

Native plant reserve set to bloom with grand opening

THE Leon Levy native plant preserve, a 25-acre sanctuary created jointly by the Bahamas National Trust and the Leon Levy Foundation, will celebrate its grand opening this Thursday in Governor's Harbour, Eleuthera.

The Preserve is the first National Park on Eleuthera and has already injected more than \$2million into the local economy. The Preserve was designed by world renowned landscape architect Raymond Jungles in conjunction with subtropical plant expert, Dr Ethan Freid.

Visitors will enter a tropical sanctuary, walk a mile-long trail leading over a waterfall, through a mangrove swamp and groves of medicinal plants; and climb a lookout tower offering breathtaking views of the Atlantic Ocean.

The Preserve features more than 171 species of indigenous plants and more than 34 species of birds, including the Antillean Bullfinch.

More than 100 varieties of medicinal plants and more than 25 different economic plants are among the 2,000 native trees, shrubs and herbs recently added to the site.

The Preserve will also showcase Eleuthera's history and prehistory. Visitors will learn about the arrival of the Lucayans, the Spanish, the English and the Africans, as well as the island's native flora and fauna including the elusive brown racer. They will learn the ways in which native plants were used medicinally throughout the island's evolution and be able to sample the five finger bush tea.

Among the guests at the opening will be Brent Symonette, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Mrs. Symonette; Earl Deveaux, Minister of the Environment and Mrs Deveaux, members of the Bahamas National Trust Council; Eric Carey, Executive Director of the Trust; Shelby White, founding Trustee of the Leon Levy Foundation and Gregory Long, President of the New York Botanical Garden.

The overriding mission of the Preserve is to promote education, interdisciplinary conservation, preservation and research, so that future generations of Bahamians understand and appreciate their rich ethnobotanical heritage. Its programmes will focus on medicinal uses of native plants and educational outreach to foster an enthusiasm for the environment and conservation and promotion of bio-diversity and sustainability.

The Leon Levy Native Plant Preserve was created by the Bahamas National Trust with the support of The Leon Levy Foundation, a New York foundation created from the estate of famed Wall Street financier Leon Levy, who founded the Oppenheimer Mutual Funds. For many years Mr Levy and now his family, have had a home on Eleuthera. Mr Levy loved the island and was concerned that the knowledge and use of the medicinal value of the island's native plants was rapidly diminishing. In 2006 Shelby White, Leon Levy's widow, approached the Bahamas National Trust about creating an appropriate memorial to her husband in Eleuthera.

Ms White said: "This project has been a long-standing dream of mine. Working with the Bahamas National Trust as our partners, I believe we have created the finest nature preserve in the Bahamas, a

place that will make Eleuthera a must-visit tourist destination and of which we will all be proud."

The founders hope the diversity of the Preserve's plant and animal life will inspire subsequent generations to preserve native species and habitat and address the pernicious effects of years of deforestation, invasive species importation and mono-culture agricultural practices.

Bahamas National Trust Director of Education, Portia Sweeting said: "This will become a living classroom for Bahamian students who are studying plants and their value to Bahamians."

Gregory Long, President of the New York Botanical Garden, said: "All of us at the Garden are greatly impressed with what the Leon Levy Foundation and the Bahamas National Trust have accomplished on this beautiful site."

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