World Oceans Day - Revitalization: collective action for the oceans



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The United Nations has declared 8 June World Oceans Day: a day for humanity to celebrate the ocean and focus on collective actions to protect and restore them. Oceans covers more than 70% of the planet's surface. It is mankind’s main source of life and sustenance. The ocean produces at least 50% of the planet's oxygen, is home to most of the earth's biodiversity, and houses protein sources for more than a billion people worldwide.

Leading scientists around the world have concluded that a healthy ocean is a critical part of the solution to the climate and biodiversity crises. To increase the ocean’s resilience and continue to enjoy healthy and abundant marine flora and fauna, it is essential that 30% of the oceans be protected by 2030. Currently, only between 8 and 17% of the world's ocean cover is protected.

The Caribbean Sea, as an area of the Atlantic Ocean in the tropics of the Western Hemisphere, is one of the most biodiverse areas in the world due to its geographical complexity. The Greater Caribbean Region is comprised of 7,000 islands and is inhabited by more than 250 million people and approximately 12,000 different species have been recognized. The area is also home to 9% of the existing reefs on the planet, including the Mesoamerican Reef System (SAM) and the Belize Barrier Reef.

Coral reefs provide a wide variety of ecosystem services to the inhabitants of the Greater Caribbean. They are home to a quarter of marine species and provide food security due to the large number of species that are found in the reef ecosystem. Reefs provide jobs for millions of tourism workers and serve as natural barriers that protect from the damaging effects of strong waves during storms or hurricanes. Beneficial medicinal components have also been found in several species. To get a better idea of the ecosystem services that reefs provide, according to a study published by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in 2019, each year, coral reefs and associated reef activities generate an estimated economic value of $7.9 billion USD for the tourism industry and attract nearly 11 million visitors to the Caribbean islands annually.

Unfortunately, the rate at which Caribbean coral reefs have degenerated is alarming, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) estimates that more than 50% of Caribbean reefs have disappeared since the 1970s and it is estimated that by 2034 Caribbean corals could disappear altogether. The main threats to the conservation of the coral reefs of the Greater Caribbean are overfishing, pollution of coastal areas, global warming and the presence of invasive species.

In these critical times, it is essential to support and promote the conservation of the Caribbean Sea. To achieve a healthy ocean, well conserved coral reefs are needed in order to ensure compliance with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The development of protected and conserved areas should be recognized as the main mechanism for the preservation of the nature and ecosystem services provided by the coral reefs. We must work together to create a new balance so that we do not exhaust all that the Caribbean reefs offer us, but restore their vitality and give a new life.

Fortunately, there is good news, there are various regional programmes and initiatives aimed at the protection and sustainable use of marine biodiversity and the use of coastal areas, such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which is responsible for coordinating responses to environmental problems within the United Nations system. The regional agreement called the Protocol of Specially Protected Wild Flora and Fauna Areas (SPAW), is focused on improving the management of protected areas, conserving vulnerable and threatened species and assisting countries with other regional and global agreements and commitments on biological diversity.

The ACS, through its Strategic Objective C, seeks to reduce environmental risks, biodiversity loss and promote the restoration, preservation, conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and other natural resources through better governance of the Caribbean Sea. The Association as an organization of "consultation, cooperation and concerted action" seeks to achieve greater cooperation and initiative in this area through its Plan of Action 2022 – 2028, by promoting the sustainable management of the Caribbean Sea and its resources through the development of strategies that allow incorporating innovative practices, nature-based solutions, the integrated approach aimed at the conservation and preservation of ecosystems and biodiversity. The preservation and conservation of the Greater Caribbean is a mandate of paramount importance to the ACS and our region demands it now more than ever.