

## ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES FOR CARIBBEAN TOURISM DESTINATIONS

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*The paper offers a reflection on tourism issues and development strategies relating to Caribbean destinations, and more particularly, insular destinations. When faced with intense competition from popular destinations around the region, the smaller islands have had to reaffirm their market position. Mass tourism development models have not created the expected knock-on effects for these territories of limited size and vulnerable resources. Any wish for alternative tourism practices, which for this region essentially revolve around the term ecotourism, falls under the scope of badly coordinated tourism development and its ensuing over-concentration of infrastructures, land conflicts and policies of entrenchment, etc. Sharing tourism revenue and accessing resources are key elements to the debate. Development strategies in relation to alternative tourism practices are better able to meet the expectations of host territories.*

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JEL Classification: *L83, M1, O1*

### INTRODUCTION

The tourism and services sector has established itself as a powerhouse for the island economies in the Caribbean<sup>1</sup> over the last twenty years. Tourism has continued to gain importance in economies where traditional activities are in crisis, notably in the agricultural plantation sector. Competition is intense among destinations that offer a similar tourist product, i.e. sandy beaches lined with palm trees, coral

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reefs and a tropical festival atmosphere where carnivals and other musical events abound. Away from the stereotypes, this sector is mainly known for mass tourism concentrated in specialised tourism areas organised around large hotel complexes. This is undeniably important in terms of employment, but the advantages to the host societies and territories are deemed to be inadequate. Despite the magnitude of the flows of people and finance brought to the region by tourism, the existing development programmes are not deprived of certain limitations when we consider the limited benefits to local economies, the impact of consumption levels and the environmental issues (Dehoorne, 2006).

It emerges as vital that we contemplate new specific complementary approaches, properly integrated into the host environments and societies, and capable of providing alternatives to the classic and traditional 3 and 4 S's coastal resort tourism (Pattulo, 1996; Sheller, 2003; Duval, 2004; Spilanis and Karayiannis, 2009; Dodds and Butler, 2010) along with a commitment to sustainable development.

As part of the reflection, our objective will be to study the issues and strategies that revolve around ecotourism. The analysis of the tourism phenomenon and its recent evolution at a regional level will enable us to describe the context for this rising interest in ecotourism, and more generally in alternative tourism practices, and to further on envisage a strategic typology which is formulated on a wide territorial basis.

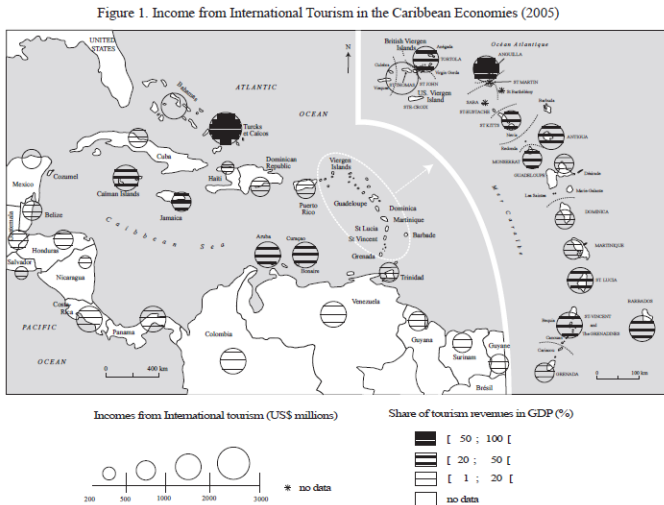
## **TOURISM IN THE CARIBBEAN AREA: THE DEVELOPMENT CHOICES IN QUESTION**

### **The importance of the tourism phenomenon**

Tourism is the main source of foreign currency for the Caribbean and is a vital sector of activity in the region's development. Tourism revenue was at 20,400 million US dollars for the insular Caribbean in 2005 (WTO, 2006) and the level of employment in this sector has now risen above 2.5 million (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2001). Tourism therefore directly and indirectly contributes with 15.5 % of jobs in the region compared to a share of 6.3 % of jobs worldwide, thus creates jobs, diversifies and boosts economy (López-Guzmán et al., 2011; Karmakar, 2011). Its earnings can easily amount to more than half of the GNP, for example, in Saint Lucia (64 %), Antigua and Barbuda (74 %) and the British Virgin Islands (82 %), and reach a record level of 91 % of GNP in the Turks and Caicos Islands. Since the end of the 1980s, tourism

revenue in the Caribbean began to replace revenue earned from the traditional plantation economies and its dominance continues to grow fast.

