



**Blue
Tourism
Initiative**



Towards Sustainable Blue Tourism in the Caribbean: Policy Pathways to Support Community-Based Coastal and Marine Tourism

POLICY NOTE



CANARI (Caribbean Natural Resources Institute) is a non-profit institute headquartered in Trinidad and Tobago, facilitating stakeholder participation in the stewardship of renewable natural resources in the Caribbean.



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Towards Sustainable Blue Tourism in the Caribbean: Policy Pathways to Support Community-Based Coastal and Marine Tourism

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About the Blue Tourism Initiative

The [Blue Tourism Initiative](#) is a global multi-stakeholder innovation program focused on the environmental management, governance, and planning of coastal and maritime tourism in three marine regions: the Mediterranean, the Western Indian Ocean and the Caribbean. The project supports the participatory development of sustainable blue tourism initiatives through policy actions and a multi-stakeholder approach to inform the scalability of sustainable blue tourism in other regions.

The objectives of the Blue Tourism Initiative are to:

1. Assess the blue tourism's current global and regional situation, focusing on challenges and opportunities, and recommend directions for sustainable blue tourism development.
2. Support and monitor the implementation of sustainable blue tourism initiatives in the Mediterranean, Western Indian Ocean, and the Caribbean.
3. Integrate sustainable blue tourism management and governance at the regional policy level, share best practices, and raise awareness among key local, national, and regional stakeholders.

The Blue Tourism Initiative is co-led by the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations ([IDDRI](#)) and the Spanish Think and Do Tank [Eco-Union](#). It is co-funded by the French Facility for Global Environmental ([FFEM](#)), and implemented with three partners responsible for the project's activities in each region: The International Union for Conservation of Nature ([IUCN](#)) in the Mediterranean; Coastal Oceans Research and Development in the Indian Ocean ([CORDIO East Africa](#)) in the Western Indian Ocean and the Caribbean; and Natural Resources Institute ([CANARI](#)) in the Caribbean.

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1. Blue Tourism in the Caribbean

The Caribbean heavily relies on tourism for its GDP, employment, and foreign exchange earnings.¹ Tourism contribution to GDP reached a maximum of 14.5% in 2019 and recovered to 9.1% in 2021. Registered International Spending was up to 73% in 2019. Regarding tourism employment, it accounted for up to 13.4% of all jobs in 2021, with an estimated growth at an average rate of 4.5% annually, expected to create 1.34 million new jobs by 2032.² In the region, the tourism sector contributed more than 60 billion U.S. dollars to GDP in 2022. Among all territories, the Dominican Republic and Cuba registered the highest total contributions to GDP from tourism.³

In 2023, the region saw around 32.2 million visitors, with a 14.3% increase in international stay-over arrivals, signalling post-pandemic recovery. Cruise visits surged by 57% compared to 2019, reaching 31.1 million, with projected growth of 10 to 15% in 2024. However, this tourism growth is expected to slow down due to global economic and geopolitical challenges.⁴ Coastal and marine tourism, or blue tourism, in the Caribbean, is valued at US\$47M (12% of the global blue economy sector), representing a vital part of the regional economy⁵. Figure 1 provides a view of the economic impact of tourism in the Caribbean between 2000 and 2021.

Leveraging development opportunities in this sector, in line with the principles of the blue economy, can aid in building a more inclusive, resilient and sustainable regional future.⁶ However, alignment with global sustainability targets is vital to ensure a more inclusive and sustainable blue tourism sector. This involves addressing sectoral economic leakages, environmental impacts, limited economic inclusion, conflicts between tourism and other development needs, and climate change impacts.

