

The Creation of a Sustainable Tourism Program for the Caribbean

History of the Organization of American States



The Organization of American States (OAS) is an intergovernmental organization that serves to bring nations in the Americas together to solve complex global and regional problems. The modern OAS is a rare example of a large, long-lasting regional organization, as most regional organizations around the world only came into existence after World War II. The OAS is the longest regional organization in continual operation.¹

The current OAS traces its roots back to previous inter-American organizations, which often took the form of small coalitions of neighboring nations.² While the OAS, did not officially exist until May 5th, 1948, the idea had persisted since the First International Conference of American States in 1890. The OAS was the first truly regional group that represented all of the independent nations of the Americas.³ The founding document, the Charter of the Organization of American States, affirmed all member nations' commitments to national sovereignty and regional integration.⁴ The initial 21 member nations quickly grew to 35 nations to include the newly independent Caribbean nations and Canada in the following decades. While members are free to join and leave the OAS, the organization has the power to suspended members for anti-democratic coups, such as in the suspension of Cuba from 1962-2009 and Honduras from 2009-2011.⁵

The stated mission of the OAS after World War II was to promote cultural, military and, principally, economic integration among member nations. While this obligation has largely been met, the OAS had another mission that was less stated, to combat communism.⁶ After the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, the OAS was seen as largely purposeless by the majority of member states. However, instead of rendering the OAS obsolete, the end of the Cold War provided for an opportunity for growth and reformation.

The OAS is led by the General Assembly. Similar to the United Nations General Assembly, this body is based on the principle of one-nation, one-vote. Thus, the United States has the same

¹ "Organization of American States: Background for Congress." *Congressional Research Service*. <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42639.pdf>.

² "Who We Are." *OAS*. http://www.oas.org/en/about/who_we_are.asp.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ "Charter of the Organization of American States." *OAS*. http://www.oas.org/dil/treaties_A-41_Charter_of_the_Organization_of_American_States.htm.

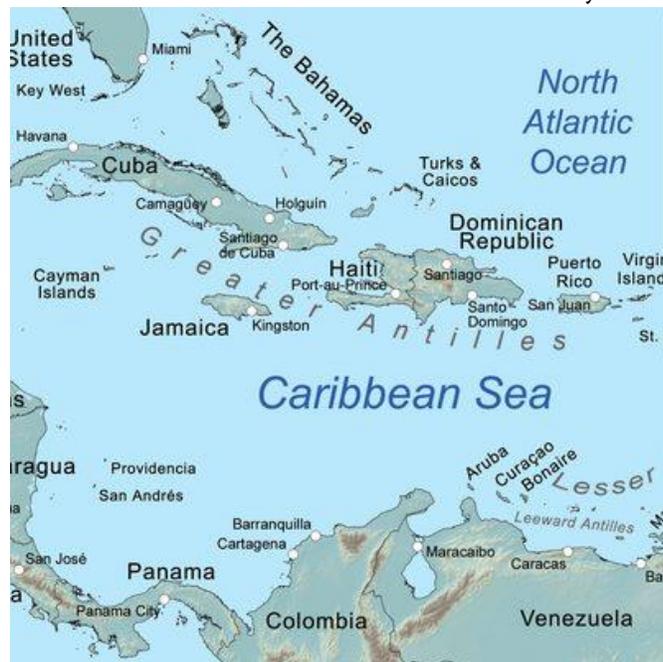
⁵ "OAS Readmits Honduras to its ranks." *CNN*. <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/americas/06/01/honduras.oas/>.

⁶ "Organization of American States: Background for Congress." *Congressional Research Service*.

voting power as Grenada or Paraguay. The General Assembly is headed by the Secretary General, a position currently held by Luis Almagro. The Secretary General is elected for 5-year terms by the General Assembly. The General Assembly works to set the policies of the OAS and to coordinate actions among the many subsidiary organizations working under the auspices of the OAS. While the OAS has special committees to deal with Health, Agriculture, Education and Women's Issues, it does not have standing special committees to handle the promotion of democracy or climate and environmental issues.⁷ While the OAS is headquartered in Washington D.C., the General Assembly convenes at a yearly conference that rotates among the member nations.

