvador over the past three weeks, and on one occasion had sought to hire one of his boats and some of his guides to show them around Pigeon Creek.

He added that some four miles of mangroves in Pigeon Creek had been bulldozed, an allegation emphatically rejected by Mr Mittens as "absolutely not true".

He added that anyone claiming to have seen mangroves cut down must have seen "a mirage", although the developers had cut some pathways and taken cars to the site to provide surveyors with access.

Mr Johnson questioned whether there was a need for another major resort development on San Salvador, which already has Club Med, with most of the 1200-strong island's working population already gainfully employed.

Yet Mr Mittens told The Tri-

bune yesterday: "Whenever I go over there, I meet people saying: 'Please start, please start'. If you fly to San Salvador and ask people whether they're happy with Club Med, every time people ask us when we're going to start."

Mr Johnson said he was not against further investment in San Salvador, but said the island needed niche, boutique resorts that matched the island's infrastructure and population size.

He pointed out that San Salvador had already carved out its market niche through Club Med and its history, being the first place Christopher Columbus had landed at in his epic voyage across the Atlantic.

"Eighty-five per cent of our ecosystem, birds and fish, depend on this area," Mr Johnson said of Pigeon Creek. "It's the only tidal body of water on the island. It provides all our fisheries, all our conchs."

"Our ecosystem is self-sustaining. It's not like Andros or Exuma which get replenished by the Tongue of the Ocean currents. If our groupers go, there's no more groupers. It's the most ecologically sensitive area in San Salvador."

Pottery Classes

New Providence Community Centre

Blake Road

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Starting Saturday, 13 October

Wednesday, 17 October