The Bermuda Environmental Sustainability Taskforce (BEST) is an independent Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and Registered Charity that was founded in 2007. Their mission is to preserve and enhance the quality of life in Bermuda for present and future generation by advocating for sustainable management and development of the physical, social and economic environments. BEST operates as an environmental watchdog, a campaigner to preserve open spaces and a voice for local residents concerned with current developments. Bermuda would be less than the paradise it can be without the campaigns and projects initiated by BEST.

What started it all was the 2006 campaign to Save the Gardens. This effort began because of the concern felt island-wide that the Bermuda Botanical Gardens should not be developed on by a new hospital. The Botanical Gardens are visited by 200,000 locals on average every year and are an essential habitat for plants, amphibians and land birds. Before BEST was established its soon-to-be-leader, environmentalist Stuart Hayward, was encouraging the public to write letters to government, make phone calls and attend public meetings so their opinions could be heard. The campaign was successful. The hospital is being built on adjacent land and the Botanical Gardens remain intact, to be enjoyed by many residents and visitors now and in the future. This incident showed a need in Bermuda for an organization such as BEST to protect open spaces and convey concerns about open space to the government.

Once launched BEST first embarked on the challenge of saving Southlands. Southlands was a 37 acre privately owned area in Warwick. The original plan to build a five star luxury hotel on the land was opposed by the public in the area and beyond. The development would have spoiled the rare relatively pristine area and some action was needed. As a first response BEST put together an event where the public were invited to tour the property with talks by Dr. David Wingate. The campaign was a success. It enabled the public views to be heard and the open space to be preserved. As a result there was a land swap and the hotel complex is now to be built on the old American Military Base at Morgan’s Point after a clean up process there is complete. Without BEST’s intervention there is a higher possibility that the Southlands site would have been built over and there would have been less effort to fully utilize the potential of Morgan’s Point.

Just down the road from Southlands another development problem arose, The Grand Atlantic Site. The zoning for the land was for tourism, hence a luxury hotel was included in the original plan and a Special Development Order (SDO) was granted. However only residential dwellings were built which are an eyesore on South Shore. An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was not carried out and as a result the concern of the eroding cliff face below was not adequately addressed. Also there were potential social problems that could mature after the development was complete. The densely compacted buildings will likely mean high levels of noise, lack of privacy and possibly higher crime rates. As predicted there was not a high demand for these properties, which sparked a greater concern when there was a proposal for more to be built on the same site. BEST worked with Warwick residents by holding an informative walk around the Grand Atlantic housing site with the aim of suspending further construction until plans for the development are available to the public, an EIA is complete and when there is evidence that the housing is needed. Without BEST, the last stage of this development surely would have continued because concerns felt by the public and the harm to the environment would not have been adequately addressed.

The Tucker’s Point development is another instance of an SDO being granted without a previous EIA. The proposed plan was to build an additional 78 private residences and 70 hotel rooms. However the site of development was too steep and densely wooded on some of Bermuda’s oldest and hardest rock. Also the application for the SDO implies there are no caves in the area but there were no surveys or studies completed confirming this to be true. BEST immediately objected to this application and encouraged the public to engage in calling for a revision of the SDO. BEST also co-hosted a walk that attracted almost two thousand people to the potential development site. Speakers explained the history of the land and the environmental damage likely to occur as a consequence of the development. The plans for the hotel expansion have been dropped. However Tuckers Point still aim to subdivide lots on Glebe Hill, Paynter’s Hill and Whitecrest Hill and sell off real estate for residences. This is another housing development project being promoted as tourism-related. BEST are still requesting for an EIA to be completed and ideally for development not to take place.

These interventions are evidence that Bermuda would have suffered environmental losses without BEST. Instead there would be considerably fewer green field sites and natural habitat would be increasingly rare. Also there is a risk that the public’s trust in the planning process could fall as well as the public’s trust in the credibility of the government’s development projects.

There is no doubt that Bermuda needs development now, and will continue to do so in the future. However, the beauty that is Bermuda needs to be cherished and protected. Bermuda needs BEST.