**Figure 1** Incomes from international tourism in the Caribbean (2005)



Within two decades, Caribbean destinations which had previously been distant, expensive and reserved for elite groups, have become accessible to mass tourism. The number of visitors to the insular Caribbean has grown from 8.7 million in 1990 to over 19 million in 2004. Tourism from cruise ships (around 20 million) and pleasure boat sailing can be added to short break tourism. Overall, the islands and shores of the Caribbean (outside of the United States) received more than 40 million tourists in 2004 (Caribbean Tourism Organisation, WTO, 2005). The dramatic growth in tourism is prevalent in a number of known international spots such as the resorts of Cancun and Costa Maya (Yucatán Peninsula), Montego Bay and Ocho Rios (Jamaica), Cayo Largo (Cuba) and Puerto Plata (Dominican Republic). The Caribbean Islands are at the heart of the system, with Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic (approximately 3.5 million international tourists each in 2004), Cuba (more than 2 million) and Jamaica (1.4 million) (cf. Figure 1.) If throughout the whole region the volume of activity seems quite modest

(notably in comparison to the numbers of visitors to the northern shores of the Mediterranean), the former should be re-examined in the light of the small-sized host territories and their demographic burden (Dehoorne, 2007). The Caribbean destinations that dominate the market have opted for mass tourism strategies; they have organised themselves around impressive coastal resorts that offer relatively cheap breaks.

### **Limitations of the current means of development**

From an economic point of view there are several limitations that need to be highlighted. Poorly diversified tourist offers are based on cost driven commercial strategies and the advent of mass tourism in the tropics cannot be separated from these commercial realities. With reference to the importance of financial flows through the territories, the revenue share that actually promotes the development of these nations could be considered inadequate. Varying factors helped to explain the limited knock-on effect, such as the significance of *all-inclusive* packages; these have been essentially put together from provider cities where tourism companies control the market. The importance of international capital must also be emphasised. Capital external to the Caribbean controls more than 60 % of the region's receiving capacity and smaller insular states were then obliged to adopt attractive tax systems to entice investors. All the difficulties involved in supplying provisions to tourist facilities also fall within the overall logic that denies local companies 'a look in'. Packed and frozen food imports are equivalent to a 50 % loss in declared tourism revenue, as in Saint Lucia (Wilkinson, 2004).

Indeed, the economic development of the region has been influenced by a long line of external control. Tourism has come to the rescue of traditional hard-pressed economies and insular economies that bear the scars of their plantation history. It has led to a new phase of development opening up for these islands, but the mechanisms involved are continuing to follow the plantation cycle, hence the term 'plantation tourism' (Weaver, 1988). This extraverted development can be characterised by an increased competition in the provision of a single product aimed at a market controlled by a number of large transnational groups. The dependence of these states on tourism and their considerable economic vulnerability in general, can be explained by the fact that their economies are young, their institutional capabilities are limited and their financial and technical capabilities are minimal (Brigulio et al., 1996; Lockhart & Drakakis-Smith, 1997). Short term economic imperatives prevail when

these underemployment and debt-ridden states have to make choices. An example is the balance of payments for Barbados which showed a deficit of 145 million US dollars in 2000 for an external debt of 30 % of the GDP; Antigua's external debt (425 million US dollars in 2000) at present amounts to 69 % of its GDP. The top priority for these countries is to boost their employment markets. Although the latter are unstable and precarious they help reduce the impact of economic and social crises.

The decision to give priority to states that are born from a policy of enclosing tourism locations reinforced the above economic limitations. The idea of having enclosed holiday sites meets a dual purpose within an entrenchment rationale: on the one hand it recognises the importance of security because it is a matter of protecting people from the risks of international terrorism and local petty crime in general, whereas on the other hand it has an economic advantage in that visitors' expenditure are easier to control because they take place in standardised sites which are cut off from the outside world. This way of functioning, i.e. minimising contact with local people is very disappointing for many visitors in search of more intense and reality based experiences of the host territory. If the vast majority of tourists are happy with this type of break, for others, choosing a holiday in an enclosed location is only a first step towards an anxiety-provoking, but appealing faraway land that will guide the tourist to other individualised experiences, more integrated into the host societies.

