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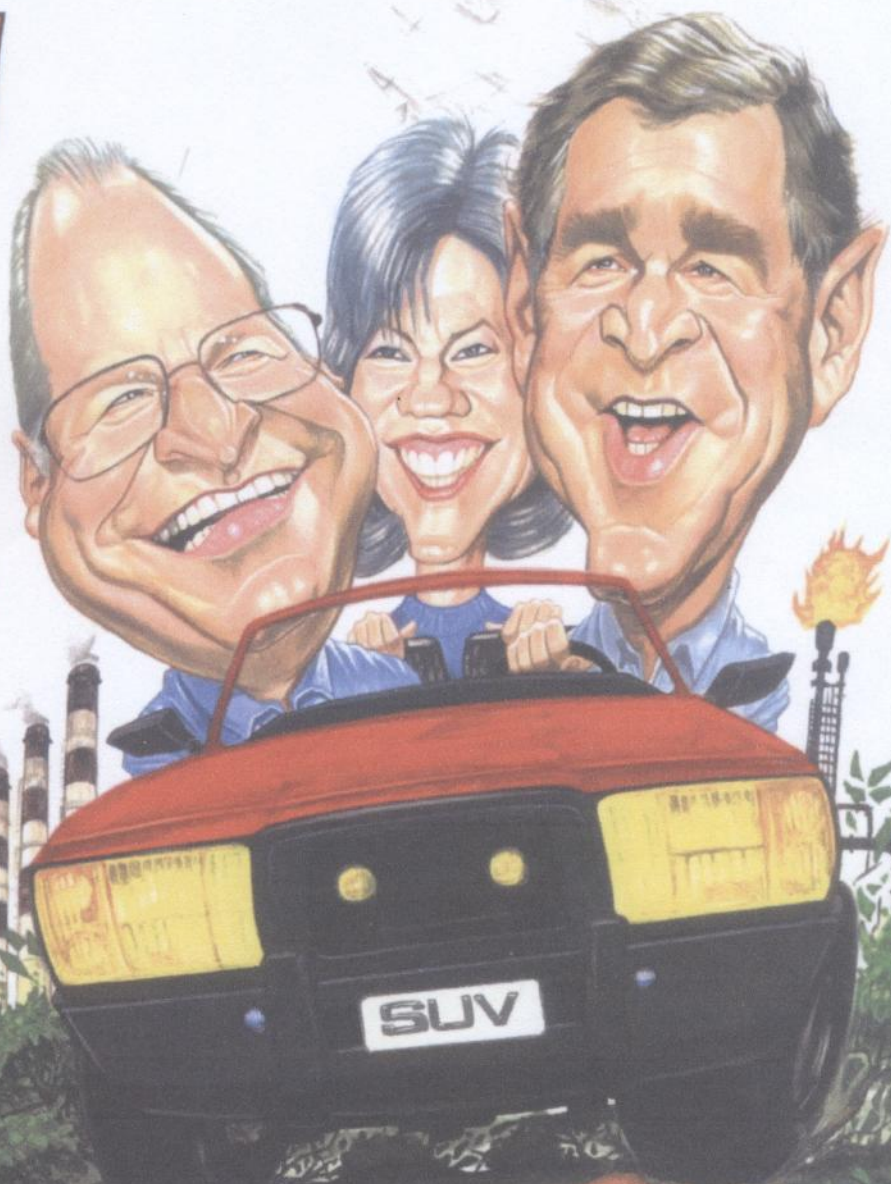
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**BALLOT BOX STRATEGIES TO SAVE THE PLANET**



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## GREEN LIVING GOING GREEN

### Paradise in Punta Cana

#### Greening the Dominican Republic

By Brian Howard and Starre Vartan

As the plane skids to a stop on the tarmac of Punta Cana International Airport, the first impression of the Dominican Republic is of open-air breezeways and thatched roofs.

According to Kelly Robinson, environmental affairs specialist for the Punta Cana Resort and Club, "The airport was designed not only to welcome visitors, but also to be environmentally responsible, using native design and materials." Palm trees sway in the courtyard as tropical birds dart through the rafters.

A few hours later, the sun is setting as gentle aquamarine surf laps a few feet from the reclining beach chairs. As a small Caribbean nation not far from the coast of the United States, the Dominican Republic (which shares its landmass with Haiti) has historically been a popular get-away. Today, its beauty is challenged by rapid development.



*Punta Cana Resort has 11 freshwater lagoons, and this one is open for snorkeling. Visibility is excellent.*

© Starre Vartan

According to Lonely Planet, "The Dominican Republic was once blanketed with lush rainforests teeming with diverse flora and fauna, including some 1,500 species found nowhere else. Today, many of the swamps have been drained and trees cut down, but there are still isolated pockets of untamed nature to satisfy even adamant ecotourists."

The problem is widespread poverty. The U.S. Agency for International Development reports that the Dominican Republic is beginning to address that issue, along with the country's relatively weak environmental protection laws. It may not be too late. Robinson says that the Dominican Republic retains 14 percent of its original forest cover, in contrast with Haiti,

which is almost entirely deforested due to pressures from extreme poverty and political instability.

On the largely undeveloped eastern tip of the island, Punta Cana Resort and Club is a partnership between Dominican businessman Frank Rainieri and New York labor mediator Theodore W. Kheel—who also founded Earth Times magazine. “My vision was to create a resort that harmonizes with the local flora and fauna, where families could go to have a great vacation, and learn about the unique environment of the Dominican Republic,” says Rainieri.

The 432-room resort is set back from the three-mile white sand beach, although sweeping views accent nearly every space. Environmentally sensitive features include water- and energy-efficient buildings, gray water recycling, organic gardens and the use of native plants. Robinson says the resort maintains at least 30 percent of the original vegetation on every plot. The resort’s golf course is planted in a hybrid grass that requires low amounts of water and pesticides.

The open-air common spaces are made of local coral stone, wood and the cana leaves that gave the area its name. There are ample opportunities to ride horses on the beach, play tennis, windsurf, kayak, dance at the nightclub and enjoy fresh local fish. Accommodations range from \$80 per person per night to \$1,950 per villa per night.

## **Reefs and Lagoons**

Another attraction is just offshore: a five mile-long coral reef, where guests can snorkel or dive among sea turtles, sea fans, urchins, starfish, eels and a fantastic array of bright-colored fish. “While some coral bleaching and over-harvesting has occurred,” says Robinson, “We are working with the Dominican Ministry of the Environment and local fishermen to develop a sustainable-use plan.”

Just steps away from the beach, a boardwalk meanders through the damp and shaded forest of the resort’s 2,000-acre ecological preserve, which is home to 500 types of plants and 82 species of birds. The preserve has 11 freshwater lagoons, one of which guests can snorkel, providing a rare glimpse into a world of fish and turtles. Naturalist Gloria Caminotti describes the mangroves in halting English, and points out some elusive lizards sunning themselves.

The club established and helps support the on-site Cornell University Biodiversity Laboratory, where research focuses on the medicinal potential and ecological importance of local flora and fauna.

While visiting Punta Cana is a trip to paradise, working there isn’t so bad either. “We needed to make a livable community both inside and outside the gate,” says Rainieri. For its workers, the resort has helped provide medical coverage, housing, a new school and even bowling.

According to Robinson, future regional concerns include limiting development and water use and preserving beach access for local people.

**BRIAN HOWARD** and **STARRE VARTAN** enjoyed exploring Punta Cana.