

# Tourism in the Dutch Caribbean

## Overview

The world is continuously getting smaller as globe trotting gets easier with each passing year. In fact, tourism is one of the fastest growing industries [33]. One study by the World Travel and Tourism Counsel found, that in 2015, 1 in 11 jobs was related to tourism [35]. This is especially true in the Caribbean, where tourism has grown at a rate of 7%, nearly double the global average of 4% [3, 13]. Although tourism has continued to increase, natural disasters, such as Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017 proved to be devastating to local tourism [19]. Fortunately, 2018 and 2019 saw a rebound of these numbers, yet this was completely undone by the Corona virus halting all travel in 2020. These various incidents prove the fragility of the entire tourism sector, and show how important it is to design a tourism plan which can help weather these dips.

At first glance it may appear that the demands of increasing tourism are at direct odds with conservation efforts, but this does not have to be the case. Designing a sustainable tourism plan will not only work to protect the environmental richness that inspired tourists to visit the islands in the first place, but actually enhance their overall experience. This special edition BioNews will work to introduce the idea of Sustainable Tourism and provide examples and objectives to help drive these efforts into the future. It is paramount

that the development and growth of the tourism industry within the Dutch Caribbean take into account the fragility of its natural resources and work to ensure that these environments are protected for everyone to enjoy for years to come.

## Mass Tourism vs. Ecotourism

As international travel has become increasingly common and has become a significant economic driver within the Caribbean, these islands have seen unparalleled changes to their environment within a single generation [33]. All tourists cannot be lumped together, as there are a variety of different types of tourism, from extended stay tourists who may choose to spend the winter months beachside to cruise boat tourists who spend a few hours soaking in what each island has to offer. In general, tourism in the Caribbean is predominately focused on marine activities such as swimming, snorkeling, diving, sport fishing, and yachting [33]. Mass tourism (low-cost packages) makes up a large portion of the tourist market [15]. This is especially true as the airline industry continues to press for cheaper flight options, making mass tourism packages increasingly common and affordable.

However, there is another side of tourism. Consumers are learning that their choices are contributing to the overall health of these

environments, and increasingly “quality” is defined by environmental and ethical components [15]. Ecotourism has seen a rise in recent years, evident by Bonaire’s push to become the world’s first blue destination, for example. Ecotourism could highlight some of the islands’ best natural features while still allowing tourists the opportunity to come and explore.

It is still unclear how the effects of the Corona virus pandemic will affect world travel once it’s behind us. It is now more important than ever for islands to diversify their interests to allow their economies to withstand and rebound after a disaster. Low budget, high volume tourism has developed at a great cost to each of the islands, but as these islands begin to rebuild, a focus on sustainable tourism options could help stabilize the local economies and increase their economic resilience in the future.





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### Value of Caribbean Ecosystem Services

The Caribbean is an important biodiversity hotspot both above and below water. This region is home to 2.6% of the world's plant species and 3.5% of its vertebrate species [33]. In addition, nearly 7% of the world's reef ecosystems are found within the Caribbean [33]. Recent studies have identified, within the Caribbean, 755 species, both plant and animal, that are at risk of extinction. The 2011 Island Conservation report highlighted 121 critically endangered and 111 endangered mammals, reptiles, amphibians and birds, along with 13 bird species which have already become extinct [33].

Crystal blue waters, healthy coral reefs and stunning terrestrial landscapes are just a few reasons tourists flock to these islands each year. Recent TEEB (The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity) research found that nature/ecosystem services of Bonaire, Saba and St Eustatius represent 31%, 27% and 24% of the island's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2013 [5, 6]. Similar TEEB information for Aruba found that that revenue generated from the ecosystem services was valued at an estimated US\$ 269 million per year, and a poll found that around 50% of current visitors would not return if current environmental conditions deteriorated [36].

On St. Maarten, of the 500,000 stay-over visitors, 80% were found to have engaged in coral reef related activities (such as using the beaches, diving or snorkeling) [2]. On Curaçao, marine-associated tourism (excluding cruise boats) represented 38% of the total economic value of tourism in 2014. Restoring and conserving these environments is going to prove instrumental in keeping tourists returning year after year. Building a sustainable tourism plan will help ensure these environments are around for tourists to enjoy for many years to come.