The third aspect to be highlighted in regard to the limitations of current development is that involving ecological issues. The wealth of these shores comes from both tangible and intangible resources (especially biophysical) that have a high added value (the coral reefs). Tourism consumption trends cause damage locally which adds on to the engendered species by urbanisation and demographic pressures (Island Resources Foundation, 1996; Saffache, 2000). We need to reflect on the impact of mass tourism, may it be from cruise ships (Wilkinson, 1999), the increased mooring of pleasure boats on the coral reefs (the Grenadines), the problems of waste management (Aruba, Jamaica) or untreated and partially treated waste water (Aruba, Cayman Islands, Grenada, Dominican Republic, etc). Coastal districts are deteriorating rapidly on these small islands and the non replacement of resources raises concerns about development choices; at the moment these choices come under particular requirements for economic growth (Daly, 1990; Goodland, 1992) and do not work in favour of a well thought out diversification or a real development strategy.

Too often, Caribbean territories are faced with the situation of being simple reception providers within an international tourism system where there are limited prospects for local participation (problems of capital or access to provider markets), so some sustainable management choices need to be considered in order to find alternative forms of tourism, firmly rooted in the host territories and populations (Breton, 2001; Dehoorne, 2006; Gerovassileiou et al., 2009).

## **THE NEED TO DEVELOP ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES: ECOTOURISM AT THE HEART OF THE DISCUSSION**

### **Economic reasons**

The concept of ecotourism is synonymous with locally controlled products, modest investments and community involvement, and has particularly appealed to international bodies (United Nations, World Bank). The ecotourism alternative could push isolated and/or disadvantaged regions with little tourism towards a new form of development that international tourism being in the hands of large international tour operators is incapable of delivering.

Ecotourism is organised around flows that are modest and diffuse, and only involves limited amounts of finance. From a strictly tourist point of view it emerges as a part of a diversification process in what the nation has to offer - a complementary approach. The relevant flows are not enough to interest the established international airlines, in contrast, at a regional development level; this well targeted financial input in relation to isolated and poverty-stricken territories can have a noticeable effect on people's well-being. Our surveys on the smaller islands of Dominica and Saint Lucia confirm the 60 % share of expenditure that directly profits the local economy as well as the distribution of the main expenditure items (Dehoorne et al, 2007; Murat, 2007).

At the very core of the endogenous development strategies, ecotourism is an "opportunity for native populations to 're-appropriate' their own milieu" (Breton, 2001). It helps in the creation of local family or community-based micro businesses, in the provision of specific jobs (guide, artisan) in the community and the improvement of local tourism residences by way of small scale accommodation units that raise the status of women. These activities bring in new revenue that circulates within the community and promotes local projects, especially in the field of medicine (building and coordinating health clinics) and education (helping the village school). These micro projects sometimes benefit from

financial incentives, supportive government measures (for example, Dominica, Saint Lucia and Venezuela) and help from NGOs.

**Table 2** Economic benefits from ecotourism

For a budget of 1,000 US dollars (excluding international transport)	
Share remaining in the local economy	60%
1. Accommodation and catering (small family owned or community facilities where provisions are sourced locally)	30%
2. Transport and local trips (private or public transport which is either for specific groups or available to the whole community, locally owned)	10-20%
3. Variety of services (from local people: guides, tasting sessions with craftspeople, organization of fun activities)	10-12%
4. Support for local development projects (community projects designed to reinforce the organisation of education and medical services, to support environmental programmes or to introduce new tourist facilities)	6-10%
Share invested from outside the local economy (administration, communication and commercial intermediaries, partnership with national guides who do not live in the host area)	40 %

*Source: Dehoorne et al. (2007), from The Ecotourism Society (2004), Fundación Programa Andes Tropicales – Venezuela, Bioplaneta – Mexico.*

Development projects that revolve around ecotourism and alternative approaches in general are particularly interesting in the case of rural communities facing deconstruction, impoverishment and depopulation, and whose culture is often scorned by societies in search of the urban dream. Let us remind ourselves that in the Caribbean region private individuals and small businesses have a much reduced role. The boom in the tourism sector has emerged through complex systems that too often elude the local populations who are left experiencing bitterness and

impotence in the face of inflation, the dollarization of their economies and the privatisation of their living space. In this way, reflecting on the diversification of tourism interests and their positive impact on other natural and cultural resources is an issue which meets the real concerns of these countries. It is about seeing to what extent new endogenous development initiatives would better position tourism within the host territory, away from the shorelines and the enclosed resorts, and open to other 'treasures'.

