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## **Island dreams: human nature is the least predictable element in a battle for the last pristine ecosystem on Saint Croix**

Thomas McNamee

Conservation is supposed to be about conservation, right? Say you want to save the last untrammelled ecosystem on the island of Saint Croix, in the U.S. Virgin Islands. You've got an upland wilderness. You've got the island's last two really isolated and pristine beaches. You've got superlative coral reefs and sea-turtle nesting habitat. You've got research underway at a world-famous facility. You want to talk biodiversity, fisheries, beauty, and knowledge. Your plans probably do not include an eccentric countess, embezzled research funding, and the fury of a hurricane.

Hurricane Hugo came to Saint Croix late on September 17, 1989. Through the night, the wind blew at over 140 miles per hour (and probably harder, but Hugo broke all the anemometers). At the West Indies Laboratory of Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU), a marine research station at the eastern end of Saint Croix (the largest of the US. Virgin Islands), thirty-five students and twenty researchers huddled together in a dorm as the roofs flew out to sea and the boats at the station's docks splintered and sank.

The laboratory's director, Elizabeth Gladfelter--a compact marathon runner then forty-two years old, with a fierce, direct stare and the set of jaw that bespeaks iron determination--rallied her troops. Soon students, faculty, and staff were digging latrines, firing up barbecue grills to heat water, forming committees for every conceivable exigency, including entertainment. They made, remarkably, three hot meals a day and salvaged years of research data. Twenty-two of the twenty-eight who stayed to try to restore the laboratory came down with dengue fever--a mosquito-borne malady that makes you feel as though your every bone is broken and, accordingly, is known as "breakbone fever"--but they survived that too. Within a month, research schedules were back to normal.

Hugo left Saint Croix in ruins. Three-quarters of the island's houses had lost their roofs. There was no telephone service, no electricity. There was some looting, and much more rumor of it. Hardly a tree was left with a leaf or twig. Swarms of bees and wasps descended on a largely homeless populace. It took four months to restore power, even longer to get the phones working. Mainlanders (swindlers among them) arrived to cash in on the rebuilding. Local businesses shriveled. Tourism, the economy's heart, dwindled to almost nothing.

The West Indies Laboratory had been a paradise of a research facility, nestled in a mountain bowl of dry tropical forest and endowed with state-of-the-art equipment. Its flower-lined paths wound alongside coconut palms, gumbo-limbo trees, and tropical fruit trees. The sea, with its miles of coral reef, lay just across the road. The lab brought together undergraduates,

graduate students, conservationists, and researchers in many natural science disciplines from all over the world, including some of the leading lights of marine science. Before Hugo smashed it almost to pieces, the lab's research work had resulted in nearly 250 scientific publications.

The late Fairleigh Dickinson Jr. had helped found the lab in 1971 as a campus of FDU--whose board he chaired--setting it amid some 200 acres that he donated. Dickinson was a very rich man and a generous man, and no place was dearer to his philanthropic heart than Saint Croix, where he kept a house; he once owned much of the eastern tip of the island. In 1977 he donated a large parcel of it to the US. Virgin Islands to be preserved as a park. It encompassed mostly undeveloped beach with superb coral reefs just off-shore, and above it mountainsides of uninhabited tropical woodland.

Close by this parcel, on the south side of the island's eastern tip, are two isolated bays that epitomize the tranquillity, beauty, and biotic diversity that have been lost in much of the Caribbean. It's a long, hot walk through the thorn bush to Jack Bay and Isaac Bay, where and mountain-sides--although farmed, overgrazed, and altered in centuries past--have grown into a dense quilt of thorn scrub and cactus and littoral woodland: an undisturbed beach ecosystem. The bay areas are sensationally beautiful. So is the reef. Four-foot barracudas hover in the shallows of crystalline water between the surface and the crowded heads of elkhorn coral. Surges of red-eared sardines burst from shadow, and brown pelicans plunge into their midst. Rainbow-colored parrotfish gnaw at the coral and excrete it in cloudy plumes--the source of sand for the beach where leatherback, hawksbill, and green turtles come to lay their eggs. Here and there, the long-spined Caribbean sea urchin (*Diadema antillarum*) is making tentative moves toward recovery from its mysterious pan-Caribbean die-off fifteen years ago. This spiky and venomous creature was the principal grazer of algae on the coral reefs, and scientists speculate that the demise of great stretches of reef may have been caused by *Diadema's* disappearance, as ungrazed, rapidly growing algae choked the coral. Now, just as mysteriously, *Diadema* seems to be coming back at Jack and Isaac Bays and elsewhere around the island.

