SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AN ECONOMIC DRIVING FORCE FOR THE GREATER CARIBBEAN : Advancements made at the 23rd Meeting of the Special Committee on Sustainable Tourism

Port of Spain (July 09, 2012) – Managua, Nicaragua became a hub of activity as an estimated thirty (30) delegates gathered to attend the 23rd Meeting of the Special Committee on Sustainable Tourism (SCST) of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) and 1st Preparatory Meeting of the 3rd Meeting of Ministers of Tourism of the Greater Caribbean (TMM-3), held from 28th – 29th June, 2012. Included in the high-level gathering were delegations from ten (10) ACS Member States and representatives of leading regional and international organisations: the Caribbean Tourism Organisation (CTO), the Central American Tourism Integration Secretariat (SITCA for its acronym in Spanish), and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

The Chairman of the Special Committee and Minister of the Nicaraguan Tourism Institute, Honourable Mario Salinas underscored that the major objective of this meeting was to efficiently market and integrate tourism with its various sub-sectors in an effort to foster solidarity and cooperation among ACS Member States and Associate Member States with the ultimate outcome being increased economic benefits at national and regional levels.

The ACS Director of Sustainable Tourism, Ms. Gloria de Mees, on behalf of the Secretary General conveyed to the Government the vision of the Association's new administration as regards strengthening its role as a platform facilitating regional dialogue, cooperation and concerted efforts

in areas of common interest. Aligned to this mission, the objective of the two days gathering was focused on maximizing the potential of the ACS Sustainable Tourism Work Programme by translating the pending and new initiatives into tangible outcomes.

At the conclusion of the meeting, some important advancements were made, foremost of which was the endorsement for cooperation between the Secretariats of the ACS, CTO and SITCA, as instilled in a cooperation matrix presented to the gathering, and designed to enhance cooperation among the three regional agencies and simultaneously define a jointly coordinated route for collaboration in priority areas for intervention. On an institutional level, the meeting recommended that the ACS develop a horizontal cooperation plan in order to facilitate the exchange of best practises and capacity building between countries.

In the programmatic areas that form the focus of the ACS Sustainable Tourism Work Programme, the meeting mandated the Secretariat to commence the exchange of students among the countries of the Greater Caribbean for language training and cultural immersion, parallel to the finalization of the framework of the Centre for the Promotion of Languages and Cultures of the Greater Caribbean (CPLC). Various countries pledged their commitment and resources to this initiative of building a knowledge society sensitive to the values and culture of the Greater Caribbean considering its contribution to enhance regional trade, travel and cooperation.

In the area of the promotion of Multi-Destination Tourism (MDT), the meeting also favourably considered proposals geared towards knowledge exchange, capacity building and academic research related to Cruise Tourism in the Greater Caribbean and Entrepreneurial Strengthening with a focus on Women. Empowerment of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME's) through funding modalities and knowledge and skill enhancement exercises was deemed very important taking into account the possibilities for employment and contribution to sustainable and inclusive growth. In the area of air connectivity as a component of MDT, the Secretariat found support from the ACS membership to consolidate efforts with regional transport executives to engage in dialogue, with the aim to enhance intra-regional travel and the promotion of MDT packages.

On the topic of Visitor Safety and Security, the Secretariat’s proposal on tourism policing through the engagement of At-Risk Youth was highly commended. More importantly, the significance of the Sustainable Tourism Zone of the Caribbean (STZC) was re-affirmed as a vehicle to enrich and strengthen destination competitiveness, management and promotion. The fruits from this initiative being the development of the STZC website, the establishment of a Regional Cooperation Mechanism, continued publication of the quarterly news letter "In the Zone", and alignment of the STZC indicators to national and hemispheric initiatives, all of which were applauded and encouraged by the meetings’ participants.

Delegations proclaimed the meeting as being a resounding success and pledged their commitment to support the ACS in the work to strengthen and promote the sustainable development of tourism in the Greater Caribbean.