If it is easy to agree on the theoretical principles behind ecotourism, the investigation into some examples of the Caribbean experience has enabled us to highlight the rationale complexity and some mainly economic and political issues which drive these strategies.

## **ECOTOURISM WITHIN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN CARIBBEAN TERRITORIES**

### **Territories that have the advantage of ecotourism**

Regional initiatives involving ecotourism place the emphasis on the wealth of natural resources, more notably, protected natural areas, especially those areas that are classed as being UNESCO world heritage sites, such as the *Morne Trois Pitons National Park* (Dominica), and the many national parks like the *Culebra National Wildlife Refuge* (Puerto Rico, 1909), the *J. Armando Bermúdez* and the *J. del Carmen Ramirez* parks (Dominican Republic), and the *Virgin Islands National Park* (US Virgin Islands). As stressed during the *First Caribbean Conference on Ecotourism*, organised by the *Caribbean Tourism Organisation* in 1991 at Belize City (cf. Figure 2), these spaces are fundamental in ensuring the success of ecotourism policies. This aspect of ecotourism is often very close to nature tourism where the notions of well being and local participation are not addressed.

Land given over to ecotourism is either interior, volcanic (northern Martinique, Basse-Terre Island at Guadeloupe), coastal though little used by resort tourism (particularly the volcanic islands and their black sandy beaches) or carefully preserved, for example, mangroves (cf. Table 3). Certain islands intend to profit from the new opportunities made available by their magnificent forests and wildlife.

Ecotourism experiences are still in their infancy, but some interesting endeavours need to be pointed out, for example, on Dominica where the focus has been on 'forest ecotourism' and on the Dutch island of Saba with its 'marine ecotourism'.



**Table 3** Types of location given over to ecotourism activities

Type of location	Description	Examples
Interior mountainous areas	Sparsely populated area with resources that are naturally preserved	Cordillera Central (Dominican Rep.), El Yunque (Puerto Rico)
Peripheral islands	Small outlying and isolated islands, state dependent, limited development for tourism, capable of being oriented towards an exclusive alternative tourism	Barbuda, Exuma Cays and Great Inagua (Bahamas), Tobago, Saba and Bonaire, Bird of Paradise Island (Trinidad et Tobago), the Grenadines
Non-exploited coastal zones	Barely accessible beaches, mangroves, dunes, swamps, cliffs, wealth of resources	Northern coasts of Curaçao and Aruba, south west Jamaica, northern coast of Trinidad, Paria Peninsula (Venezuela)
Offshore reefs	Diving sites with a reputation for the wealth of their marine biodiversity, presence of shipwrecks	Cuban archipelago of Los Colorados, Saba Bahamas, Bonaire and the Cayman Islands

*Source: Dehoorne et al. (2007), from David B. Weaver (1994)*

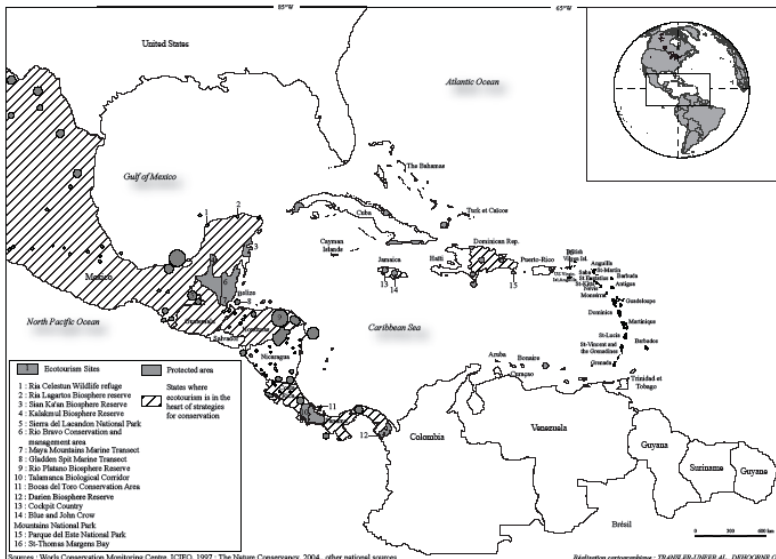
Dominica is situated between the French islands of Guadeloupe (to the north) and Martinique (to the south), and is the most mountainous of the Leeward Islands. There are fewer than 80,000 inhabitants over an area of 754 km<sup>2</sup>. Running against the current of the dominant resort tourism model, Dominica intends to position itself as ‘the island of 365 rivers’ (as opposed to the Island of Antigua which is ‘the island of 365 beaches’). Inland resources, i.e. mountains, forests and biodiversity, all fall under the umbrella of ecotourism.