Coral reefs are both highly re-silient and highly vulnerable. Hugo bulldozed reef walls of elkhorn coral across the south shore of Saint Croix, sometimes scouring ten to twenty feet of sand out of the reef channels, but there was no detectable damage to the Jack and Isaac Bays' reef ecosystem. A hurricane to a reef is something like a fire to a forest: an agent of renewal. On the other hand, ordinary mud can choke a reef. Ten years ago, reefs offshore from a Saint Croix resort development called Carambola were trashed by the mud that washed down from its construction site.

The possibility of just such a sudden catastrophe is what had so many people on Saint Croix so upset back in 1986, when Dickinson sold the land he owned in the area surrounding Jack and Isaac Bays to CaribBank Financial Group LP, a real estate development company headed by Franklin Knobel. This was no minor parcel: it was the whole south side of the eastern tip, 301 acres all the way from the ridge line down to the sea, directly adjoining the land Dickinson had earlier given to the territory.

Knobel eventually floated a proposal for a huge resort there, and the local conservationists--led by the Saint Croix Environmental Association--set up a howl. A battle was in store. Then came Hugo.

Of the Dickinsons' own house, nothing was left but a concrete slab. There were many such slabs. For the island's 55,000 people, unemployment was horrendously high. Crime and other indexes of despair rose. The bottom dropped out of the real estate market. Franklin Knobel stopped making payments on the mortgage Dickinson had extended to him. As the months dragged on, Saint Croix seemed paralyzed in a sort of posttraumatic shock. And Jack and Isaac Bays remained pristine.

Meanwhile, the president of Fairleigh Dickinson University, Robert Donaldson, was impressed with the work Betsy Gladfelter and her students and staff had done after the hurricane; Donaldson had toured the lab shortly after Hugo struck. Gladfelter says that insurance company officials and the Federal Emergency Management Agency had assured her the lab was eligible for full replacement money--\$1.3 million. And Donaldson said his visit had convinced him that when the insurance money came through, the university must rebuild the West Indies Laboratory. But the university was in severe financial difficulty, and running the lab cost money. Some members of FDU's board of trustees saw Hugo's devastation of the lab as an opportunity: the insurance money could be used to pay off some of the university's debt.

When FDU sent its representatives to Saint Croix in February 1990, Gladfelter suspected that the university was thinking about shutting down the lab and pocketing the proceeds. Her faith in the executive branch of the university had already taken a battering because of events at Salt River, a deep bay on the north shore of Saint Croix. The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) operated a submarine research station called Aquarius there, and funds for Aquarius flowed through the office of Richard Touma, associate dean of the College of Science and Engineering at FDU. It turned out that some Aquarius funds had been embezzled. Gladfelter was not optimistic. The signs for the lab's future were grim.

On February 27, 1990, the planning and development committee of the FDU board of trustees decided, by a margin of one vote, to use the insurance proceeds "to rebuild [the lab] if the University does not need the funds for general University purposes of a higher priority." That decision was followed in April by the board's vote to suspend the coming academic year at the lab. The same spring, NOAA decided to relocate the Aquarius research station, effectively moving it out of the scandal-tainted control of the university and away from Saint Croix. (In February 1993, Touma would plead guilty to theft of federal funds and would receive three years' probation.)

Gladfelter continued to drum up letters of support from scientists worldwide, many of whom had worked at the lab. But on June 13, the FDU board voted to kill the West Indies Laboratory. Betsy Gladfelter simply refused to let it die. When Francis J. Mertz, who had been appointed the new president of FDU in May 1990, went down to take a look at the lab, Gladfelter begged him to keep it open at least for the rest of that summer; she would find an

angel somewhere. And Dickinson promised her that he would help fund the reborn lab. Then Gladfelter discovered that the Virgin Islands' plant-closing law required procedures--including giving the employees the first option to purchase--that FDU hadn't followed, so in September she and nine other staff members at the lab sued the university to keep the facility open. And she stormed up to FDU's home campus in Teaneck, New Jersey, to demand written assurance (which she never received)" that FDU would use the insurance proceeds for rebuilding the lab if she succeeded in forming a nonprofit corporation to run it.