The OAS and Tourism

While originally founded to serve as a vehicle to combat communism in the Americas, the OAS has blossomed into an organization that helps start dialogue, research and establish policy, and organize projects. One area in which they have helped organize projects and establish policy is in tourism. The OAS aiding improvements in tourism in the Americas helps accomplish two of its goals: promoting understanding between nations in the Americas and promoting development and prosperity. Across the OAS it is estimated that in 2016 tourism directly contributed \$740.8 Billion to the Gross Domestic Product of member nations.⁸ The OAS currently runs and supports programs dedicated to sustainable



tourism in the Caribbean and Central America, Tourism Safety and Security, Culture and Development, the Protection of Cultural Heritage in the Caribbean, and the Small Tourism Enterprises Network (STEN).⁹ In addition, the OAS holds several summits between tourism professionals and government officials involved in tourism in order to help establish a dialogue and help in the diffusion and sharing of knowledge and industry best practices.¹⁰ The STEN program encapsulates both knowledge sharing and dialogue efforts with the promotion of the tourism sector. This program seeks to help support micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the tourism industry in the

Caribbean by improving their market visibility, helping train staff members in sustainable practices, and bring MSMEs in the Caribbean up to international standards.¹¹ Given the importance of MSMEs, which are estimated to contribute to 50-70% of jobs in the Americas, strengthening this network can

⁷ "Our Structure." OAS. http://www.oas.org/en/about/our_structure.asp.

⁸ "Travel & Tourism Economic Impact 2017." World Travel & Tourism Council. <https://www.wttc.org/-/media/files/reports/economic-impact-research/regions-2017/oas2017.pdf>.

⁹ "Projects and Activities." OAS. <http://www.oas.org/en/sedi/desd/ct/projects.asp>.

¹⁰ "Policy Dialogue." OAS. <http://www.oas.org/en/sedi/desd/ct/policy.asp>.

¹¹ "Small Tourism Enterprises Network." OAS. <http://www.oas.org/en/sedi/desd/ct/sten.asp>.

help improve the economy in Caribbean nations.¹² MSMEs can help reduce poverty, increase employment and improve social inclusion across the region. The OAS is heavily involved in providing technical support, knowledge diffusion and program management to help improve the tourism sector across the region and make it more sustainable.

Tourism and the Caribbean

Tourism is a vital part of the Caribbean economy. It is estimated by the World Travel and Tourism Council that tourism comprised 15% of the Caribbean's GDP and employed nearly 14% of its residents in 2016.¹³ In some areas, such as Tobago, an island of Trinidad and Tobago, tourism employs 50% of people.¹⁴ In the Caribbean tourism contributes more to GDP than any other region. For the developing economies of the region, tourism is a vital source of income. Jamaica, for example, has seen its GDP grow by around 1% for the past several years and, as of October 2017, had an overall unemployment rate of 10.4% and a youth unemployment rate of 25.4%.¹⁵ Over the coming decade it is expected that the tourism sector will continue to grow by 3.6% and increase its employment by 2.4%.¹⁶ For struggling and growing economies in the Caribbean, these increases will be vital in order to help improve their economies and lower unemployment.

Drawbacks of Tourism

However, tourism does not come without any drawbacks for the Caribbean. While the Caribbean islands all vary in size, land, freshwater, space for waste and food are often in short supply. Tourists generate more waste, which takes up more land, and according to several studies, they consume more water than islands residents.¹⁷ These wasteful practices hurt the islands' residents by using up vital resources. Additionally, while tourists and the hotels that cater to them are important economic engines, many hotels and resorts are not concerned with improving local development. For example, it is estimated that hotels and resorts in Saint Lucia imported more than 70% of their food rather than seeking local produce.¹⁸ Given the collapse of banana prices, the main agricultural export of many Caribbean states, and the inefficiency of the agricultural sector, St. Lucian farmers cannot compete with international prices. This has harmed the agricultural sector and increased unemployment throughout the sector, ultimately depopulating many rural areas n across the region.¹⁹ If an internal demand was created for agricultural products on Caribbean islands by the tourism industry, then employment in the agricultural sector would increase and tourism companies buying local would have a good branding opportunity. But this lack of local development is not just limited to the agricultural sector. The United Nations Environment Program estimates that only 20% of tourist

¹² "Micro, Small and Medium-size Enterprises." OAS. <http://www.oas.org/en/sedi/desd/smes/default.asp>.

¹³ "Travel & Tourism Economic Impact 2017, Caribbean." *World Travel & Tourism Council*. " <https://www.wttc.org/-/media/files/reports/economic-impact-research/regions-2017/caribbean2017.pdf>.

¹⁴ "UN: Fostering sustainable coastal and marine tourism in the Caribbean." *United Nations*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgfSmxcNJ2E>.

¹⁵ "Where we Work." *The World Bank*. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/jamaica/overview>.

