

Shootin' Pigeon & Ducks and Wild Hog Huntin': Traditional Lifestyles on Land & Sea



by Tracey Thompson

But for the cover, in the northern islands, of pine trees and, in the southern islands, of hardwood coppice and thorny bushes and cacti and wiry grasses, large areas of The Bahamas would be stony desert. Hard work, resourcefulness, and self-reliance mark the ways in which Bahamians traditionally have fed and sheltered themselves on this Land of Rocks.

FARMING & FOODWAYS

People on Mayaguana speak with quiet pride about how anything can grow there. As in the rest of the arc of islands, with cutlass and hoe and planting stick people cut down scrub bush, set fire to the fallen bush to singe it, pulled up the burned stumps, and, when rain came, planted, weeded, and reaped fields of Indian corn and guinea corn, bananas, pigeon peas, cane, pumpkin, beans, sweet potatoes, cassava, tomatoes, cabbages, onions, carrots, beets, and other crops, and then moved on to cut fresh fields after the soil tired. Some kept chick-

After making a hole in the shell, fishermen extract conch meat in one piece. The sea offers a bountiful supply of fish and seafood, which Bahamians depend on for food and economic survival.

Photo by Grace Turner

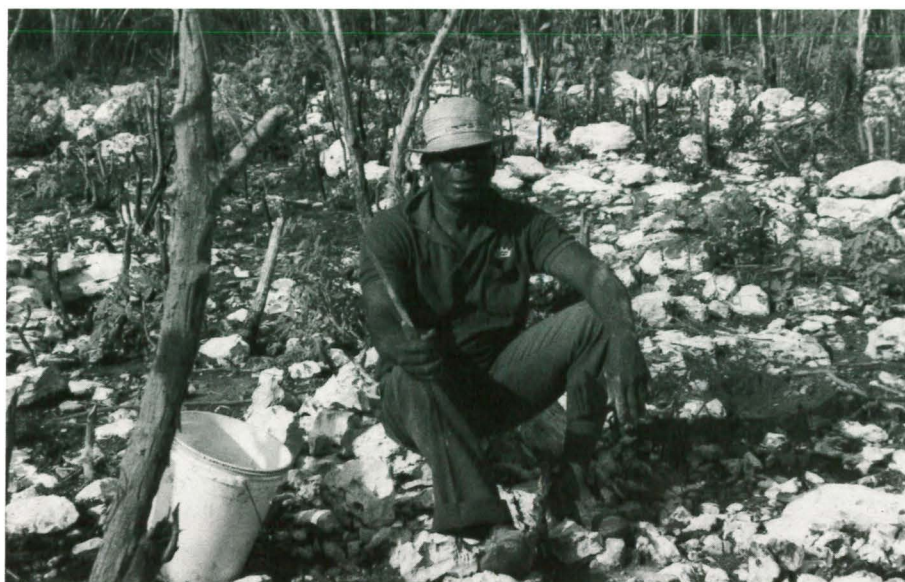
ens or goats or pigs penned or tethered in the yard, or knifed or shot wild hog or wild cows in the bush, or shot pigeon or duck. They dove for conch, and used homemade cotton nets or cotton lines to catch fish and turtles, too, and crabs which scampered everywhere. Some of their field produce and conchs and fish they exported to Nassau, buying in exchange goods such as flour, rice, detergent, and clothes. The other produce they kept, to use as seed for the next planting, to feed to livestock, and to eat. Over the fire fed with dry wood they roasted corn and baked bread and boiled crabs. To preserve fish and meat they “corned” it: sliced the flesh and salted it thoroughly, then hung it in the sun to dry. They dried their conch, unsalted, in the same way, again for eating on another day.

HARD TIMES

I heard a joke repeated in Inagua: that the mosquitoes were so large you heard their bones crack if you smashed them. There as elsewhere, mosquitoes hatched after each rainfall, complicating the hard, harsh work of clearing and cultivating difficult land by hand. People took “smoke pots” – ceramic or metal pots holding burning coconut or green leaves whose smoke dispersed the mosquitoes – when they went to work in the fields. And thrushes and blackbirds offered a greater challenge, and worms, too, all eating the corn. Often enough the volume of produce harvested from the fields ran out before the next year’s crop was ready to be reaped. In especially meager periods between the annual harvests, or if the crop failed for lack of rain, people would go in the bush and catch crabs and eat the hearts of palm trees and go onto the water to catch fish and collect conch, waiting for the mailboat to

Amidst limestone rock, Isaac Dean farmed his fields in Cat Island for over 70 years. The pieces of wood, or "burned bush," sticking out of the ground identify a field that has been cleared using the slash-and-burn technique.

Photo by Grace Turner



bring supplies from Nassau. Worst was when storms and hurricanes came, catching people off guard in an era before advance weather warnings, on land breaking down houses and blasting and flooding fields, at sea drowning parents or children as they fished or turtled or sponged in wooden sailboats or dinghies offshore or carried cargo from island to island.