On September 12, 1990, the Territorial Court of the Virgin Islands issued a temporary restraining order directing FDU to keep the lab open for three months with full pay for everyone on the staff, and ordering the plaintiffs to post a \$50,000 bond. (In the event that the case went against the staff, the bond would cover the university for possible lost revenue.) But the tide soon turned against the Gladfelter group; not satisfied with the manner in which the bond was posted, the judge vacated the restraining order. On November 30, Gladfelter and the rest of the staff received the following notice from the Office of Academic Affairs at FDU:

Effective immediately, the lab is  
  
permanently closed. Until further notice,  
  
there is to be no access to the facility, In  
  
case of emergency contact Mr. Farber. You  
  
will be contacted in due course about  
  
outstanding pay arrangements.

So who exactly was Mr. Farber? And how had he entered the picture? Well, it's complicated.

Nadia Farber, the contessa de Navarro, is the widow of Sid Farber, a Long Island, New York, industrialist (her title comes to her from a previous husband). The above-mentioned Yuri Farber is the industrialist's nephew. He and the contessa, sometimes reside in splendid isolation in Castle Aura, a vast and inexpressibly strange stucco and marble ersatz-Moorish castle designed by the contessa herself; it stands high on a crest, overlooking the West Indies Laboratory.

The contessa, who is of Bulgarian birth and international upbringing, is a small, ample, and graceful lady of a certain age, and she and her castle are the object of obsessive fascination on Saint Croix. Her wardrobe consists almost entirely of caftans and color-coordinated turbans. She wears iridescent sea-blue eye makeup that swirls around her cheekbones in serpentine filigree. She speaks ten languages. In the heat of the day she carries a white lace parasol. Gesturing theatrically with gem-crowded fingers, she calls her interlocutor "my darling." She is utterly charming.

Yuri Farber is as reserved as the contessa is flamboyant. A fortyish Czech, he is by all reports the entrepreneurial spirit of the contessa's expanding empire. He is guarded, polite. He has reason to be cautious; he is unpopular with some of the neighbors, as is the contessa.

This, in part, is why. By the late 1980s, Fairleigh Dickinson University had a declining enrollment (down by 38 percent in ten years) and a budget deficit reported to be \$24 million. Desperate for cash, the university, just a few months before the devastating hurricane, had sold the contessa approximately 125 acres of roadless forest land it owned in the area between the lab and the castle. At that time, the contessa also picked up the right of first refusal for a remaining 9.5 acres, including the West Indies Laboratory itself.

Then came Hugo, the lab shutdown, the lawsuit, the court order. The contessa saw her chance to complete her holdings, and FDU jumped. On September 11, 1990--one day before the issuance of the court order to keep the lab open for three months--the university installed a new property manager at the lab: Yuri Farber.

Betsy Gladfelter pleaded with the contessa not to go through, with her option to buy the lab property. Gladfelter also called the University of South Carolina, which has one of the best marine science programs anywhere. With amazing alacrity for an institution, USC offered to rescue and rebuild the lab. South Carolina's offer exceeded the contessa's bid, but FDU was already well along in its negotiation with her. In April 1991, the contessa signed a contract to purchase the lab and its remaining land for \$415,000. The contract included payment to Sid Farber's estates of \$10,000 a month for lab security and management until the university settled all outstanding matters (between it and the lab staff) and the deal could at last close. (The university and staff are prohibited from discussing details of their final settlement.) The contract also stipulated that the contessa would donate \$175,000 to FDU.

The contessa and Farber had a vision of their own for the property: Community Aura, a luxurious mountainside development, the design of whose houses would reflect the glory of the great Castle Aura towering above it. Some of the lab structures would be incorporated into the design; the rest would be demolished and replaced by a club for the citizens of Community Aura, with a swimming pool, tennis courts, dining room, "whatever my people wish," as the contessa put it. Soon, Yuri Farber's bulldozers were at work chewing in a network of roads.

Time in the islands passes in stumbling starts and sudden fits. Long periods of stasis are punctuated by irruptions of catastrophe--like Hugo, say, or like real estate developer Franklin Knobel's successively less outrageous but ever more hopeless proposals for Jack and Isaac Bays.

Franklin Knobel could have been sent from Central Casting: pacing back and forth in white pants, white shoes, and gold bracelet, sucking fiercely on a cigarette, preemptively angry, he endured hearing after hearing, filed plan after amended plan for the bays. The environmentalists howled, the hearings dragged on through the years, new conditions were attached to this or that permit, and Knobel would be back at the drawing board. Stasis, meanwhile engulfed Community Aura. The castle still stared down at the ruins of the West

Indies Laboratory, which the contessa still declined to sell. But along the new roads, not a single house rose.

