



Senate Statement

Presented by

The Senator Lindsay Simmons

Junior Minister for Home Affairs

Wednesday, December 9th, 2020

“Efforts to improve marine enforcement”

Madame President, I would like to, today, update Honourable members on the efforts to improve the Government’s capability to address illegal fishing and offenses against our most threatened protected marine species and habitats. These species, help make Bermuda the unique gem, that we know and every effort must be made to protect them from illegal activities such as poaching and willful damage and destruction.

Madame President, Honourable members will likely be aware of a recent incident involving protected parrotfish at the east end of the island that is currently being investigated by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (the department).

This was not an incident of illegal fishing but rather should be better described as a wildlife crime on a fish species that is not only beautiful to look at for locals and tourists alike, but one that provides us benefits well beyond that of a passing meal.

Madame President, parrotfish play a vital role in maintaining our fragile marine ecosystem. Parrotfishes are a diverse group of primarily herbivorous fishes, and fourteen (14) different types are known to occur in Bermuda. The name comes from their bright colours and because their teeth are fused together and look like a parrot's beak.

Most parrotfishes live on coral reefs, where they eat seaweed, which include micro-algae. Their feeding helps to keep the reef clean, ensuring that corals are not smothered by seaweed and that there is room for new coral larvae to attach. This allows our reefs to stay healthy and grow, providing habitat for other fish and invertebrates; fish that our commercial fishermen legally harvest for our consumption. These same reefs provide our greatest protection from major storm events.

As they graze, parrotfish also consume rock and dead coral, which is ground up and excreted as sand. A large parrotfish can produce hundreds of pounds of sand per year which help to build our world-famous beaches.

All in all, this is a fish species that we can legitimately say that we rely on for the health of Bermuda's natural environment and our own wellbeing.

Madame President, investigating incidents of illegal killing, injury and/or damage to our most threatened wildlife can be very challenging as they tend to occur away from normal observation, at night and underwater. Even if caught in the act or reported, the Department has to prove beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law that an offense has occurred based on the evidence available.

Madame President, recognizing these challenges the Ministry of Home Affairs is looking to provide tools to our Wardens to assist them in the form of:

- *Continual enforcement training*
- *Improved cooperation with other enforcement agencies*
- *Use of new technologies for enforcement*
- *Ensuring legislation, offenses and penalties fit the crime*

Continual enforcement training

Madame President, recognizing the need to ensure our staff are properly trained, this past October, the Fisheries Warden section joined with many other non-police service enforcement teams to undertake training with the Department of Public Prosecution to hone their skills in investigation and developing cases for prosecution. Not only did this training provide a good update to their existing skills, it gave the opportunity to discuss, with other colleagues with similar challenges, potential gaps to be addressed in the legislative process, evidence gathering and retention.

Over the course of the upcoming year, the Department will be working on instituting these recommendations to increase its enforcement capabilities as well as undertaking continuing training, where possible.

Madame President, on behalf of the Ministry of Home Affairs, I would like to thank the Minister of Legislative Affairs, the Director of Public Prosecution and her

team, the Bermuda Police Service, and the Department of Health for their assistance in providing this extremely beneficial training to our Wardens.

Improved cooperation with other enforcement agencies

Madame President, the Bermuda reef platform, its bays and harbours, as well as the offshore fishing areas are truly massive; areas that need to be patrolled in good conditions and bad, in the daytime and at night.

With this in mind I would like to acknowledge the increased capacity and capabilities that the new Coast Guard has brought to the table. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the Coast Guard for their support to date. The Fisheries Wardens team look forward to working closer with them, in conjunction with the Maritime Operations Centre and the Bermuda Police Service in the future.

Use of new technologies for enforcement

Madame President, we recognise that we cannot physically be everywhere all of the time. As a result, the Department is investigating new technologies to assist in its work.

These will be identified in the ***Marine Resources Enforcement Strategy*** that is currently being developed to address all the major issues faced by fisheries, protected species, marine heritage and pollution control. These will range from body cameras, to boat mounted infrared cameras for night time operations, new means of communicating with the public, as well as incorporating the existing capability provided by other government agencies.

Ensuring legislation, offenses and penalties fit the crime

Madame President, parrotfish have been legally protected since 1993 and it is an offense under the Fisheries Act 1972 to take, kill and/or sell parrotfish, with a penalty of up to \$50,000 fine and two years' imprisonment.

Apparently this does not appear to be as an effective deterrent by some. As such the Ministry will be reviewing the possibility of strengthening not only this offense but a number of others identified during stakeholder consultation and as a result of recent court decisions.

Madame President, while the Government strives to do better, we can achieve even more with the assistance of the public. Given the possibility that these parrotfish may have been caught to sell, the Department would like to take this opportunity to also remind members of the public that they should only purchase fish from a licensed commercial fisherman, who should provide a licence number for verification.

Should anyone see suspicious fishing activity, they should report it as soon as possible to the Fisheries Wardens at 535-4615, the Bermuda Coast Guard at 294-0610, or the Bermuda Police Service at 211. Timely reporting is critical to assisting with a successful prosecution.

Madame President, in closing, Honourable members can be assured that the Government will continue to do our utmost to tackle illegal fishing and wildlife crimes. I look forward to reporting back to you in the near future with new and improvement measures of control, as well as our successes in this area.

Thank you, **Madame President**.