Association of Caribbean States Disaster Risk Reduction, Environment and Caribbean Sea Directorate Caribbean Sea Commission World Environment Day 2022

Researchers predict that plastic in the ocean “will outweigh fish” by 2025. Credit: Public Domain

In the universe are billions of galaxies,

In our galaxy are billions of planets.

But there is #OnlyOneEarth.

Let’s take care of it!

#OnlyOneEarth is the campaign slogan for World Environment Day 2022, which will be celebrated on 5 June. During this day, collective and transformative actions are taken to celebrate, protect and restore our planet. This year's theme was used at the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972. The Conference is led by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and this year will be hosted by Sweden.

World Environment Day is an important date to encourage global awareness and action for environmental protection, as well as to promote progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Fifty years after the first conference on environmental issues, it is important to remember that humanity is facing a triple environmental crisis: rising temperatures and sea levels; we are experiencing the sixth mass extinction of species and loss of habitat, and pollution is present in every corner of the world.

The Greater Caribbean is one of the most threatened regions in the world due to the effects of climate change, and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in particular are highly vulnerable. Land-use change is the main threat related to habitat loss and 60% of Caribbean biodiversity is under some category of threat. In addition, the Caribbean Sea is the second most plastic-polluted sea in the world.

Unfortunately, the Caribbean islands are the largest per capita plastic polluters in the world, with land-based activities generating between 70-85% of the litter that ends up in the Caribbean Sea. Countries such as Trinidad and Tobago, Antigua and Barbuda, St. Kitts and Nevis, Guyana, Barbados, St. Lucia, Bahamas, Grenada, Anguilla and Aruba generate more plastic waste than the weight of 20,000 space shuttles.

It is important to remember that the oceans regulate our climate and generate most of the oxygen we breathe while supporting key economic sectors and harbouring biodiversity. Solid waste that ends up in the oceans poses biological, ecological, physical and chemical impacts and threats to the environment and the biodiversity it harbours; it is estimated that the amount of plastic waste flowing into aquatic ecosystems will triple by 2040.

Facing these scenarios, it is essential to transform our economies and societies to make them inclusive, just and more connected to nature. Societies must work together to address these pressing issues, making a sustainable living the default option.

There are actions and efforts underway in the region such as the assessment of regulatory responses to reduce marine pollution from single-use plastics and polystyrene; 11 Caribbean countries have introduced legislative policies that include fines and penalties for non-compliance, there are several programmes and forums to accommodate stakeholder participation, as well as the dissemination of extensive public education campaigns.

Given the transboundary nature of this issue, there is a need to go beyond national efforts and harmonise regional and international approaches. The ACS, as an organisation for "consultation, cooperation and concerted action" seeks to achieve greater cooperation and initiative in this area through its Plan of Action 2022 - 2028, by promoting mechanisms to guarantee the right of every person to a healthy environment and to foster sustainable development through the generation, recovery and integrated management of waste; it is necessary to promote measures to mitigate the impacts generated by solid waste on the environment and the health of the populations. The preservation and conservation of the Greater Caribbean is a mandate of paramount importance for the ACS and our region demands it.