



A former fisherman-turned-coral gardener at one of the nurseries at Oracabessa Bay.
Photographer: Kadir van Lohuizen/NOOR via Redux

How James Bond's Legacy Is Saving Jamaica

The founder of Island Records runs a unique conservation movement that could be a model for the entire Caribbean.

By **Ross Kenneth Urken**

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In 1949, Ian Fleming bought a blank naturalist's notebook which he grandly labeled “Sea Fauna or the Finny Tribe of Goldeneye.” Bound in leather and its title embossed in gold, he took it with him when he departed London for his beloved Jamaica, where he would immerse himself in the island's natural beauty and dive among its plentiful barracudas. He called two of the larger specimens Bicester and Beaufort, similar to creatures seen in “Thunderball,” one of a dozen novels he would later write about a certain British spy.

Sixty years on, the pristine Jamaica of James Bond's creator is in danger. Overfishing has imperiled the barracuda's habitat: Fewer algae-eating fish spurs coral die-off, and the practice of fishing with dynamite has had catastrophic effects. But over the past seven years, a former record company executive has slowly built a network of conservationists to help protect the ecosystem near Fleming's home, dubbed Goldeneye, creating a template for others in the process.



Chris Blackwell at his Strawberry Hill resort in Jamaica.

Photographer: Forray Didier/Alamy

Chris Blackwell, 81, founded Island Records and launched Bob Marley's career, among others. He's the son of Blanche Lindo, Fleming's close friend, and he now owns Island Outpost, a chain of boutique luxury, nature-oriented resorts. Its gem is GoldenEye, where guests can rent the original Fleming villa near the village of Oracabessa (“GoldenEye” is also the name of a 1995 Bond film). The Oracabessa Foundation, which operates as the headquarters of Blackwell's conservation efforts, is located there.

Jamaica is undergoing unprecedented growth. The Jamaican Ministry of Industry, Investment and Commerce teamed up with Jamaica Promotions Corp. and China Export-Import Bank to create “Brand Jamaica,” with \$10 billion made available to companies looking to build there.

Blackwell, with the help of wealthy supporters such as Jay-Z and Beyonce, has focused his resources on preserving Jamaica's marine ecosystems, fighting overfishing, coral reef destruction and the threat posed by easy development dollars. The critical difference between Oracabessa and previous preservation efforts is the deep involvement of the local fishermen who are affected most.

"It is a model for all the other fish sanctuaries across the island," Blackwell said. "It seemed to me to make so much more sense if you could talk to the people and hear what they're saying."



Ian Fleming in his study at Goldeneye, his home in Jamaica's Saint Mary Parish, in 1964.
Photographer: Harry Benson/Express via Getty Images

In Fleming's day, Oracabessa was a thriving fishing and banana port. That

began to slow after the island's independence from the U.K. in 1962. Amid political upheaval and economic decline, overfishing became rampant. Decades of dynamiting reefs in a bid to harvest fish set off a vicious cycle that, in tandem with climate change, has managed to shrink the habitat. Today, Jamaica has one of the most depleted fish stocks of any nation.

