Governance of the Caribbean Sea

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The economic development of the Greater Caribbean region is inexorably linked to its capacity to endow itself with concerted government

In December 2007, through the perseverance of the ACS and its Member States, the United Nations passed a resolution aimed at classifying the Caribbean Sea as a special zone, from a sustainable development perspective.

The remarkable consultation efforts carried out by the ACS from then onwards undeniably raise the question of protecting the Caribbean Sea, which, with respect to marine biodiversity, constitutes a potential source of value for coastal countries and a major geo-strategic stake on an international scale.

While the economic value of biodiversity is today established, in terms of assessing both monetary gain and the services rendered by different ecosystems, the world's economists are faced with the problem of calculating this value on the basis of relevant criteria.

The assessment of biodiversity – and notably of marine biodiversity – on a monetary basis is possible, whether through an examination of direct uses such as fishing, the supply of raw materials for medical purposes and tourist appeal, or of indirect uses relating to ecological functions, the protection of soil against erosion or water filtration, all with the aim of maintaining the balance of ecosystems.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to do a similar assessment in terms of its option price, that is, the price attributed to the preservation of an asset with a view to future utilisation, or, for example, the protection of a plant that is recognised for its medical potential. In the same way, it would be difficult to assess the quasi-option value of biodiversity, which refers to the safeguarding of an asset for which the potential has not yet been proven, with a view to future utilisation, as an unknown, a plant might be preserved for yet undetermined purposes

Yet, the sustainable development of biodiversity and its monetary potential constitute a source of wealth and future prospects, whether in terms of assessing the services rendered by ecosystems, or in respect of prospects for industrial development based on biomimetics, bioinspiration or bioprospection.

The economic development of the Greater Caribbean region is therefore inexorably linked to its capacity to endow itself with concerted governance, which would allow it to not only measure the economic potential and value of this shared marine patrimony, but also to develop, in collaboration with all coastal countries, tools for appropriating, protecting, developing and regulating it.

With these aims in mind, Article 3 of the International Convention on Biological Diversity, which was signed in June 1992 during the Rio Earth Summit, stipulates that: "States have the sovereign right to exploit their own resources in keeping with their environmental policies." Furthermore, the first paragraph of Article 15 stipulates that: "the power to control access to genetic resources belongs to governments and is regulated by national legislation." This immediately establishes the principle of national and regional ownership of biodiversity resources, from a genetic, specific or ecosystem-related point of view.

The accelerated decrease in biodiversity, confirmed during the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, could be 100 to 1000 times greater than the natural extinction rate of species by the year 2050, thereby boosting the monetary value of services carried out by ecosystems.

For the period 2000-10, the direct losses resulting from the drop in ecosystem-provided services was estimated at €50 billion per year. By 2050, estimates indicate that cumulated losses in terms of well-being could stand at 7 per cent of GDP.

However, these estimations do not take the intrinsic values of these ecosystems into consideration. Their existential value, their value as a legacy to future generations and their social and cultural value can only be endogenously appreciated by the populations who benefit directly from the goods and services they provide.

This is why the objective should not be to attach a monetary value to the ecosystem of the Caribbean Sea

in terms of its ecological wealth, but, rather, to measure its inestimable value, by factoring in the different socio-cultural components that characterise it and make it into a unique reservoir of life.

This is why, while the protection of this vast reservoir of life is a matter of general interest for humanity and its survival, its governance must be drafted and shared by all the peoples of the Greater Caribbean region, who, collectively, must be given and give themselves the means of protecting this cross-border treasure.

In 2009, the series of meetings on sea-related matters organised by France, the country with the second largest maritime zone in the world, present in the three oceans thanks to its overseas territories, allowed me to highlight the fact that these overseas territories must spearhead marine governance in all three oceans, while acting as an intermediary for Europe within these spaces.

The Caribbean islands are a biodiversity hotspot. The ecosystem profile prepared by Bird Life International in January 2010 identifies 290 key biodiversity zones and seven biodiversity conservation corridors within the hotspot of the Caribbean islands. Of these 290 key zones, 209 contain coastal and marine ecosystems. Several sites serve as a habitat for important marine species. Thus, 18 of these key biodiversity zones show the highest nesting site densities for marine turtles within the hotspot, with over 100 visits each year per internationally endangered species of marine turtle. Mangrove swamps are an essential part of numerous key biodiversity zones and they all provide habitat to an exceptionally high number of internationally endangered species. The corridors assemble several key biodiversity zones that are considered as a priority in light of their importance for ecosystem resilience, ecological services and for the biological health and richness of the hotspot.

The island of Martinique alone is home to an average of 182 species of fish, 48 species of corals, 70 species of sponges and 331 species of molluscs.

Three species of marine turtles continue to nest on Martinican beaches, but in small numbers (Eretmochelys imbricata, with the highest numbers, Dermochelys coriacea and Chelonia mydas), while Caretta caretta and Lepidochelys olivacea have only been spotted at sea.

A census of cetacean species is currently being undertaken in Martinique. Seven species have already been observed, notably from the delphinidae family (Delphinus delphis and Tursiops truncatus), as well as sperm whales.

In light of their wealth in biodiversity, their Caribbean identity-based values and their role as an interface with Europe, the French territories of this basin must take part in the process initiated by the ACS and its follow-up committee.

As President of the Regional Council of Martinique, I support the protection and conservation initiative launched by the ACS and shall ensure that all the actions of the body over which I preside factor in this future stake, which requires the strengthening of ties among our countries, in order to, in the words of former CARICOM Secretary General Carrington: “turn the Caribbean Sea into a lake.” ■

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View of the South Cape of Martinique