In the meantime, Gladfelter and the University of South Carolina decided that the best place for a rebuilt lab was Cottongarden Point, a lovely peninsula on the land Dickinson had given to the Virgin Islands government. It was essentially wilderness except for one dirt road and a gigantic radio telescope, part of the Very Long Baseline Array, a system of ten telescopes that stretches from Hawaii to Saint Croix. To build there would require sharing jurisdiction with the University of the Virgin Islands--an agreement that took three years to forge--and approval by the US. Virgin Islands legislature. The University of South Carolina faced the prospect of a legal battle of its own, for many local environmentalists were appalled by the very idea.

However, the leading conservation group, the Saint Croix Environmental Association, decided not to oppose the Cottongarden proposal. USC promised that development of the lab site would be ultrasensitive and pointed out that having a major university committed to monitoring the ecosystems at the eastern tip of the island for the next hundred years ought to sound like a pretty good deal. If only Jack and Isaac Bays could be protected, the reborn West Indies Laboratory would preside over one of the world's great nature reserves. But developer Franklin Knobel still wanted to build around the bays.

In 1994, at long last, having filed his umpteenth amended proposal and declaring that the necessary funds were in place, Knobel got a permit to develop the land around Jack and Isaac Bays--new roads, million-dollar houses, jobs for islanders, twinkling lights, two nice beaches. But ten days later, Knobel declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy; his debt to Dickinson had reached \$3.4 million. (Chapter 11 bankruptcy allows a debtor to continue in business, with a court- and creditor-approved repayment plan).

The Nature Conservancy saw an opportunity for what would be its most magnificent Caribbean sanctuary. After two independent appraisals were conducted, the Conservancy offered to buy the Jack and Isaac Bays property from Knobel. He turned them down. Realizing that the property was likely to be returned to Fairleigh Dickinson Jr. (the mortgagor), the Conservancy also began discussions with him and his wife, Betty. Betty Dickinson recalls that she and her husband accepted an offer of appraised value; Carol Mayes, from the Conservancy's office on Saint Thomas, says that no formal offer was made. "It was a handshake deal," says Betty Dickinson, "a gentleman's agreement."

But with proceedings for the return of the deed from Knobel slowly working their way through federal court, stasis reigned at Jack and Isaac Bays once again. In 1996, Fairleigh Dickinson Jr. died. The court gave Knobel until June 1997 to redeem the mortgage. He did not do so, and at last the deed was returned to Dickinson's widow. Meanwhile, the Saint Croix real estate market had continued to decline; the Conservancy ordered an updated appraisal of the property. Mayes says that the Conservancy's strict policy is never to pay more than appraised value. As Betty Dickinson remembers it, the new appraisal came in lower, and the Conservancy lowered its offer by a million dollars. Outraged, Betty Dickinson declined. She is, she says, "still dickering with the Nature Conservancy," but doesn't really care if nothing

comes of that. The taxes are low, and she doesn't mind just holding on to the land indefinitely in its present unsullied condition. Is Betty Dickinson committed to seeing Jack and Isaac Bays preserved in-perpetuity? One senses that that is her wish, but she will not commit herself.

Islands concentrate and crystallize action that is diffuse and indistinct in the larger world. All this madness over one splendid little patch of real estate perched above an azure sea may not mean much in the great global scheme of things. But it embodies the real life of conservation worldwide, in which misunderstanding, moral pride, blind eccentricity, endless delays, and the limitless loquacity of the dollar can easily overwhelm the best-laid plans. We want to think of conservation as a matter of rational thought and rational action, when in fact the arcane, unpredictable, and just plain screwy caprices of human nature are many a time what determine the outcome on the ground.

Will the West Indies Laboratory be reborn? Well, that depends--among other things, on whether all goes well with the University of South Carolina's plan for Cottongarden Point; the university finally signed a lease for the site with the Virgin Islands government last year. Will Jack and Isaac Bays end up as a Nature Conservancy reserve or a flashy resort? Well, that depends--among other things, on whether the Conservancy can find its way back into Betty Dickinson's good graces. Are these processes so complex as to be beyond the influence of individuals? No. Jack and Isaac Bays would almost certainly be a subdivision today were it not for the Saint Croix Environmental Association. The West Indies Laboratory would be no more than ruins were it not for Betsy Gladfelter. The whole situation is impossibly complex, maddeningly unpredictable. But isn't there a certain strange beauty, too, in its irreducible humanness? Saint Croix is us.

Thomas McNamee is the author of *The Return of the Wolf to Yellowstone* and other book. He lives in San Francisco.

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