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Saint Lucia Receives International Guidance on Restoring Forests and Ecosystems

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The Forest and Ecosystem Restoration Initiative (FERI) in collaboration with the Department of Sustainable Development and the Forest and Land Resources Management Division within the Department of Agriculture hosted a Regional Workshop on Forest Ecosystem Restoration in Saint Lucia from 9th to 13th March 2020. As an agency with responsibility for protecting among other things, Saint Lucia’s natural heritage which includes protected areas with forests ecosystems, an invitation was extended to the Saint Lucia National Trust (SLNT). One such area in which the SLNT has recently been integrally involved in restoring along with partner agencies such as the Forest and Land Resources Management Division, is the Ma Kôté Mangrove forest within the Pointe Sable Environmental Protection Area (PSEPA).

Forests and ecosystems form a large part of the natural heritage of many countries worldwide, including Saint Lucia and many of our sister isles. Although there has been a slowing in the rate of net deforestation worldwide, ecosystems have undergone significant degradation which has adversely affected global biodiversity and related livelihoods. Material presented at the workshop highlighted that conserving the existing natural areas alone would not be sufficient to halt and reverse the biodiversity loss observed and as such restoration of ecosystems was deemed necessary. Ecological restoration was defined by presenters as “the process of managing or assisting the recovery of an
ecosystem that has been degraded, damaged or destroyed as a means of sustaining ecosystem resilience and conserving biodiversity”.

Ecological restoration requires global effort and assistance from multiple partners and stakeholders. FERI is one such initiative which is implemented by the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) with financial assistance from the Korea Forest Service of the Republic of Korea. It provides assistance to developing country Parties of the CBD to advance and achieve national targets and plans for ecosystem conservation and restoration under the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity (2011-2020) and its Aichi Biodiversity Targets. The targets which are more directly supported by the FERI interventions are targets 5, 14 and 15 which in summary deal with, inter alia, reduction in the loss of all natural habitats, including forests; restoring and safeguarding ecosystems that provide essential services, including services related to water, and contribute to health, livelihoods and well-being; and enhancing ecosystem resilience and the contribution of biodiversity to carbon stocks.

One presenter mentioned that the lack of global ecosystem-related data has made it difficult for countries to set informed national targets and to measure progress towards the Aichi targets. Participants were therefore introduced to ecological parameters that would determine the type of information required to measure progress and thus assist with setting specific measurable, agreed, realistic, time-bound (SMART) targets. One of the tools also introduced to improve ecosystem restoration was the Short-Term Action Plan on Ecosystem Restoration (STAPER).

In many instances, the benefits of ecosystem restoration to ecological, social and economic sustainability far exceed the costs associated with ecosystem restoration. However, these benefits are often overlooked and therefore not taken into consideration when making policy decisions that affect areas with forests and ecosystems. The Economics of Ecosystem Restoration (TEER) initiative and its objects were introduced as one of the approaches to ecosystem valuation to help
decision-makers gain a better appreciation of the benefits provided by ecosystems and biodiversity in economic terms.

Saint Lucia’s forest and ecosystem guardians are now better equipped not just to develop better plans for restoring forests and ecosystems but to also measure and monitor progress towards achieving the island’s restoration goals. Additionally, stakeholders have now been exposed to tools that can be used to ascribe economic values to ecosystems which would hopefully inform national decisions and policies to safeguard our island’s precious natural heritage found in its forests and ecosystems.