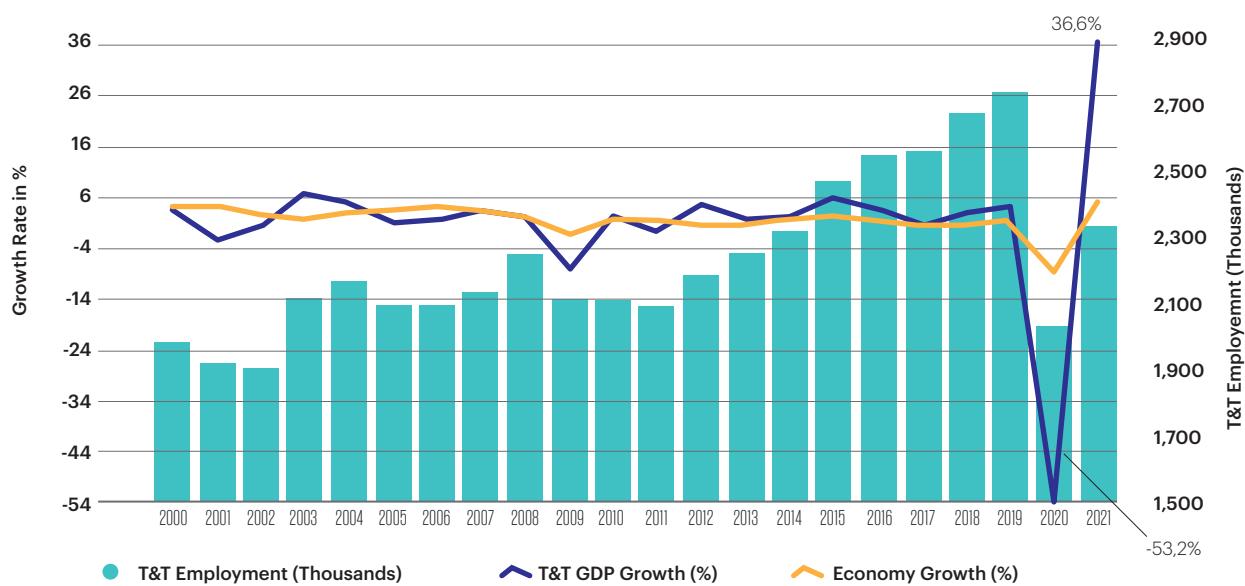
Tourism in the Caribbean has experienced rapid development over the past five decades, aiming to reduce reliance on agriculture by attracting foreign exchange and investments.⁷ The tourism development model, primarily driven by mass tourism and the cruise industry, has resulted in over-tourism (exceeding the carrying capacity of destinations)⁸ largely driven by foreign interests and the prevalence of all-inclusive resorts. This approach to tourism has exacerbated economic leakage issues in the region,⁹ gradually hindering the economic inclusivity that tourism should foster. Significant portions of tourism revenue are repatriated and so the local benefits generated by the sector are limited.¹⁰

Tourism poses significant challenges, particularly as activities and infrastructure tend to concentrate along coastlines, exerting pressures on marine and coastal ecosystems already vulnerable to the effects of climate change and other anthropogenic threats.¹¹ Coastal development, exacerbated by tourism, has already severely impacted coral reefs, mangroves, and seagrass beds across the Caribbean¹², also threatening water, food, and energy sectors.¹³ Efforts are underway to diversify tourism and decrease pressure on both community and ecosystems, while still generating important economic benefits for the region. These efforts are partly driven by global demands for sustainable and authentic experiences.¹⁴ However, the Caribbean tourism sector faces challenges in transforming to more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient practices.

- 1 Mooney, H. and Zegarra, M. A., (2020). *The pandemic's unprecedented shock to tourism in Latin America and the Caribbean*.
- 2 World Travel & Tourism Council, (2023). *Travel & Tourism in the Caribbean Prospects for growth*.
- 3 Statista (2024). *Total contribution of travel and tourism to the gross domestic product in the Caribbean in 2022, by country or territory*.
- 4 Rosenblatt, D., Mooney, H. and Clayton, K. (2023). *Regional Overview: Global and regional economies at a crossroads*. Inter American Development Bank.
- 5 Patil, P., Virdin, J., Diaz, M. and Roberts, J., (2016). *Toward A Blue Economy: A Promise for Sustainable Growth in the Caribbean; An Overview*.
- 6 Balestracci, G. and Sciacca, A., (2023). *Towards Sustainable Blue Tourism: Trends, Challenges and Policy Pathways*.

