

Turtle tails and tall tales at Science Café

ST. EUSTATIUS--“You can tell a male turtle by the length of its tail,” Matt Davies said at Thursday evening’s Science Café at Caribbean Netherlands Science Institute (CNSI). As Marine Park Ranger for St. Eustatius National Parks STENAPA, he should know. Last year, whilst diving with a science team, a total of 34 male and female turtles were counted in pre-selected waters of St. Eustatius, he said.

“There is a lot more to learn about these fascinating creatures,” Davies told his audience. “In the future, we aim to tag, track and continue to treasure them.”

Three species of turtle explore Statia’s waters to feed on sea grass or to lay eggs on its volcanic sands. The green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) seems to be the most frequent visitor to Statia’s shores, and is already classified as an endangered species.

The lighter weight hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) is not such a common sight, which probably explains why it is on the critically-endangered list.

On Statia, lucky divers may actually spot the largest of all living turtles, the vulnerable leather back (*Dermochelys coriacea*), Davies explained.

“Our scientific dives prove that all species of turtle prefer to swim inside rather than outside our Marine Reserve,” Davies announced. “They also prefer the Caribbean shallows to that of the rougher Atlantic side of the island.”

The 2015 turtle census indicates that a total population of more than 1,000 turtles of the green and hawksbill variety inhabit Statia Marine Park.

Davies reminded that although protected on Statia, “sea turtle stocks are declining throughout most of the wider Caribbean region. Hunting turtles for soup or stew continues in various islands, including St. Kitts.”

Seawall myth

Historian and Monuments Director Walter Hellebrand’s richly-illustrated presentation was entitled “The Greater History... and finishing his sentence with “...the more it leads to

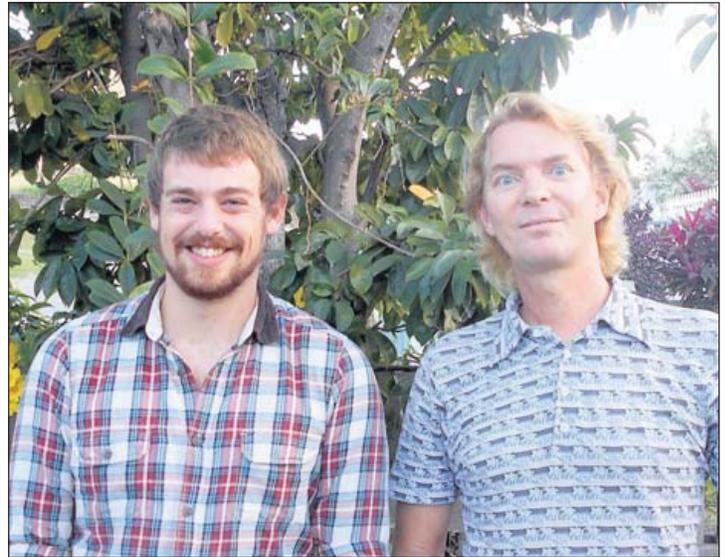
stories.”

His point was that there are many tales being told about Statia’s past, but that while their abundance in itself is precisely the result of the fact that the island’s history is such a great one, distinction has to be made between these stories and history.

A persistent tale, for example, exists about a “seawall” that, according to “stories” was the western boundary of Lower Town. Using 18th century maps and drawings together with images from Google Earth, Hellebrand was able to prove that there never was a seawall and that there isn’t another half of Lower Town submerged in the sea. He reminded everybody to look at the display at the Monuments Office which illustrates his explanation.

Hellebrand explained that the more distance there is -both in place and time- the more the imagination takes the upper hand, especially with a history as evocative as Statia’s.

For example, in an 1841 book by a British author that talks about a 1780 hurricane, mention is made of



Marine Parks Ranger Matt Davies and Monuments Director Walter Hellebrand outside Caribbean Netherlands Science Institute.

all houses on Statia being destroyed and 4,000 and 5,000 inhabitants killed. But in giving their report, eye witnesses tell of some minor damage and no fatalities whatsoever.

Similarly, Hellebrand demonstrated that the population figure of 20,000 for Statia in the late 1700’s is a “fallacy” and that the

island’s maximum recorded population was circa 10,000.

The myth that British Admiral George Rodney’s raid on the island in 1781 was the end of Statia’s prosperity and that he destroyed buildings was equally debunked. With the help of historical population figures, tombstones in

the Jewish cemetery and the first newspaper in the Dutch Caribbean, the *St. Eustatius Gazette*, Hellebrand demonstrated that Statia’s economic decline only set in after 1795.

Hellebrand took up the challenge of CNSI’s Director Johan Stapel to explain the reasons for this in a follow-up presentation.

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