



Ecosystems of The Bahamas



WHITELAND COPPICE

INTRODUCTION

By far the most diverse and interesting group of native trees and plants can be found in our Bahamian forest known as **Coppice**. Jack Patterson, author of *Native Trees of the Bahamas* estimates that there are probably 100 species of trees and shrubs per square mile in our Bahamian forest. There are different types of coppice throughout The Bahamas. On the islands where coppice occurs, each forest is slightly different depending on its location, the amount of rainfall and if people have used the area in the past. This fact sheet will describe generally the Whiteland Coppice.

DESCRIPTION

The places we see as we walk along the road and drive in our cars that have many trees growing close together and look "thick" and "dark" with heavy shade are special places called coppice. There are basically two types of coppice in The Bahamas – Blackland Coppice and Whiteland Coppice.

There are areas on our islands where plant life has been less intense due to salt spray and other natural factors. The soils in these areas often contain more lime and rock and support a hardier community of forest plants. These impoverished areas of forest that often run along the coasts of islands are called Whiteland Coppice.

The trees and shrubs of the Whiteland Coppice are rugged and durable. Brasiletto grows here as do several species of Acacia, which are shrubs and small trees with large bipinnate leaves. The aptly named Haulback, a shrub armed with sharp spines curved like a cats claw, trail through this forest. There are some large shade trees that grow, such as the mahogany, sea grape and manchineel as well as the Balsam and the Clusia or Autograph tree.

Cacti are the most enduring plant life of the Whiteland Coppice, better adapted to stand the extremes in rainfall, storm and roaming goats than most plants. The largest is the Dildo Cactus, which can grow to heights of 20 feet. A much shorter non-branching column-like cactus is the Turks Cap named for the red inflorescence that crowns the column. The Prickly Pear Cactus also grows wild in many disturbed areas. The most spectacular is the Queen of the Night, which spends most of the arid year as a scraggly vine that climbs over trees and walls. With the arrival of the spring rains, the cactus develops massive swelling buds which open to reveal six inch white flowers and fill the evening air with the faint scent of vanilla. Attracted by the aroma, the night pollinating Sphinx moths flicker from flower to flower like nocturnal humming birds.

IMPORTANCE

The Whiteland Coppice is often in close proximity to the sea, and this makes it the preferred habitat of land crabs. The crabs dig roomy burrows in the limey soil. Four species of land crab (in addition to the land hermit crab) are encountered in The Bahamas. Two of the species (the Giant White land crab and the Black crab) are important economically as they are caught and sold as food.

THREATS

Fire: This is an ancient enemy of forests. Slash and burn agriculture practiced in The Bahamas and other tropical countries often leads to out of control fires with many acres of good timber destroyed for no useful purpose.

Development: Man's need for cleared land is truly a threat to our forests and it is a challenge to all Bahamians to set aside areas of Bahamian forest for wildlife and as a tribute to the historical debt we owe this ecosystem.

Illustration by John Thompson

© 2000 The Bahamas National Trust, P. O. Box N-4105, Nassau, Bahamas

www.thebahamasnationaltrust.org