Some decades earlier, the government of Dominica had unsuccessfully tried to develop a resort-style tourism, but on this volcanic island, the absence of white sandy beaches and the long rainy season did not encourage investment. The three ‘handicaps’ of yesteryear: the mountains, the rivers and the waterfalls, along with the significant forest cover are now favourably exploited as an opportunity for ecotourism.

The environment on this island sparsely populated and lacking noteworthy infrastructures is quite well protected. Dominica therefore makes a good case in persuading people to visit it and tourism campaigns insist on its virginal nature, the luxuriance of its forests (that cover 62 % of the island), the smoking volcanoes, and the omnipresence of its rivers and waterfalls. Ecotourism relies on a network of nature parks, micro businesses and modest accommodation units (eco-lodge style) that are endorsed by the government.

Saba provides an example of a promising economic recovery by a protected island micro territory. This small island of 8 km<sup>2</sup> is dominated by a dormant volcano, Mount Scenery (888 metres high), and is located 45 kilometres south of Saint Martin. The absence of beaches has limited the tourism growth for this islet which specializes in marine ecotourism and diving. The Marine Park on Saba surrounds the island (from the high water level to a depth of 60 metres) and is at the centre of the scheme. The Saba Conservation Foundation (private non-profit earning foundation) was set up in 1987 to coincide with the opening of the first protected area; it manages the spaces and counsels the authorities.

**Figure 2** Ecotourism and Protected Areas in the Caribbean Basin



The Marine Park at Saba counts around thirty of the best diving spots in the Lesser Antilles. A system of zoning divides the park into pleasure

and commercial zones, and a network of buoys (must be used for the purposes of mooring) facilitates the management of the diving areas and prevents the coral being damaged. It is one of the rare autonomous marine parks in the world, earning income from visitors and authorised diving companies which have to pay for the right of access; the sale of souvenirs and donations. The regulations oblige the diver to be accompanied by a certified professional (as required on the islands of Dominica and Saint Lucia) and the cost of a three day diving stint is from 250 to 300 euros. The island has one small airport with the only regular flights coming from Saint Martin (where the cost of 15 minutes of flying time is equivalent to 20 % of that for a transatlantic flight between Saint Martin and Europe). Saba is also accessible by boat, again from Saint Martin, in about thirty minutes. The island has some small scale accommodation units such as guest houses and eco-lodges; catamarans complete the accommodation.

### **Ecotourism: positioning and development strategies**

Several types of positioning can be identified within the current craze for ecotourism in the Caribbean. First we need to distinguish between two separate systems: one operated by less visited destinations which hope to impose their uniqueness (nature, conservation, authenticity) on the ecotourism market and thereby break into the world market, the other operated by mass tourism destinations that use ecotourism to diversify their offer and expand it across their territories.

The investigation should also focus on the issue of the site's accessibility; ecotourism can be used as a means to open up peripheral territories that have been isolated for a long time, and conversely, it can be used as a pretext to close off locations and retain them as a resource for a privileged clientele.

### ***Ecotourism as a tourism development strategy***

For territories that are devoid of the classic threefold resources: white sand, palm trees and lagoons, ecotourism provides an opportunity to offer something original. Underdeveloped and under populated islands have opted for this alternative; the stigma of being underdeveloped can then be turned to their advantage (limited urbanisation and infrastructure, relatively well-protected natural spaces). Destinations like Panama and Dominica have now followed the approach which was begun by Coast Rica some decades earlier.

Inevitably, the question of revenue becomes crucial. Even though ecotourism revenue generates substantial benefits for local people, the amount of revenue remains modest, if not insufficient. Thus, in Dominica ecotourism based on natural resources appears to be a perfectly adapted instrument to meet local needs and to initiate tourism development in the country, but when taking economic imperatives into account, authorities will be obliged to define their strategy from the following alternatives: either have an elite tourism for a small number of ecology conscious well-to-do clients or a mixed formula that combines mass tourism practices at certain coastal sectors (for example, from cruise ships) with more protective inland practices on certain sectors.

