Sustainable Wildlife Governance for the Greater Caribbean

By: Anaïs Régina Renel

On 20 December 2013, during the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), March 3 was proclaimed United Nations World Wildlife Day (WWD).

World Wildlife Day raises awareness of biodiversity, highlights the benefits wildlife provides to humanity, and draws attention to the consequences of its decline. The 2026 observance focuses on medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs), species central to health, cultural practices, and local economies — illustrating how human societies depend on biodiversity for both survival and development. Wildlife underpins essential ecosystem services, including food provision, water regulation, pollination, climate regulation, and cultural value. Biodiversity loss therefore entails not only ecological degradation but also increased vulnerability, economic hardship, and social instability for communities that depend directly on natural systems.

At the same time, the emphasis on MAPs underscores the practical dimension of wildlife conservation. In many regions, including the Greater Caribbean, wild plants remain vital for primary healthcare, nutrition, and income generation. In the Greater Caribbean, traditional plant use remains widespread. In rural Barbados, over 75% of residents reported using botanical medicines, while a national survey in Trinidad documented 917 plant-based remedies derived from 96 species across rural communities. These findings demonstrate that wild and locally cultivated plants continue to play a major role in primary healthcare, cultural practices, and everyday survival in the region. Traditional knowledge systems govern sustainable harvesting practices, linking biodiversity directly to cultural identity and livelihood security. The governance of these resources therefore raises broader questions about access, equity, and sustainability.

World Wildlife Day is thus an opportunity not only to celebrate biodiversity but also to reflect on how “nature” is defined and governed. The idea of wilderness as pristine, untouched land remains deeply embedded in conservation discourse. Yet, as historian William Cronon argues, wilderness is not a timeless natural condition but a cultural and political construction. Most landscapes designated as natural have long histories of human use, including the collection and management of plant resources.

Contemporary “wilderness” is typically a highly regulated space. Governments and international bodies designate protected areas that control access, activities, and resource use, including harvesting, hunting, and fishing. Through zoning, monitoring, tourism rules, fire management, and species interventions, ecosystems are actively managed. In this sense, wilderness reflects a form of governance rather than the absence of human influence.

Because such decisions determine who can access biological resources and who benefits from them, conservation policy also intersects with environmental justice. Restrictions may disproportionately affect communities that rely on wild resources for subsistence or health, while commercial actors benefit from global markets for natural products. Unequal distribution of costs and benefits can generate tensions between authorities and local populations, sometimes leading to conflict.

Lessons from exclusionary or “fortress” conservation highlight these challenges. Many ecosystems evolved with human stewardship practices—such as controlled burning, rotational harvesting, agroforestry, and seasonal mobility—that supported biodiversity and resilience. However, protected areas have often restricted or criminalised traditional livelihoods, displacing communities and disrupting subsistence activities. Removing these practices can alter ecological processes and erode local knowledge systems.

Marginalised rural and Indigenous communities are often most directly dependent on natural resources and therefore most affected by both environmental degradation and restrictive conservation policies. At the same time, these communities possess extensive ecological knowledge that can contribute significantly to sustainable management when recognised and supported. Equitable participation in value chains for plant-based products can also provide incentives for conservation while supporting local development.

Addressing biodiversity loss therefore requires approaches that transcend national boundaries and disciplinary divisions. Wildlife populations, marine ecosystems, migratory species, and environmental pressures operate across borders. Coordinated regional responses — combining scientific expertise, local knowledge, policy alignment, and resource mobilisation — are essential to balance conservation objectives with economic development and social inclusion.

Regional organisations can play a crucial role in this process. The Association of Caribbean States (ACS) provides a platform for consultation and cooperation among countries of the Greater Caribbean. By convening governments, technical agencies, and partners, it facilitates information sharing, policy coordination, and multi-country initiatives addressing shared environmental challenges.

In alignment with its Plan of Action 2022-2028, the ACS seeks to “promote the sustainable development of the Caribbean Sea and its resources through the development of strategies that incorporate innovative practices, nature-based solutions, an integrated approach aimed at the conservation and preservation of ecosystems and biodiversity”. This objective illustrates the recognition that biodiversity conservation, sustainable use, and regional resilience are inseparable elements of long-term development in the Greater Caribbean.

This commitment is further embodied in the Declaration of Montería (2025), in which ACS Members underscored the need to protect marine ecosystems while addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, plastic pollution, sargassum influxes, recognising the region’s continued vulnerability to environmental and climate threats. Together, these commitments demonstrate the importance of linking biodiversity conservation with resilience and sustainable development.

World Wildlife Day is particularly relevant to the Greater Caribbean because the region’s economies,

food security, and coastal protection depend heavily on biodiversity. Coral reefs, mangroves, forests, and fisheries support tourism, small-scale livelihoods, and climate resilience while facing increasing pressures from climate change, pollution, habitat loss, and overexploitation. The sustainable use of plant resources, including MAPs, is likewise tied to both ecological health and socio-economic stability.

The proposed designation of the Caribbean Sea as a Special Area in the context of sustainable development illustrates how regional cooperation could support more integrated conservation. Such a framework seeks not only to protect marine biodiversity but also to safeguard livelihoods, enhance resilience, and promote sustainable use of shared resources. By linking environmental protection with economic and social considerations — including fisheries, tourism, coastal communities, and cultural practices — it moves beyond exclusionary models towards approaches that recognise human dependence on ecosystems.

The conservation of coral reef ecosystems demonstrates the direct connection between biodiversity protection and disaster resilience. Coral reefs function as natural coastal defences, reducing wave energy, limiting erosion, and protecting communities from storm surges and sea-level rise while sustaining fisheries and tourism. Their degradation increases exposure to hazards and economic losses. Recognising this link, the ACS continues to support initiatives such as the Japan–Colombia–Caribbean Triangular Cooperation Project for Coral Restoration and Disaster Risk Management, which promotes regional collaboration, knowledge exchange, and capacity building to rehabilitate reef systems. Strengthening ecosystem health therefore contributes simultaneously to biodiversity conservation, climate adaptation, and disaster risk reduction.

Ultimately, the focus on medicinal and aromatic plants in 2026 highlights a broader principle: biodiversity conservation is inseparable from human well-being. Plant species used for health, culture, and livelihoods demonstrate how ecosystems sustain societies, while also revealing the need for equitable governance of natural resources. Ensuring sustainable use, fair access, and benefit-sharing is essential both for conservation success and for social justice.

World Wildlife Day thus serves as a reminder that protecting wildlife is not only about preserving species in isolation but about sustaining the complex relationships between ecosystems and human societies. Effective conservation depends on inclusive approaches that recognise historical stewardship, support sustainable use, and promote cooperation across local, regional, and global scales so that biodiversity can continue to sustain both ecosystems and the people who depend on them.

References:

Büscher, B. (2016). Reassessing fortress conservation? New media and the politics of distinction in Kruger National Park. Annals of the American Association of Geographers, 106(1), 114-129.
Clement et al. Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine (2015) 11:67 DOI 10.1186/s13002-015-0052-0
Cronon, W. (1996). The trouble with wilderness: or, getting back to the wrong nature. Environmental history, 1(1), 7-28.
Vujicic, T., & Cohall, D. (2021). Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices on the Use of Botanical Medicines in a Rural Caribbean Territory. Frontiers in pharmacology, 12, 713855. https://doi.org/10.3389/fphar.2021.713855
World Wildlife Day. (n.d.). About World Wildlife Day 2026. United Nations. https://wildlifeday.org/en/about