

Current State

Each of the six Dutch Caribbean islands have their own unique draw, enticing visitors from around the world each year. From environments ranging from lush tropical habitats, cloud and dry tropical forests to rich coral reefs, each island has something unique to offer. Unfortunately, recent research has highlighted areas in which these environments have become gravely threatened, and if no action is taken soon, these environments could disappear completely.

The recent State of Nature report published by Wageningen University has brought a lot of attention to a number of environmental issues faced by the islands of Bonaire, Saba and St. Eustatius. In this report, all 33 experts concluded that the “*Conservation status¹ of the biodiversity in the Caribbean Netherlands is assessed as moderately unfavorable to very unfavorable*”.

Another report brought attention to significant issues within Bonaire’s reef, noting shallow areas are hardly growing, and some show signs of erosion. In fact, they found a low or negative growth rate for most of the shallow water reefs and noted that only a small portion of the reef will be able to withstand

the pressures of sea level rise [1]. Additionally, there is widespread perception that these reefs are healthy, however this is now being attributed to what researchers are calling ‘shifting baseline syndrome’, and these reefs are actually losing important calcifiers and there is an overall decrease in coral cover [1, 14, 16; 21]. Similar trends have also been seen on Saba, where coral cover has steeply declined since the 1990s. In the 90s, coral cover was at nearly 30%, however a recent survey found coral cover to be closer to 8%, where most of the bottom cover is attributed to macro-algae, dead coral or rocks [17]. St. Eustatius had a similar reduction, going from 30% to 5% since 2005 [17].

For each of the six islands, their natural assets are under significant threat from a variety of local pressures. These pressures include land degradation due to coastal development, erosion and sedimentation, along with eutrophication caused by inadequate water treatment, biodiversity threats such as overfishing, disease and invasive species [17]. Furthermore, an increase in unexpected events such as Sargassum blooms or the effects of the Corona virus pandemic adds an additional burden for these islands to manage.



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¹ The Conservation Status is used in the European Union for reporting on the status of species and habitats protected under the European Habitat Directive (see http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/habitatsdirective/index_en.htm).