World Environment Day 2026: Climate Action — “Inspired by Nature. For Climate. For Our Future”



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World Environment Day 2026, under the theme “Inspired by Nature. For Climate. For Our Future,” provides an opportunity to reflect on how climate change and climate action are understood globally and across the Greater Caribbean. While climate discussions have increasingly focused on carbon management, emissions reductions, and disaster response, climate vulnerability in the Greater Caribbean is also shaped by social, economic, and ecological dynamics. The emphasis on nature as a source of climate solutions therefore invites a broader perspective on resilience that recognizes the role of healthy ecosystems not only in climate adaptation but also in supporting livelihoods and sustainable development. In a region where coastal communities, fisheries, tourism, maritime activities, and food security depend heavily on the health of marine and coastal ecosystems, nature-based solutions offer opportunities to strengthen climate resilience while sustaining the ecological systems upon which economic and social well-being depend. Examining climate action through this lens brings into focus questions of vulnerability, responsibility, and the governance of shared marine and coastal systems across the region.

1. How We Understand Climate Change

1.1 Beyond Carbon and Catastrophe

Contemporary understandings of climate change are frequently structured around two dominant imaginaries: climate change as a problem of greenhouse gas emissions requiring carbon reduction, and climate change as a source of visible disasters and extreme events. (1, 2). Carbon accounting, net-zero targets, and emissions metrics have become central tools of climate governance, while hurricanes and extreme weather dominate public attention. While both approaches are important, they can sometimes overshadow the slower processes through which climate vulnerability develops. Rather than occurring only through extreme events, climate change often manifests through gradual forms of social and ecological erosion, including declining fisheries, saltwater intrusion into freshwater resources, coastal erosion, livelihood insecurity, displacement pressures, rising

insurance costs, and the progressive degradation of ecosystems that support local economies.

These impacts highlight that climate vulnerability is not only shaped by climatic hazards, but also by social and economic conditions that influence the capacity of communities to adapt and respond.

1.2 Who Experiences Climate Change?

While climate change is a global issue, its impacts are not evenly distributed. The Greater Caribbean is particularly vulnerable due to its high exposure to hurricanes, sea-level rise, and coastal hazards, combined with the concentration of populations, infrastructure, economic activity along the coast and unequal access to resources (3). Dependence on climate-sensitive sectors such as tourism, fisheries, and maritime transport further increases exposure to climate-related disruptions, making climate change both an environmental and a development challenge for the region (4, 5).

Climate change impacts are not gender neutral. In the Greater Caribbean, climate vulnerability is also experienced unevenly across social groups, including along gender lines. Research on Caribbean Small Island Developing States (SIDS) has shown that women often face heightened vulnerability to climate-related shocks due to pre-existing inequalities in access to economic resources, decision-making, land ownership, and employment opportunities (6, 7). Following hurricanes and other climate-related disasters, women frequently assume increased responsibilities for caregiving, household recovery, and community support, while disruptions to livelihoods can disproportionately affect those employed in sectors such as tourism, small-scale agriculture, fisheries value chains, and informal economic activities (6). Studies conducted after Hurricanes Irma and Maria in the Eastern Caribbean also revealed that women often experienced greater economic insecurity during recovery periods due to unequal access to assets, credit, and formal employment opportunities (7). These differentiated impacts highlight the importance of gender-responsive climate policies that recognize how vulnerability and adaptive capacity are shaped by existing social and economic inequalities. More broadly, they illustrate that long-term sustainability depends not only on restoring ecosystems, but also on addressing the social factors that influence access to resources, decision-making, and opportunities for adaptation. Ecosystem-based approaches are therefore most effective when ecological restoration is accompanied by inclusive governance and equitable participation in the benefits they generate. Reflecting this perspective, the ACS's Strategic Plan: Greater Caribbean 2035 – A Shared Horizon: From Our Common Sea toward Sustainable Development and Well-Being identifies gender equality as a cross-cutting priority and recognizes that women and girls are disproportionately affected by climate change due to unequal access to land, resources, decision-making processes, and adaptive capacity. The Plan further highlights increased livelihood losses, care responsibilities, and exposure to violence during disasters, underscoring the need for gender-responsive climate and disaster risk reduction policies across the Greater Caribbean.

2. Nature-based Pathways to Climate Resilience

2.1 Building resilience

As climate risks intensify, Caribbean countries are increasingly implementing hybrid solutions that combine engineered adaptation measures, traditionally used to protect settlements, tourism infrastructure, ports, and other assets from erosion, flooding, and storm surges, with nature-based solutions that utilize ecosystems functions to enhance resilience rather than relying exclusively on engineered infrastructure.

Mangrove restoration, coral reef rehabilitation, seagrass conservation, and coastal ecosystem management provide multiple benefits simultaneously: reducing erosion, buffering storm surges,

supporting biodiversity, sustaining fisheries, and enhancing climate resilience. Unlike many single-purpose interventions, these approaches address both environmental and socio-economic dimensions of vulnerability. Across the region, coral reef restoration projects have been developed not only to support ecosystem recovery but also to strengthen coastal protection and sustain tourism- and fisheries-dependent livelihoods (8). Similarly, mangrove conservation and restoration initiatives in Belize have been integrated into climate adaptation and coastal resilience strategies because of their role in reducing storm impacts, stabilizing shorelines, and supporting local livelihoods (9). These examples illustrate how ecosystem-based approaches can simultaneously address environmental vulnerability and socio-economic resilience.