- 7 Clegg P., Cumberbatch, J. and Degia K., (2021). *Tourism in the Caribbean and the Blue Economy: Can the two be aligned?* In *The Caribbean Blue Economy*. Eds Clegg P, Mahon R, McConney P and Oxenford H.A. Routledge, London and NY.
- 8 Cheer, J. M. and Novelli, M., (2023). *What is overtourism and how can we overcome it?*
- 9 Leotaud, N., Girvan, A. and Jattansingh, S., (2021). *The Blue Economy Winners and Losers in the Wider Caribbean*. In *The Caribbean Blue Economy*. Eds Clegg P, Mahon R, McConney P and Oxenford H.A. Routledge, London and NY.
- 10 Jayawardena, C. and Ramajesingh, D., (2003). *Performance of tourism analysis: a Caribbean perspective*. International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 176-179.
- 11 Walker, L., (2022). *Climate Change, the Caribbean Sea, and the ocean economy - securing livelihoods of Caribbean People*. Focus.
- 12 United Nations Environment Programme-Caribbean Environment Programme, (2020). *The State of Nearshore Marine Habitats in the Wider Caribbean*.
- 13 Crisman, T.L. and Winters, Z. S., (2023). *Caribbean small island developing states must incorporate water quality and quantity in adaptive management of the water-energy-food nexus*. Frontiers in Environmental Science, 11.
- 14 Euromonitor International, (2019). *Diversification of Caribbean tourism experiences*: A custom report prepared by Euromonitor International.

Figure 1. Travel and Tourism GDP change, overall economy change, Travel & Tourism employment



Source: World Travel & Tourism Council, (2023). Travel & Tourism in the Caribbean Prospects for growth.

2. Regional Vulnerabilities and Challenges to Sustainable Blue Tourism

Caribbean Small Island Developing States (SIDS) face significant challenges in promoting more inclusive and sustainable blue tourism models and practices. They are often excessively dependent on tourism, which exacerbates their vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters. The impacts of climate change are evident throughout the region, with rising sea levels and sea surface temperatures causing substantial damage to marine ecosystems.¹⁵ Coral bleaching, coastal erosion, and the loss of essential habitats threaten blue tourism activities such as snorkelling and diving, which depend on the health of these ecosystems.

Alarmingly, projections from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) suggest that a 1.5-degree Celsius increase in global warming could result in the disappearance of between 70 and 90% of the world's coral reefs.¹⁶ Such loss not only diminishes biodiversity but also undermine the resilience of coastal communities that rely on these ecosystems for their livelihoods.

Moreover, damages caused by sea level rise can amount to up to USD 22 billion annually by 2050 and a staggering USD 46 billion per year by 2100, representing a significant portion of the current regional GDP.¹⁷ Extreme events such as

tropical cyclones, which are exacerbated by climate change, cause an estimated US\$835 million worth of damage annually in the Caribbean¹⁸ and pose multifaceted threats to coastal tourism infrastructure, disrupt business operations, and negatively impact the destination's image. Additionally, influxes of Sargassum seaweed, fuelled by warming oceans among other things, poses a grave threat to coastal tourism in the region. These large mats of seaweed impact corals and other marine life, disrupt fisheries and other coastal activities, and can make coastal areas inaccessible and unsightly for tourists, leading to the closure of hotels and resorts and adversely affecting local communities socio-economically.¹⁹

Therefore, the economic toll of climate change on Caribbean tourism cannot be underestimated and must be carefully considered to promote a more resilient tourism sector.

The cumulative impact of these climate-induced stressors not only diminishes the attractiveness of the Caribbean as a tourist destination but also undermines the socio-economic stability of the region. The frequency and intensity of these climatic events are expected to escalate with climate change, further exacerbating the vulnerabilities of Caribbean tourism.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic led to unprecedented revenue losses and worsened existing socio-economic disparities in the region, with women being most impacted by job losses and the closure of micro- and small enterprises. Geopolitical uncertainties, such as the conflict in Ukraine, further impeded progress towards a more sustainable tourism recovery in the region.²⁰

15 Van Meerbeeck, C., Zermoglio, F. and Bonnin Roncerel, A., (2021). *Country analysis: Resilience to climate change at a glance*.