Those "hard times" live on in the shared imagination of islanders. Blackfoot Rock is a point which juts out into the sea not far from the settlement of North Victoria Hill in San Salvador. Marcia Kemp, a 40-year inhabitant of that settlement, suggested how deeply etched an impression the poverty of material resources left on that community.

In those days as a child growing up in North Victoria Hill . . . when you [would] have your meals or anything they would say not to waste it. You cannot waste your food, because, you know, "You children don't know what hard time is. Hard time is gonna come again." And they would say this so often, as a child I thought hard time was someone who was coming. He had visited before, so . . . you were to expect hard time to come again. And in my mind's eye I used to see him coming around Blackfoot Rock.

RESOURCEFULNESS, SELF-RELIANCE & VERSATILITY

Medical science offers an example of how resourceful and self-reliant islanders were. Men and women alike had extensive knowledge of the curative qualities of plant and marine life which were readily to

be found on the land or offshore. Fever bush. Cough bush. Midwife bush. Catnip for worms. Pond bush for diabetes. Almond loaf tea for high blood pressure. Spoonwood and guava for gripe. Guinea hen bush for headache. Tamarind leaf for the eyes. And the versatility of island women and men aged, let us say, over 50 is striking. Trained in upholstery, engine repair, and navigation, and formerly involved in the furniture and dry cleaning businesses, today Leon Turnquest of Inagua does masonry and carpentry and plumbing, manages his own hotel, and occasionally fishes, farms, and hunts. Over the years Samuel Collie of Mayaguana built boats, sailed, fished, farmed, practiced masonry and carpentry, crafted spare parts for his truck, built his home, made dolls, model planes, and model boats, and concocted "bush" medicines. Such versatility comes as no surprise. Islanders had no choice but to take care of themselves. Cash was rare. Field and marine produce sold to Nassau brought so little in exchange. Steady paid labor was hard to come by outside Nassau. So purchasing the services of specialized tradesmen, even were those services readily to be found on the island, was not feasible.

LABOR MIGRATION & SHRINKING COMMUNITIES

Over the years the harshness of living on land and sea using traditional technologies and the scantness of opportunities for education and wage labor have helped to push islanders from their homes in pursuit of schooling and work in Nassau or in Freeport or in rural communities where projects of varying duration – manufacturing salt in Inagua, or build-

ing military facilities on several of the islands, for example – have offered permanent or short-term employment. Islanders have left in large numbers as well for the United States. Since World War II “The Contract” or “The Project” has been a major conduit of Bahamians to the mainland. An arrangement created in 1943 between the governments of the United States and The Bahamas, the “Contract” program enabled thousands of Bahamians to work on farms or in farm-related industries located across the United States. Some of them came home. Many others never did.

The marks of short- and long-term emigration stand out on the landscapes of some island communities and appear in the stories of their inhabitants. Consider Inagua. That island today has one settlement: Matthew Town. An old map – printed when, I cannot say – shows place names ringing the island. Dog Head Bluff. Lantern Head. Mount Misery. Minott Tent. Oree Bay. Northeast Point. I learned that some of those communities had once had year-round residents. In others, like Northeast Point, people had farmed for several weeks or months each year but had based themselves in Matthew Town. Today no one farms there. The other communities, as far as I could learn, have died. Consider Mayaguana. Horsepond, one of the island’s four settlements, lost its last inhabitant over 30 years ago, and the remaining three settlements have shrunk. Mary Black, born 1918 in Pirate’s Well, says that when she was a girl a lot of people lived in the settlement, and by comparison no one lives there today, the old people having died out and the young people having left home. Consider San Salvador. George Storr, 80 years old, and his wife Viola, 75, are what remain of the settlement of Pigeon Creek. Thomas Hanna, an elderly gentleman, and James Rolle, 87 years old, are what remain of Fortune Hill. Bernie Storr, 54 years old, his mother, and his family are what remain of Polly Hill.

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VULNERABLE TECHNOLOGIES

Bahamians seem to be returning to the islands. In San Salvador, with the construction and, since 1990, operation of a Club Med resort, the population has nearly doubled. Mayaguana’s Abraham’s Bay, having shrunk, is, so residents say, now growing; and major development scheduled to begin on the island soon is likely to draw others home. But I think the immigrants unlikely to utilize traditional technologies fully. Throughout the archipelago, imported technologies and material prosperity have created the possibility of living on the island again without having to do the hard and time-consuming manual work entailed in traditional living. So from stone, lime, and leaf thatch to concrete block, cement, and shingle; from outside kitchen and fire hearth to indoor kitchen and gas stove; from corning to freezing fish and meat; from throwing ashes from the fire hearth on worms to spraying fields with pesticide; from smoke pots to cans of Off; from hand mills to communal mills for grinding corn; from lighting torchwood to lighting kerosene lamps to turning on generators; from hauling well water in buckets to water mains; from cutting wood to buying diesel fuel; from crocus-bag and flour-bag clothes and bare feet to modern wardrobes; from homemade grass mattresses to store-bought ones; from hand tools to power saws and electric drills: island lifestyles are undergoing rapid, if geographically uneven, transformation. That genius for utilizing the resources given by land and sea, if it will survive an international market economy, will need conscientious conservation with all deliberate speed.

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