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## Reef defenders in Bahamas sue over mega-resort

### S.F. developer sees Baker's Bay as model for sensitive construction on fragile islands

Teresa Castle, Chronicle Foreign Service  
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**(02-13) 04:00 PDT Guana Cay, The Bahamas** -- The calm, turquoise waters off this sleepy island have long lured visitors seeking shelter from storms, but a San Francisco development company's ambitious plan to build a gated community for well-heeled golfers and yacht owners has set off a full-scale revolt that flies in the face of the government's plans to build mega-resorts on many of the country's most pristine islands.

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"They'll come with their poodles with pedicures, and they'll expect us to jump," said Troy Albury, who runs a scuba diving operation on **Guana Cay**, one of the Out Islands that form a coral-fringed strand about 200 miles east of Florida.

But his real concern is what the development might mean for the lush coral reef offshore. Albury heads the Save **Guana Cay** Reef Association, which has taken the unprecedented step of suing Bahamian Prime Minister Perry Christie for leasing more than 100 acres of crown land, without the approval of the local government, to help the Discovery Land Company build Baker's Bay Golf and Ocean Club. The

Supreme Court begins hearing the case today.

Discovery Land says the 595-acre, \$500 million resort -- with 400-plus homes, a village with shops, boutiques and an inn, a yacht club and an 18-hole golf course created by noted designer Tom Fazio -- will be a model for environmentally sensitive development on small islands elsewhere. The company prides itself on respecting the land in its 12 other golf course developments, including CordeValle in Santa Clara County.

Albury and other critics, including several marine scientists, say that fertilizer needed to keep the golf course green will wreak havoc on the fragile reef and that a 180-slip marina developers plan to carve out of a mangrove wetland in the middle of the 6-mile-long island will irreparably alter the sensitive local ecology.

"If they ruin the reef, no one will come here," said Chorene Wilson, manager of Sunset Beach Bar and Grill in the picturesque village of pastel-colored cottages that line Kidd's Cove, named for the infamous pirate who frequented these waters in the 17th century.

Glenn Laing, **Guana Cay's** representative on the district council, summed up the

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opposition's fears: "The land will be raped and they'll move on."

The 250 or so islanders are a fiercely independent lot, and they've been bruised before by developers. Disney's Big Red Boat cruise ship anchored off the island for five years, and the operators dredged a channel, damaging a portion of the reef before abandoning the project in 1993. Discovery Land cleaned up the site, which is within its proposed development. That earned it the support of some **Guana Cay** residents.

"In the long run, it's going to probably benefit the locals," said Donna Sands, who rents golf carts visitors use to tool around the small island. "They're going to offer jobs if the people want it."

Anyway, she added, "they're gonna do it whether (the islanders) want it or not. That's what government does."

Aubrey Clarke, who came to **Guana Cay** from Nassau in the 1980s and hasn't donned a pair of shoes since, rejects that view. He signed on as the lead plaintiff in the lawsuit. "This is going to test the laws," he said from his customary stool at Nippers, an open-air bar overlooking the reef. "We've got to have environmental laws."

That's not an idle longing. The Bahamas' first comprehensive environmental protection plan was drafted only last year, and the country is still writing laws to carry out the plan. Meanwhile, the government has forged ahead with proposals to anchor luxury mega-resorts on each of the country's major island chains.

The ruckus on **Guana Cay** has begun to attract international attention. Michele Perrault, international vice president of the Sierra Club, has expressed concern that the government overlooked potential environmental problems in its rush to approve the project.

The developers appear to be surprised and somewhat perturbed by the vociferous opposition to their plans.

"There are people who will just make mischief out of anything," said Livingston Marshall, who holds a doctorate in marine science from the College of William and Mary in Richmond, Va., as he steered a golf cart down Torchwood Lane, newly cut through dense stands of mangrove, toward the site of the marina.

Marshall was the chief environmental adviser to the prime minister until he was hired away to oversee environmental and community relations for Discovery Land.

He pointed out that the company, which paid \$25 million for the 485 acres of private land and plans to sink \$175 million into developing it in the next few years, has incorporated all kinds of environmental safeguards in its plan. It has promised to seed the golf course with a special kind of grass that can live on salty water and to add an impervious layer beneath tees and greens in sensitive areas to prevent fertilizer and insecticides from leaching out to the coral reef.

In response to community concerns, he said, it set aside more than 70 acres as a mangrove preserve. It plans to operate its marina to the highest standard for controlling pollutants, and before bulldozers started clearing land for roads, rare orchids and bromeliads were harvested for transplanting after the resort takes shape.

But several marine experts say the company's plans fail to provide adequate protection for the reef, home to giant brain corals up to 200 years old, sea fans and sponges, and for the shoreline, which provides nesting grounds for endangered green sea turtles and threatened loggerhead turtles.

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After looking over the project's environmental impact assessment, James Risk, a marine biologist hired by the islanders who has more than 40 years of experience monitoring coral reefs, said "the result would be the death of the reef within three years."

Coral reefs thrive in nutrient-starved ecosystems, said James Cervino, a specialist in reef biology who teaches at Columbia and Pace universities.

He had just returned from a diving expedition to check the health of the corals.




Because the island's soil is porous limestone, he said, 40 to 60 percent of the fertilizer spread on the golf course will drain right through it, feeding algae that can smother coral. He added that the reef is already struggling to fight off the effects of recent ocean-warming episodes, and adding nitrogen from fertilizer would be "a double whammy, a perfect recipe for death."

Kathleen Sullivan Sealey, a specialist in coral reef fish who wrote the Baker's Bay environmental assessment, doubts that the consequences will be so severe. She has been retained by Baker's Bay to monitor the construction. Along with a handful of Earthwatch volunteers, she plans to keep a close eye on near-shore corals, because they will serve as an early warning system of any dangerous levels of pollution on the reef.

Sealey, a University of Miami professor and dean of science and technology at the College of the Bahamas, has led a team monitoring the Bahamas coastline via satellite for four years. The Baker's Bay project, she said, can serve as "an experiment in sustainability for small island developments."

However, many islanders say they have no desire to be part of an experiment. Albury said that the last time he saw Sealey, he told her: "I hope you don't monitor the reef till it's dead."

*This article appeared on page A - 4 of the San Francisco Chronicle*

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