16 Van Meerbeeck, C., Zermoglio, F. and Bonnin Roncerel, A., (2021). *Country analysis: Resilience to climate change at a glance*.

17 Thomas, A., Menke, I. and Serdeczny, O., (2018). *Loss and Damage Costing and Financing Mechanisms: Caribbean Outlook*.

18 Lewis-Cameron, A. and Brown-Williams, T., (2021). *Rethinking Destination Success: An Island Perspective*. St. Augustine: University of the West Indies (Unpublished manuscript), 16pp.

19 United Nations Environment Programme, (2021). *Sargassum influx in the Wider Caribbean Region Sargassum challenges and impacts in the WCR*.

20 Jessop, D., (2022). *War casting shadow over tourism's recovery - Caribbean News Global*. Caribbean News Global (CNG).

In the face of these interconnected challenges, there is an urgent need to reimagine tourism development in the Caribbean by prioritising inclusivity, sustainability, and resilience. Policies aimed at maximising local economic benefits, conserving natural resources, and promoting social equity are essential. This will require shifting away from traditional success metrics that predominantly focus on visitor numbers and embracing a more holistic tourism development approach that values environmental integrity and community well-being. The Caribbean can and should take proactive steps to chart a path towards a more sustainable, resilient, and prosperous tourism future.

3. Reshaping Tourism in the Caribbean: The Role of Community-Based Tourism

Tourism stakeholders increasingly advocate for policy and strategic tourism reforms, particularly in the post COVID-19 era, emphasising a shift towards stewardship, experiential focus, and quality over quantity.²¹ Community-based tourism (CBT) offers a sustainable tourism development avenue that aligns with regional agendas. CBT is defined by the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) as "A collaborative approach to tourism in which community members exercise control through active participation in appraisal, development, management and/or ownership (whole or in part) of enterprises that delivers net socio-economic benefits to community members, conserves natural and cultural [heritage] resources and adds value to the experiences of local and foreign visitors. This encompasses both tourism activities in a community and goods and services supplied to the tourism industry by one or more community members."²²

The rise in interest in CBT reflects a growing demand for sustainable and authentic experiences, prompting its integration into Caribbean tourism planning and initiatives in various countries. Despite notable examples of successful CBT, there is a lack of comprehensive data on its triple bottom-line impacts, hindering widespread policy support. CBT can address local concerns, emphasising harmonious tourism infrastructure development, community empowerment, and fostering a sense of community,²³ mitigating the structural inequalities and power dynamics that often impede inclusivity in tourism decision-making, particularly in coastal and marine areas.²⁴

Therefore, CBT can serve as a pathway to blue tourism, promoting partnerships among local communities, stakeholders,

and government agencies for inclusive, environmentally responsible, and economically beneficial tourism development across the Caribbean. Community participation throughout the planning, management, and monitoring phases is, however, vital for successful CBT, ensuring environmental sustainability, socio-economic inclusion, and equitable benefit distribution. Given the potential of CBT to enable a more sustainable and inclusive blue tourism in the Caribbean, policy-makers must establish frameworks or build on existing ones to frame and enable CBT as part of the blue tourism economy.

4. Policy and Legal Frameworks for Community-Based Tourism

The [2020 Caribbean Sustainable Tourism Policy and Development Framework](#) by the Caribbean Tourism Organisation sets the stage for the 2020-2030 decade. The framework explicitly aligns with the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and other global and regional policies, emphasising tourism's potential for driving sustainable development, providing opportunities for marginalised groups, and preserving environmental and cultural assets. Notably, the Framework prioritises CBT, village tourism, and heritage tourism for sustainable growth in the Caribbean. Key areas of the Framework include inter-sectoral linkages for community benefits, environmental conservation, and climate change resilience. The CTO has also developed a CBT Toolkit²⁵ to support Caribbean countries to develop CBT. Several countries including Jamaica, Grenada, and Trinidad and Tobago are embracing CBT in their national policies, recognising its potential for economic development and community empowerment.