¹⁶ "Travel & Tourism Economic Impact 2017, Caribbean." *World Travel & Tourism Council*. "

¹⁷ "The Effects of Tourism in the Caribbean." *USA Today*. <https://traveltips.usatoday.com/effects-tourism-caribbean-63368.html>.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ "Institutional Analysis of food and agriculture policy in the Caribbean: The case of Saint Lucia." *Journal of Rural Studies*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0743016716304314>.

expenditures in the Caribbean go to local businesses and workers.²⁰ A wasteful use of already precious resources is further compounded by the lack of land available for waste disposal. Much of the waste produced on islands, both by tourists and residents, finds its way into the oceans.²¹ This is a threat not only to the health of the environment and tourists and residents alike, but it also has the potential to harm the tourist industry. For many tourists, the stereotypical image of the Caribbean is of warm weather, palm trees, blue water and pristine beaches. If waste pollution and litter are not sustainably processed and their amounts decreased then this idyllic image of the Caribbean will slowly fade away, taking tourists with it. Alarmingly, in a clean-up effort in 2007, the International Coast Cleanup program found that 57% of shoreline waste and litter came from shoreline recreational activities. While improving waste management and drainage systems can help reduce waste shoreline waste, a good portion of waste actually comes from people enjoying the beach.²²



Cruise ships are perhaps the most enduring aspect of the tourism industry in the Caribbean. It is believed that around 60% of cruise ship passengers visit the Caribbean.²³ While the ships bring tourists to the island who spend money and the ships pay a docking fee to the government, it takes a great deal of energy and resources to move the ships around. Indeed, according to a German environmental group a cruise ship produces the same amount of air pollutants as five million cars traveling the same distance.²⁴ In many cases the ships use such a heavy fuel, that has 3,500 times more Sulphur than diesel, and lack particulate filters that its air would have be hazardous waste if it were used on land.²⁵ But cruise ship pollution is not only limited to air pollution, with waste and water pollution two harmful side effects as well. It is estimated that 100 million gallons worth of petroleum products are released into the ocean each year by cruise ships.²⁶ This pollution washes up on beaches, kills fish, harms the health of beachgoers and threatens already weakened coral reefs. Additionally, waste water is often discharged from ships, entering into the environment, being consumed by fish and other wildlife. It is believed that large cruise ships of 5000 people can discharge 11 million gallons of waste water a day.²⁷ This represents a health risk to humans and animals. As ships continue to get larger and larger, holding more passengers, these environmental problems will continue to worsen.

Threat of Climate Change and Natural Disasters

Given the economic importance of tourism to the region, it is important to consider how climate change and natural disasters might disrupt the industry and lead to more economic and

²⁰ "Pros & Cons of Caribbean Tourism." *USA Today*. <https://traveltips.usatoday.com/pros-cons-caribbean-tourism-111681.html>.

²¹ "Waste and Marine Litter." *The Caribbean Environment Programme*. <https://bit.ly/2B68em9>.

²² Ibid.

²³ "Cruise Tourism in Greater Caribbean Region." *Association of Caribbean States*. http://www.acs-acc.org/sites/default/files/cruise_tourism_in_the_greater_caribbean.pdf.

²⁴ "The world's largest cruise ship and its oversized pollution problem." *The Guardian*. <https://bit.ly/1U6hFyL>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "How Cruise Ships are Polluting our Oceans." *Pacific Standard*. <https://psmag.com/news/how-cruise-ships-are-polluting-our-oceans>.

²⁷ "Cruise Ship Pollution in the Caribbean Coast." *The Caribbean Current*. <https://bit.ly/2OvKtWd>.

environmental chaos. Climate change threatens the entire Caribbean Basin, but places island nations at particular risk. While predictions on sea level rise vary by model, NASA believes that sea level will rise between .26 to .55 meters by 2100.²⁸ For low lying island nations seas not only threaten the tourism industry but their way of life. In Saint Vincent it is believed that 18-30 meters of beach have been lost over the past 9 years due to rising seas that increase coastal erosion.²⁹ Rising seas also are already affecting island airports which are typically built directly along the coast on low-lying terrain. This leads to airport closure severing an important connection to other islands and harming the economy and tourism sector. Additionally, natural disasters such as flooding and hurricanes often devastate Caribbean nations. Hurricanes in particular threaten tourism as they destroy vital island infrastructure and clean-up takes a long time. In 2017 hurricanes Maria and Irma devastated Puerto Rico, Dominica, and St Martin.³⁰ This damage caused hotels to be closed and cruise ships to seek alternate ports, depriving these devastated areas of a much-needed economic boost. In order to ensure even and sustainable economic growth it is important to invest in disaster preparedness across the Caribbean Basin.