2.2 Knowledge, Participation, and Innovation

Nature-based solutions reveal that climate adaptation is fundamentally a governance challenge: healthy ecosystems may reduce vulnerability, but only when the social, institutional, and economic systems surrounding them enable their protection and long-term management. Mangroves, seagrasses, and other coastal ecosystems can simultaneously buffer storm surges, reduce coastal erosion, support fisheries and livelihoods, conserve biodiversity, and sequester significant amounts of carbon, illustrating the multiple co-benefits that nature-based solutions can generate. Effective climate action therefore increasingly combines scientific research, monitoring technologies, local knowledge, community participation, and governance mechanisms capable of sustaining these ecosystems over time.

Climate governance in the Caribbean increasingly incorporates technological tools such as early warning systems and geospatial monitoring, alongside policy approaches such as anticipatory action and ecosystem-based adaptation. Coastal communities continue to contribute valuable knowledge regarding fisheries, mangroves, hurricanes, and changing coastal conditions. In Saint Lucia, ecosystem-based adaptation initiatives have combined climate-risk assessments, environmental monitoring, and community participation to strengthen the management of coastal and marine ecosystems under changing climatic conditions. National adaptation planning has emphasized the restoration and protection of ecosystems as part of broader climate resilience strategies, while recognizing the importance of local engagement, natural resource governance, and long-term ecosystem management in sustaining adaptation outcomes (10). These experiences illustrate how effective adaptation depends not only on ecological restoration, but also on the integration of scientific knowledge, local participation, and institutional support. Climate action inspired by nature therefore requires collaboration across disciplines, institutions, and communities rather than purely technical solutions.

3. Building Resilience Through Regional Cooperation

In this context, climate action becomes not only a matter of adaptation or emissions reduction, but also of deciding how shared marine resources are governed, whose knowledge informs decision-making, and how responsibilities are distributed across the region. Regional cooperation has therefore become an increasingly important component of climate governance in the Greater Caribbean.

Through the Caribbean Sea Commission (CSC), Sargassum Sub-Commission (SSC) and the Special Committee on Disaster Risk Reduction, the ACS has increasingly promoted an understanding of climate action that places ecosystems at the center of regional resilience. In a region where climate risks are closely intertwined with the health of marine and coastal environments, responding to climate change involves not only protecting people and infrastructure, but also strengthening the ecological systems that sustain livelihoods, reduce vulnerability, and support long-term development. This perspective is further reflected in efforts to advance the Designation of the

Caribbean Sea as a Special Area in the Context of Sustainable Development, which recognizes that the future resilience of the Greater Caribbean depends on the sustainable management of its shared marine environment. It is similarly reflected in initiatives such as the Korea–ACS Joint Ocean Research Center (K-ACS JORC), which aims to strengthen scientific research, knowledge-sharing, and technical capacity, related to the Continental Caribbean Sea region. Through regional cooperation and oceanographic research, the Center seeks to develop solutions to chronic, recurrent, and emerging marine and coastal challenges while contributing to the development of a sustainable blue economy and enhanced environmental resilience. The 2026 Blue Carbon Capacity-Building Programme entitled “Advances in the Conservation of Blue Carbon Ecosystems , with Special Attention to Seagrass Meadows, in Collaboration with Local and Indigenous Communities – A proposal by Colombia for countries of ASEAN and the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), implemented by the Government of Colombia through APC Colombia in partnership with Conservation International (CI) and INVEMAR under a South-South Cooperation framework also promotes the conservation and restoration of seagrass ecosystems as nature-based solutions capable of simultaneously supporting carbon sequestration, biodiversity conservation, fisheries productivity, coastal protection, and climate resilience, while strengthening regional capacity to integrate blue carbon ecosystems into adaptation, mitigation, and sustainable development strategies. This approach is also evident in the Japan–Colombia Triangular Cooperation Project for Coral Restoration and Disaster Risk Reduction, which aims to restore degraded coral reef ecosystems and strengthen their capacity to function as natural coastal defenses that reduce wave energy, protect shorelines, support biodiversity, and enhance resilience to climate-related hazards. Although these initiatives address different challenges, they are united by a common principle: that mangroves, seagrasses, coral reefs, beaches, and other coastal ecosystems are not only environmental assets, but also systems that can help buffer climate impacts, support biodiversity, sustain livelihoods, and enhance resilience. In this sense, the ACS's work demonstrates how climate action inspired by nature can move beyond isolated interventions toward a more integrated approach in which ecosystem restoration, scientific cooperation, and regional coordination contribute simultaneously to adaptation, mitigation, and sustainable development.

Conclusion

The theme “Inspired by Nature. For Climate. For Our Future.” invites us to look beyond climate change as simply a problem of carbon emissions or disaster response. In the Greater Caribbean, climate resilience increasingly depends on restoring ecosystems, strengthening communities, and recognizing the interdependence between environmental health and human well-being. Nature-based solutions demonstrate that climate action can simultaneously protect livelihoods, enhance resilience, and support sustainable development. Yet because many climate and environmental challenges—from coastal erosion and biodiversity loss to sargassum influxes—transcend national boundaries, effective responses also require regional coordination and collective governance. By combining ecosystem restoration, scientific cooperation, and shared stewardship of the Caribbean Sea, the region can build a more resilient and sustainable future for generations to come.

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