In [Jamaica](#), for instance, the [National Community Tourism Policy and Strategy](#) (2015) aims to create a competitive community tourism sector that benefits both national interests and local communities. Initiatives like the 'Country Style' network and 'Unique Jamaica' program promote diverse community experiences. In 2020, Jamaica announced the establishment of a Community Tourism Unit to increase local participation and offer unique experiences to visitors.

In [Grenada](#), the [National Sustainable Development Plan 2020-2035](#) promotes nature-based, eco-, and cultural tourism and advocates for CBT activities such as home tours with home-cooked meals, cultural exchanges, village garden walk-throughs, and fishing excursions with local fishers.

In [Trinidad and Tobago](#), the [National Community-Based Tourism Sub-Policy](#) (2021) is being developed to diversify tourism, empower local communities, and promote sustainability. The Sub-Policy, based on the Caribbean Tourism Organization's CBT Toolkit, defines CBT as "A type of tourism

21 Lewis, C.T., (2022). *Climate Change and the Caribbean: Challenges and Vulnerabilities in Building Resilience to Tropical Cyclones*. Climate, 10(11), p.178.

22 Caribbean Tourism Organisation, (2006). *Competing with the Best: Good Practices in Community-Based Tourism in the Caribbean*.

23 Riyanto, Iqbal, M., Supriono, Fahmi, M.R.A. and Yuliani, E. S., (2023). *The effect of community involvement and perceived impact on residents' overall well-being: Evidence in Malang marine tourism*. Cogent Business & Management, 10(3).

24 Evans, L. S., Buchan, P. M., Fortnam, M., Honig, M. and Heaps, L., (2023). *Putting coastal communities at the center of a sustainable blue economy: A review of risks, opportunities, and strategies*. Frontiers in Political Science, 4.

25 Compete Caribbean, 2019. *Community-Based Tourism Toolkit*. [online] Compete Caribbean Partnership Facility.



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that engages and empowers residents in the development, management and ownership of tourism products and services in their communities. It emphasises the need to protect, preserve and promote the environment, as well as historical and socio-cultural assets of the community." (p. 18).

However, despite these efforts, tourism legislation in the Caribbean tends to favour coastal hotel development and other more conventional mass tourism industry standards over community-based initiatives. This is influenced by power dynamics favouring investors. As a result, existing tourism legislation in the Caribbean often lacks alignment with sustainable tourism goals, and despite positive steps like the establishment of a Community Tourism Agency in Saint Lucia, there is still much to be done to ensure CBT's scalability, sustainability, and impact. Blue tourism, integral to Caribbean SIDS, faces sustainability challenges exacerbated by climate change and economic shocks. While CBT offers a promising avenue for environmentally sustainable and inclusive blue tourism, policy efforts need to be scaled up for CBT to realise its full potential.

Moreover, strengthening partnerships among governments, private sector stakeholders, and local communities is essential to overcome barriers to CBT implementation and foster inclusive, resilient, and sustainable tourism economies in the region. A number of policy directions are proposed in the following section, and they can be considered to enable inclusive, resilient, and sustainable blue tourism in the Caribbean through a CBT model.

5. Policy Pathways Towards a more Sustainable Blue Tourism in the Caribbean

Blue tourism is a crucial component of the Caribbean economy and its overall sustainable development agenda. However, despite its importance, the current model of coastal and marine tourism is unsustainable. Also, due to climate change, natural disasters, and external shocks, the negative impacts on host communities are exacerbated, and the economic, social, and environmental assets needed to support sustainable and inclusive forms of blue tourism are being degraded. The Caribbean's reimagining of the tourism sector points to CBT as a potential model to drive a type of blue tourism that is environmentally sustainable while delivering economic benefits to local communities in coastal areas. However, while the Caribbean has positive experiences with CBT to draw upon, much remains to be done to achieve scale, sustainability, and impact.