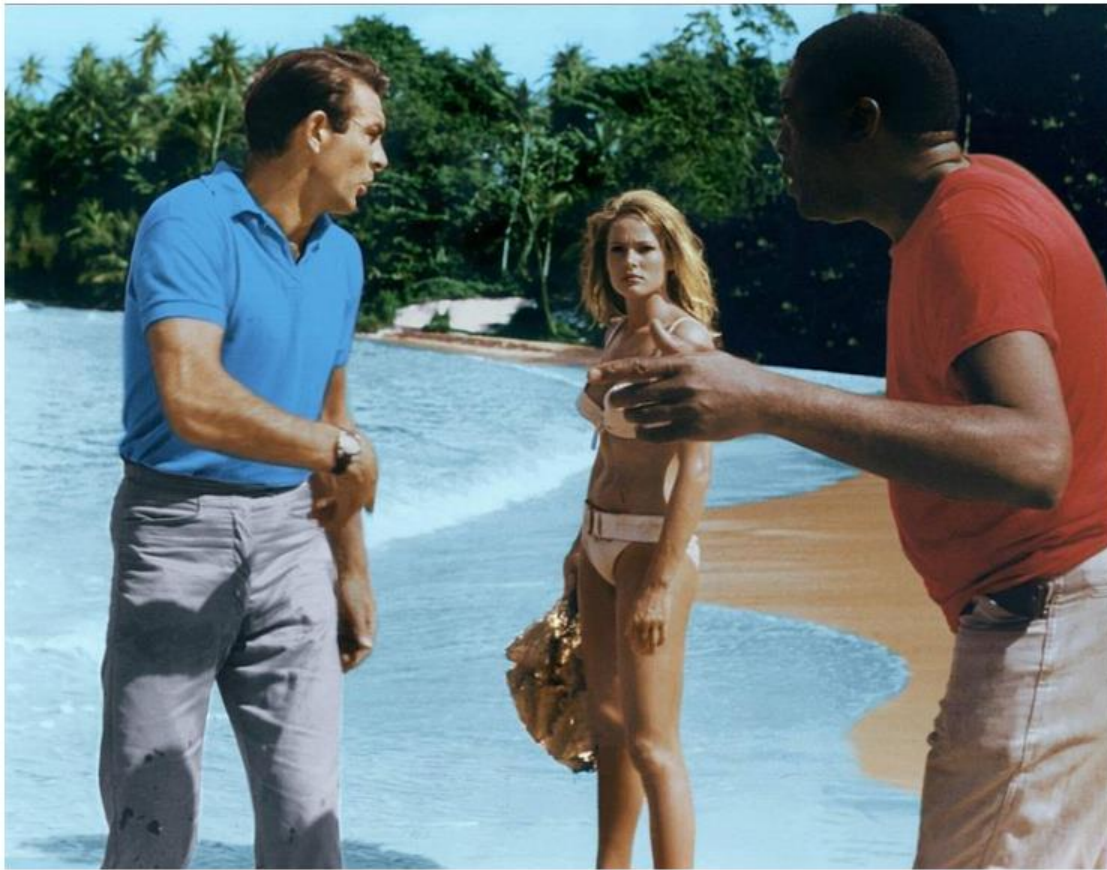
Enter Jonathan Gosse, a 48-year-old Wisconsin native and executive director of Blackwell's foundation. In November, he helped establish the Oracabessa Marine Trust, a partnership with fishermen of the local St. Mary Fishermen's Cooperative. It formalized a collaboration dating back to 2011 to build the Oracabessa Bay Fish Sanctuary, a no-fishing zone the length of the town. As fishermen head farther out, the hope is that the protected area will eventually replenish its stock of doctor fish, lionfish and snapper.

Gosse first had to negotiate an agreement with the community's leader, David George Murray. Murray, 56, is president of the Oracabessa Fishers Association, which represents 100 local fishermen. He grew up helping his father and grandfather fish, and witnessed the catch dwindle over time. He agreed that if something weren't done, and soon, there would be nothing left. Today, he's a member of the sanctuary's executive board and appoints wardens to patrol for fishermen working in unauthorized areas.

Meanwhile, government efforts to fight overfishing have been largely ineffective. Mechanical spear guns, banned by law, are still widely used, said Byron Wilson, a conservation ecologist and professor at the University of the West Indies, Mona in Kingston.

The sanctuary "could well be the only sort of thing that could work," Wilson said. Its success has hinged on getting the fishermen involved, rather than imposing rules on them. Though the anglers are most concerned about their livelihood, the foundation sought to make them stakeholders who can control conservation efforts.

Godfrey Avis, a 46-year-old ex-spear fisherman who is now a groundskeeper at James Bond Beach (where Sean Connery and Ursula Andress shot scenes for "Dr. No," the first Bond film), said he was inspired to change careers after the sanctuary was formed. He'd found it difficult to make a living as a fisherman and supported the need for a no-fishing zone.



Sean Connery, Ursula Andress and John Kitzmiller in the 1962 James Bond film "Dr. No."

Photographer: AF Archive/Alamy

Over the past seven years, the sanctuary has become successful, increasing fish biomass 1,800 percent and coral coverage 150 percent while reducing algae by 40 percent, the Oracabessa Foundation said. Other villages in Jamaica are copying the model. In January, a sanctuary in Ocho Rios, about 30 minutes east of Oracabessa, was opened. The fishermen there contacted Murray to determine how best to arrange a partnership with local hotels and conservationists.

In nearby Port Antonio, art collector Francesca von Habsburg, Swiss scion of the Thyssen-Bornemisza industrialist family, established the Alligator Head Foundation, named after property that her billionaire father bought in the 1950s. Her aim was to devote resources to marine conservation, including the creation of the East Portland Fish Sanctuary, which now coordinates with Oracabessa.

She's supported her foundation and an associated marine lab with \$550,000 of her own money and raised an additional \$900,000 from other donors last year. One investment was the installation of moorings so fisherman could attach their boats instead of anchoring onto, and damaging, coral reefs.

In Oracabessa, the sanctuary does create hardship for some. At 8 a.m. one day, buyers from local markets and restaurants were waiting at Oracabessa Bay for the fishermen to come in. Murray was chatting with wardens on the dock. Oswald Coombs, 75, a champion long-jaw fisherman, and Easton Donald, 68, a marlin champion, tended to their boats.