International Efforts to Promote Sustainable Tourism

Because of the economic importance of tourism and its drawbacks, there have been several notable efforts to reduce pollution and make the industry more sustainable. In battling cruise ship pollution, the United Nations banned the dumping of all waste, but food waste, from cruise ships in 1993.³¹ However, the ban will only come into place when all the nations around each basin enact the ban and have facilities that are able to treat the waste from cruise ships. Many Caribbean nations claim they do not have the capacity to treat waste given their small size and limited land. While the ban has come into place around the Antarctic, in the Baltic and North Seas, it cannot come into effect in the Caribbean until all nations around the sea can process the waste. Until then, waste will continue to be dumped in the Caribbean. Beyond regulations like these, the World Bank and United Nations have helped rebuild infrastructure. Under the World Bank's Emergency Recovery and Disaster Management Project Saint Lucia was able to repair coastal erosion and beach loss that were threatening a fishing village.³² Since this program was begun in 1999, over 15 meters of beach have been restored. The United Nations has also helped to foster the Sustainable Tourism Zone of the Greater Caribbean (STZC). The STZC aims to foster dialogue and serve as a meeting place for countries in the Caribbean basin who want to promote sustainable tourism.³³ Specifically, the organization focuses on improving sustainability as it relates to water and waste pollution.

While efforts led by the United Nations are helpful in making tourism more sustainable, private-public partnerships are crucial as well. Jamaica has worked with the Sandals Group, a resort company, to use agricultural and commercial goods produced by local companies and entrepreneurs

²⁸ "Understanding Sea Level." NASA. <https://sealevel.nasa.gov/understanding-sea-level/projections/empirical-projections>.

²⁹ "Can you imagine a Caribbean minus its beaches? It's not science fiction, it's climate change." *World Bank*. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2014/09/05/can-you-imagine-a-caribbean-minus-its-beaches-climate-change-sids>.

³⁰ "After Maria and Irma: Caribbean Tourism, Island by Island." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/22/travel/maria-irma-caribbean-tourism-island-by-island.html>.

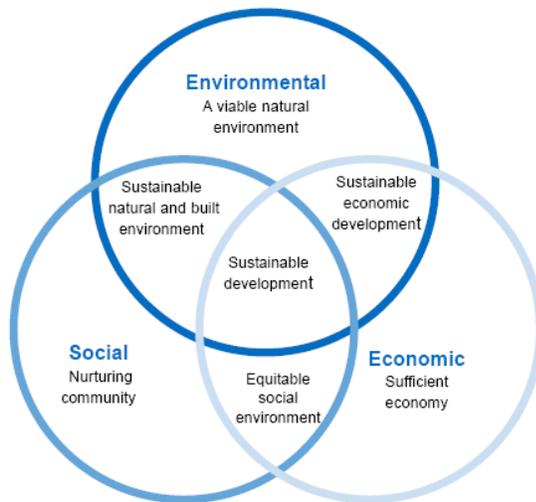
³¹ "Caribbean slow to plug cruise ship pollution." *NBC News*. <https://nbcnews.to/2MFZk03>.

³² "Can you imagine a Caribbean minus its beaches? It's not science fiction, it's climate change." *World Bank*.

³³ "About." *Sustainable Tourism Zone of the Greater Caribbean*. <http://stzc-acs.org/about/>.

in Jamaica.³⁴ Sandals have helped farmers improve the efficiency of their production and helped organize knowledge sharing with international technical experts. These programs have not all been successful, with a similar initiative in Cancun, Mexico failing because the campaign mainly focused on marketing techniques for farmers, not on technical assistance or production improvements. Additionally, many farmers and entrepreneurs were hesitant to join so they could continue to avoid paying taxes.³⁵ Without the necessary government reforms, such as institutional reforms and the reduction of graft and corruption, private-public partnerships cannot succeed.

Scope of the Issue



The OAS has the opportunity to play a crucial role in improving sustainability in the Caribbean tourism sector. To be sustainable the OAS must promote programs that lead to a more environmentally sustainable industry, with less pollution and garbage throughout the region. The OAS must craft programs that create an economically sustainable industry that seeks to improve the economic condition of not only the hotel and cruise ship companies, but also local citizens living on the islands. Finally, the programs must craft social sustainability, helping to create more equitable nations. The OAS has the tools and capacity to create a truly sustainable tourism sector, but its

member states must find the willpower. The OAS must strike a careful balance that makes the sector more sustainable while continuing to draw in tourists. If the OAS and its member nations enact draconian policies that push away tourists and tourism companies then it runs the risk of unleashing a devastating economic calamity on nations across the region.

Questions to Consider

- In what ways can Caribbean tourism become environmentally, economically and socially responsible?
- To what extent can the OAS promote sustainable tourism in the Caribbean?
- How can existing programs be improved to promote sustainability?
- How should private companies be involved in making the tourism industry more sustainable?
- How can the need for sustainability be balanced against its economic importance?

³⁴ "Tourism-agricultural linkages: Boosting inputs from local farmers." *Overseas Development Institute*. <https://bit.ly/2MGnx68>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*