The institutional framework supporting blue tourism and CBT in the Caribbean includes numerous inter-linked public, private, and civil society stakeholders operating at local, national, regional, and international levels. Some countries have established or are establishing dedicated policies, agencies, and initiatives to boost CBT. However, the Caribbean is still working towards establishing national and regional coordinating mechanisms with sectoral integration across the public sector, the private sector, and civil society. Therefore, it will be essential to develop coordinated approaches supporting sustainable and inclusive blue tourism through CBT. These

coordinated efforts will not only help manage conflicts among competing users of coastal and marine resources but also identify needs and deliver suitable support to community and industry stakeholders aiming to develop CBT as an alternative to more mass coastal tourism models. This approach can mitigate the tourism impact and leverage blue tourism opportunities, including fostering regional resilience to climate change.

Moving forward, seven policy pathways should be considered to improve the policy environment for sustainable blue tourism through CBT in the Caribbean:

1 Reform policies, laws, and plans to support CBT by incentivizing its development and providing special support for inclusive and sustainable tourism models.

Regulatory and strategic frameworks should focus on fostering good practices including by offering tailored support for sustainable tourism models, such as CBT in coastal areas. Additionally, developing sub-sector policies and plans to strengthen the enabling environment for CBT remains essential.

2 Evaluate and promote the socio-economic and environmental benefits of CBT through comprehensive data collection, market studies, and the development of assessment frameworks.

Many CBT micro-enterprises are informal, making their impact hard to measure. Data on their economic, environmental, and social impacts is needed to support CBT by informing related policies and plans. However, common assessment indicators and frameworks are essential to evaluate CBT's contributions, using both scientific and traditional knowledge for informed decisions.

3 Boost the adoption of inclusive governance models for decision-making, ensuring multi-stakeholder coordination, addressing community priorities, and strengthening institutions for CBT.

Multi-stakeholder, multi-sector, and multi-layered coordination are required to ensure that stakeholders have ample opportunities to actively participate in decision-making processes. In the Caribbean, National Intersectoral Coordination Mechanisms (NICs) are seen as good governance structures given the complexity of actors and issues encompassing marine governance. Ensuring the community stakeholders have a voice in these mechanisms' decision-making processes is critical to addressing priorities and ensuring socio-economic inclusion.

4 Building multi-sectoral networks to empower CBT through partnerships.

These networks should increasingly recognise that enterprises and communities in host destinations are not merely receivers of funding but rather important actors in the blue tourism value chain. Policies and plans should encourage locally-driven economic development and business clusters in communities across the region, favouring a more collaborative and less competitive tourism approach.

5 Mainstreaming climate resilience in planning, development, and management of the blue tourism sector.

Given the extreme vulnerability of the Caribbean's tourism sector to climate change and the likelihood of increasing and severe impacts, incorporating strategies and actions to address risks and build resilience in tourism policies and plans is essential. Conducting mapping of climate vulnerabilities along tourism and CBT value chains and assessing feasible and impactful adaptation measures that can be taken by governments and tourism businesses will help mainstream climate resilience in the sector. At the business level, providing technical and financial assistance to help CBT providers 'climate proof' their businesses is crucial.

6 Building business and technical skills among communities and CBT entrepreneurs, along with fostering gender and youth empowerment.

Policy actions should pay particular attention to identifying the business and technical support needs of existing and aspiring CBT ventures in coastal destinations and providing tailored business support services. Utilising digitization as a solution can enhance technical skills and access to micro-finances. Addressing gender disparities in blue tourism must also be emphasised by policies and plans, to ensure resilience, inclusive, and sustainable Caribbean blue tourism.

7 Develop innovative and flexible financing to boost blue-green business models and business continuity.

It is critical for micro and small enterprises in CBT to access micro-finances to propel initiatives. Financing can be shifted away from facilitating visitor access through investments in larger ports and terminals towards innovative and flexible financing to help micro and small businesses in coastal communities. Microinsurance is a key component of shock-responsive social protection as it presents the most vulnerable and those with low-income the ability to protect themselves against risks. Existing parametric insurance products being piloted in the Caribbean can be expanded to support CBT.

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