

## **Sandwatch and Sustainable Livelihoods in St. Vincent and the Grenadines**

The Bequia Community High School Sandwatch/Small Islands Voice Youth group is taking on a very ambitious yet sustainable project, to work with the Gravel Miners of the North Leeward communities of Petit Bordel and Chateaubelair.

Approximately thirty persons, largely women, of these two north-western communities earn their livelihood mainly from the daily collection of gravel and some larger stones under 20kg in weight along the beach of the Richmond and Larikai Bay area.

Tons of gravel are brought to the seashore daily by the two small rivers which flow directly from the slopes of the La Soufriere volcano. The deposit is distributed by the relatively strong longshore currents, and piled onto the black sand beach. The miners harvest these stones daily and make dozens of gravel mounds along the beach, ranging from two to eight cubic yards in size. These mounds of gravel are then marketed to the many construction companies and individuals for anything ranging from roads to hotel construction.

By itself, the quantity and supply of gravel might have appeared to be inexhaustible; nevertheless there seems to be a reduction in the size of the beach, caused by the dangerous practice of harvesting sand along with the gravel. While the gravel miners may not be directly involved in the mining of the sand, sections of the beach are disappearing, leaving most of the gravel in deep water where it cannot be retrieved.

The Sandwatch team has had discussions and conducted demonstrations with the gravel miners on two occasions to help them understand how they can measure the sustainability of their livelihood, and to introduce to them the basic tools of beach monitoring. This was well received by the entire group, as a number of them are concerned about the economic stability of their families and would like to be able to continue to pay for their children's education, if nothing else. They, therefore, appreciate anything that would help, but are disturbed about the sand mining operations.

To make a difference, Sandwatch proposes the following:

- Start a regular monitoring regime to establish the volume of aggregate collected on a weekly or monthly basis.
- Measure the volume of gravel that is distributed on the beach over a prolonged period, in order to establish a safe level of harvesting.
- Monitor river flow to establish if the source of gravel is changing.
- Measure longshore currents to understand how the beach shape changes.
- Regulate sand mining.
- Determine the feasibility of a gravel miners' cooperative.
- Establish a depot for the storage of gravel and stones and where they can be marketed as a cooperative.
- Remove the piles of stones from the beach.
- Clean and regulate the beach so it can become a tourism attraction.
- Absorb some of the miners as workers in the Bed and Breakfast Campsite thereby reducing the number of miners.
- Train some of the miners as Tour Guides and Beach Guards.
- Establish buoyed swimming areas to offer security to swimmers and create further employment.
- Construct gazebos or other huts near the beach area to market local food, drink and craft to visitors.
- Train groups in Water Safety, Basic First Aid and CPR.

Sandwatch believes that this project, though challenging, could enhance the entire area, provide alternative livelihood opportunities for many of the gravel miners and their families, as well as provide the basic comfort, safety and real wilderness experience which could attract many visitors to the North Leeward community. It would require several months of travel to set up and monitor the programme, which would certainly involve expenditure beyond the Sandwatch group's ability. We however believe we could partner with UNESCO, our Government, and other willing organizations on this project, and help to transform the area and practices of the people into a very sustainable venture.

**By Herman Belmar and Marsha Gregg, St. Vincent and the Grenadines**



Hon Jerold Thompson, Minister of Telecommunications and Technology, and Herman Belmar meeting with the gravel miners