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Development model branded 'fool's paradise'

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THE Bahamas is pursuing "unsustainable" economic growth and "an outdated model of development that enriches large foreign investors with no real long-term concern about the future of the Bahamas", an environmental expert has warned.

Thomas Goreau, president of the Global Coral Reef Alliance, in a February 10, 2007, paper written after he surveyed the coral reefs and mangroves at Guana Cay, urged the Government "to promptly enact and enforce environmental laws to protect the nation's natural resources".

Although his assessment was done on behalf of the Save Guana Cay Reef Association,

which is attempting to stop the \$175 million Baker's Bay Golf & Ocean Club project, Dr Goreau said he was not paid and gave his time voluntarily.

Calling for the Baker's Bay development, being led by San Francisco-based Discovery Land Company, to "be stopped immediately", Dr Goreau said developments like it and others in locations such as Bimini had the potential to create "severe long-term costs to the Bahamian environment and people". He based his thoughts on a series of dives at coral reefs near the Baker's Bay development on February 9, 2007.

His conclusions will automatically be opposed by Discovery Land Company, which has repeatedly said the golf course would be designed so that any fertilizer and nutrient

run-off would be directed back into the island, rather than towards the sea and the coral reefs.

The company will also mount a defence of its environmental track record, notably the clean-up efforts at the former Disney site and the removal of all native vegetation, trees and species out of the path of roads and infrastructure development.

Many investors coming into the Bahamas repeatedly insist they will do nothing to harm the environment that first attracted them to these shores, and Discovery Land Company will also point to the more than 100 jobs its project has created - albeit mostly on mainland Abaco, as opposed to Guana Cay, which has full employment.

But Dr Goreau added of the development plan the Govern-

ment was following, with its emphasis on a so-called 'anchor property' for every island: "It is typical of an outdated model of development that enriches foreign investors with no real long-term concerns about the future of the Bahamas, and will provide mainly low-paying jobs for Haitian immigrants.

"In sharp contrast, Guana Cay is a model for small-scale, locally-owned tourism, which creates a completely different ambience that more tourists prefer, causes far less environmental damage, and in the long run is more economically beneficial to the Bahamian economy....."

"The Bahamas needs sound economic development that

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protects its environmental resources, but this is a classic case of the sorts of developments that have been allowed to cause untold damage in the past, and should no longer be permitted."

Dr Goreau warned that climate change would exacerbate the environmental damage from poorly thought-out and regulated development, adding: "Much stronger environmental

laws and oversight are urgently needed, because the Bahamas has permitted developments whose environmental costs have neither been recognised nor compensated for, and the accelerating pressures of global climate change make continuation of such policies a fool's paradise of profiting today and ignoring all the consequences that will strike tomorrow."

Dr Goreau added: "It is astonishing that the Bahamas is one of the few countries in the world with no real laws to

protect the environment, especially the coral reefs and mangroves that are so crucial to it.

"For years long-term divers in the Bahamas have been telling me how fast the reefs are disappearing. In fact, the damage is now so extensive that even saving and strictly protecting all remaining habitat in good condition will not be enough."

"Large-scale restoration of damaged coral reefs and mangroves will be needed if the country is to maintain its shore protection from rising sea levels, its fisheries and its ecotourism value. A long-term sustainable environmental policy that is enforced is the badly-needed first step."

Dr Goreau further warned that the Bahamas was "racing down the same unsustainable track which has destroyed the reefs of Florida." He added: "Tragically, the Florida developers and sewage injectors are now bringing their methods to the Bahamas, which is even more vulnerable. South Floridians have a whole continent they can move to when the rising seas drown south Florida, but Bahamians do not have this option and must protect what they have."

The Bahamas, Dr Goreau warned, was the most vulnerable country in the Atlantic to global warming and global sea level rise. Meanwhile, the Save Guana

Cay Reef Association is opposing applications by Baker's Bay to the Hope Town District Council, seeking six permits for projects ranging from \$600,000 to \$1.6 million for buildings at Great Guana Cay. These applications were heard last night.

The Association's attorney, Fred Smith, said in a letter to the Council: "Our clients have vigorously complained that throughout this process they have not been provided with an opportunity for proper consultation and participation as stakeholders in the decision-making process of any central and/or local government person or agency having responsibility for consideration of applications."

"Central to our clients' complaints is the fact that our clients consider that it is the local government's authority, specifically the district council, which has the duty and responsibility under the Local Government Act to consider the many different applications which will need to be made under the Local Government Act. Apparently, many applications have somehow been made directly to central government agencies in Nassau thus bypassing the local district council."

"In addition, apparently in between the recent elections of new members to the district council, the administrator to the Council apparently issued certain permits."