Nearby, Barbara Christie, a 55-year-old fishmonger from Jack's River, complained about her inability to make a robust living. For the past 30 years, she's been selling parrot fish, goat fish, butter fish, doctor fish, jack fish, lionfish, wench, sea cat, conger eel, and cod. But lately the selection at the dock has been thin.

"Fish scarce now," she said. "Sometimes you come down here and [there's] not even one pound. You find maybe three, four fishermen and not even five pounds of fish."

She said she typically buys fish for 400 Jamaican dollars (about \$3) a pound and sells at the market in town for 500 Jamaican dollars. The price goes up another 100 Jamaican dollars for "prestige fish," including snapper. But she's competing with buyers such as Clifton Gray, 60—who purchases fish for Blackwell's resort, where Christie's daughter works as a waitress.

Still, as Murray reminds the community, the sanctuary is a necessary part of replenishing the fish stock, a way of maintaining the principal within the protected area. "This is like a bank," Murray said, gesturing toward the water. "So we live off the interest."



Fish are bought and sold at Oracabessa Bay.
Photographer: Kadir van Lohuizen/NOOR via Redux

Depleted fish stocks are just one facet of Jamaica's environmental crisis. Poachers and wildlife traffickers target crocodiles and marine turtles and their eggs. Each year, many baby turtles hatch in Oracabessa, thanks to Melvyn Tennant, a 68-year-old from the U.K. who retired to Jamaica 15 years ago with his wife. He sets out to greet would-be poachers on the beach and educate them that consuming turtles or their eggs doesn't, in fact, increase virility. He's also flooded the beachfront with enough light to scare most of them off.

From May to August, when turtles commonly lay 100 to 240 ping pong ball-sized eggs apiece, Tennant enlists patrolmen to surveil the beach at night. Nest survival rates were a paltry 37 percent in 2005 but are up to 81 percent today, he said. In a typical year, he'll release 25,000 turtles, up from 350 hatchlings in 2005, and he meticulously tags and tracks adult female turtles.

Nearby, at GoldenEye's lagoon-side bar, Blackwell

recently held court. Doctor birds, the island's streamertail hummingbirds, flew past. While the tree frogs wouldn't start croaking till dusk, his two phones rang every few minutes with the same amphibian timbre.

Fleming had him hired as a Jamaica location scout for "Dr. No." Having grown up on the island, Blackwell was already entranced by its tropical beauty. When he saw it begin to vanish, he became determined to stop it.

"In Oracabessa, the fishermen turned from poachers to game keepers, completely," he said over a rum punch. "For me—for all of us—it's been a miracle to see what's happened already in just a few years, how much [the fish] have come back."

Looking ahead, his biggest challenge isn't poachers, but Chinese money. Just last year, Prime Minister Andrew Holness said \$384 million from China's Ex-Im Bank would help the island embark on additional construction projects. But the government has also responded positively to Blackwell's efforts. The Caribbean Coastal Area Management Foundation will complete its Discovery Center this year in Clarendon, and the Environmental Foundation of Jamaica is funding community-based conservation projects all over the island. The Jamaica Environment Trust recently had a significant victory with a declaration of boundaries for [Cockpit Country](#), one of the island's largest remaining forests, as well as a promise from the prime minister that no bauxite mining will be allowed there.

In December, the government also announced it would be converting Goat Islands, two islets connected by a mangrove area within the Portland Bight Protected Area on the south coast, into a biodiversity nature reserve. The islands had been [threatened](#) since a 2013 disclosure that Chinese Harbour Engineering Co. wanted to build a \$1.5 billion deepwater port there, along with mainland infrastructure.



The coral nursery at Oracabessa Bay.
Photographer: Kadir van Lohuizen/NOOR via Redux

Holness said in an interview that protecting coastal environments—and in particular, reef systems—can offer long-term economic benefits beyond the fishing industry. “The coral nurseries and out-planting sites can also provide an attraction for tourists and potential income-generation and employment for local stakeholders as tour guides and coral gardeners,” he said.

A short turn at snorkeling around Oracabessa Bay revealed that Blackwell’s project seems to be working. A school of doctor fish and striped sergeant majors darted about, and although some reefs looked bleached, one was a rich, healthy red. Farther out is a coral nursery that the foundation is cultivating. It climbs upward, along trellises, from rods tethered to the sea floor; upside-down bottles just below the surface keep each rig floating.

Still, most of the fish that flit by are small—Bicester and Beaufort were nowhere to be found. But among the current inhabitants are many brilliant and transfixing species. An iridescent shoemaker, the exact shade of a blue morpho butterfly, swam up close, stayed a moment, then dashed back into the reef. The foundation said the fish in the sanctuary don’t fear human beings anymore—they’ve relinquished their fear of being caught.

– *With assistance by Eugene Reznik*