

DIANE PHILLIPS: A tale of two lighthouses

As of Thursday, May 31, 2018

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Lighthouses captivate our imagination and move us in a way we rarely stop to define. Maybe it is because they stand apart from all else around them - tall, proud, lonely, independent, dependable, a sentry that never needs sleep.

They are there when we need them most and long for their light. We never think about how they are maintained or who looks after them, we just know they help us find our way home from a stormy sea, lighting our way into a harbour where we can anchor or dock safely to replenish supplies, reconnect with loved ones or simply return to the life we had before we sailed off. Beyond the practical, there is a mystique about lighthouses, guiding beacons that shepherd us, twinkling in the worst of storms, reassuring us.

We marvel, too, at the life of the few remaining lighthouse keepers, someone we believe must be so content with his own company he does not need ours. If ever we had Peeping Tom tendencies, they would be directed to see how the lighthouse keeper spends the long hours and, in bitterly cold weather, the lonely days.

We are so inured to the vulnerability of lighthouses we act as if we had no responsibility toward them. We behave as if we expect them to sustain themselves with the same steely determination they show to storms, letting the angry seas slap them until the waves subside, emerging hammered but proud.

But in one place in The Bahamas, the lighthouse has a friend. In fact, it has a whole community dedicated to its preservation and well-being. The famed red-and-white candy-striped lighthouse at Elbow Cay, Abaco, is so respected by the community that books and poems are written about it, tens of thousands of photos have been taken of it over the years, and there is a group of people so dedicated to its survival that they run a gift shop open daily with 100 percent of the proceeds going to the lighthouse. The Elbow Reef Lighthouse has become the centrepiece of a community, not merely serving to guide vessels into safe harbour, but uniting residents, second homeowners and repeat visitors, all dedicated to keeping the edifice and its history alive. Women sew potholders with images of the lighthouse, selling them as fund-raisers. There is a newsletter called the Lightstation News, the most recent one packed with images from the kind of gala that Abaco excels at – black tie and barefoot, proceeds also going to the lighthouse. The Diamonds are Forever campaign raised \$128,000 to replace diamond weather glass that had to be renewed.

Sometime last year, while other buoys and lighthouses around the world were in varying states of disrepair as boaters increasingly relied on GPS and other electronic guides, the Elbow Reef Lighthouse got new life. Some 102 pieces of 3/8-inch curved glass, mined and manufactured in South Carolina, were installed around the tower, two pieces a day until at the end there were no more leaks and the re-birth was re-celebrated with a reverence usually reserved for religious symbols. Why all the fuss over a single structure? Standing atop a hill, overlooking the picturesque town with its busy harbour thriving on boating, the Elbow Reef Lighthouse is the last surviving kerosene mantle hand-wound rotating Fresnel lens lighthouse in the world.

It is no wonder the town around the lighthouse is proud.

But the story could have ended very differently if people had not cared so much or if they had depended upon someone else to restore, preserve and respect the historic treasure that today holds a world record. What might have happened if Abaconians, second homeowners, yachtsmen and fans had not taken on the responsibility themselves? With the strain on limited government resources and demands to spend on disaster recovery along with education, health care, hospitals, the war on crime, infrastructure and other areas including economic development, preserving an old lighthouse may seem like a luxury. Or, at the very least, it may fall so low on the list of must-do's that preservation receives pennies when it needs tens of thousands of dollars.

Compare the love that is keeping the Elbow Reef Lighthouse alive with what has happened to the Paradise Island lighthouse at the western entrance to Nassau harbour. Nearly four million cruise passengers pass that lighthouse every year, but rarely do you see a photo of it appear. Why? Because it is faded, dilapidated, as impressive as a yawn at the end of a long day.

Here's what those few visitors who make the trek have to say about it and these are direct excerpts from TripAdvisor.com: "Legal but sketchy lighthouse hike" is one. "Rickety lighthouse" is the title of another. "This trip is not for the faint hearted," reads one titled "Walk from Atlantis." Those who successfully got to the "rickety" structure found it "unmanned" and "unmaintained".

Compare the lack of attention with what could be a Nassau/Paradise Island treasure to the showering of community affection for the Elbow Reef Light in Abaco.

And here is what is probably less well known. The Nassau/PI lighthouse is actually more historic. It was built and completed between 1816 and 1817, nearly half a century before Elbow Cay's, which has been operating since 1863. The PI lighthouse was originally known as the Hog Island lighthouse, undergoing a name change as Paradise Island did.

So whose responsibility is it to maintain such structures? Once again, like many things in The Bahamas, it's a little of this, a little of that, though mostly it falls under the purview of the Port Department and thus, the Port Controller, whereas maintenance of buoys at sea are largely the responsibility of the Royal Bahamas Defence Force operating under the authority of the Ministry of National Security. Yet, the RBDF has a miniscule budget for replacing lights in buoys, often destroyed deliberately by smugglers who want to avoid capture.

Where there is a major capital expenditure required for a structure or site that is connected with the marine industry or environment, it could fall to the Ministry of Transport or even Works. The western end of Paradise Island is ripe for development as a controlled, inviting beach attraction with access for locals and visitors. Such development will take deep pockets because there is only so much you can raise with a beach attraction even if it includes dining and entertainment options but with the right marketing plan, it should include restoration and maintenance of the oldest lighthouse in the country. We live in a visual world and with every lighthouse being distinctive (there are no cookie cutter lighthouses), what defines a space better than than a selfie next to a lighthouse?

When you consider what one photograph by the legendary photographer Roland Rose did to bring the Elbow Reef Lighthouse to the public's attention so many years ago, long before images were shared, liked and re-shared, it does not take great imagination to see where images of the revival of a 200-year-old lighthouse could take us. We missed the opportunity to mark its 200th birthday, but it is never too late to start doing the right thing. Preserving a piece of the past can deepen our pride in our heritage and help to secure our place in a tourism competitive future.

A tale of two lighthouses, Elbow Reef and Paradise Island, and the story of what a little love can do.