### ***Ecotourism for economic recovery, free from mass tourism***

Faced with the progress of mass tourism, ecotourism strategies have served to restrict the use of locations that are endowed with the most popular attractions (smaller islands and their lagoons). Bearing in mind the huge vulnerability of these resources and the risk of disastrous consequences that an uncontrolled access to the wide public would bring, ecotourism is a key element in the debate for a regulated and payable access to a protected resource. This is evident in the example of the marine parks where new regulations have led to the gradual disappearance of traditional practices. Following Saba's experience, small territories are choosing to focus on specific activities, such as diving.

Limited access and often the absence of regular flights have meant that visits to certain locations can be restricted to those rich enough to own their own planes. Conserving resources and controlling the flows contribute jointly to the preservation of locations for an upmarket tourism, similar to that found on the smaller islands of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (in the southern half of the Antilles arc) or on the coastal archipelagos in the Gulf of Honduras.

### ***From ecotourism to mass tourism***

The dilemma for destinations like Dominica which opt for tourism development via ecotourism, means choosing between maintaining low level flows (whether wealthy clientele or not) and accepting greater numbers. The knock-on effects for the country's economy will not be the same. For example, Dominica has only two minor airports which offer small scale regional flights, and yet the inherent issues of building a

proper international airport in the territory's overall development are fundamental for the future of this young nation.

This is how a gradual shift towards mass tourism has come about. Tourists' interests have been changing progressively: from inland nature parks to the coasts and the beaches (artificial if necessary), and activities have become more sport-oriented: 'tree top walks', mountain bike trails and trips on quads, 4x4s, etc. Ecotourism is moving away from its initial principles; it has entered the international tourism marketplace and as it becomes more lucrative, the more important private funding becomes. Organisations are officially moving from ecotourism to nature tourism or adventure tourism, but the 'ecotourism' labels have not been removed. The experience of Costa Rica illustrates this point entirely: the country received 1,453,000 international tourists in 2004 (compared to 435,000 in 1990) and more than 200,000 cruise ship passengers. Its ecotourism renown and its pioneering role have continued to earn it a certain reputation; the tourism sector is now the biggest source of foreign currency, making up more than 25 % of exports (Raymond 2007).

### ***From mass tourism to the quest for diversification***

For those Caribbean destinations whose tourism relies on the traditional resources of tropical beaches, ecotourism has become unavoidable. It is about individualising what is on offer by giving it a unique flavour in an increasingly competitive world market where clichés of tropical tourism were popularized. The commitment to the environment is often superficial. Ecotourism is a simple strategy to adopt in diversifying the tourism offer. Initially the product is available as a one-day trip for a resort or cruise ship clientele, for example, on the Dominican Republic the *Punta Cana Resort and Club* created a natural reserve of 400 hectares within the perimeter of its coastal enclave. This reserve is in fact a 'study centre' that brings students to its own biodiversity laboratory and that has its own artificial reef for divers. In the same sector, the *Coral Canoa Beach Hotel and Spa* decided on a protection programme for iguanas.

When tourism has been well established on the coast, authorities go along with the idea of making ecotourism available further inland. The redistribution of flows meets the concerns about the economy and land use planning. So often this alternative tourism can play a part in underprivileged areas through local development projects that fight poverty. The larger Caribbean destinations (like the Dominican Republic,

Cuba and Jamaica) tackled this approach as have the smaller islands with a well developed resort tourism (Barbados, Guadeloupe, Saint Lucia).

## **CONCLUSION**

The rationale beyond ecotourism makes perfect sense in the Caribbean where a system of mass tourism imposed a rigid extraverted development. It is a question of driving new alternative approaches that are both complementary and original, and that are better integrated into the host milieus and societies, thereby actively involving local communities and maximising benefits. This can happen by way of ecotourism projects based on activities that are more appropriate and viable for the overall functioning of these societies, as much economically, as ecologically or politically (Hall and Lew, 1998; Weaver, 2001). However, when we take into account the financial limitations encountered by these programmes, the relationship between development and conservation is uneven, often leaning towards what is cost effective. Their stability then depends on the different public and private stakeholders being able to work jointly with the local communities; new projects are put together within an atmosphere of complex and unbalanced confrontations, and funded by international donors and NGOs.

In its conceptualisation, ecotourism acts as a basis for compromise between a well thought-out plan of access to resources and the sustainability of ecosystems; it also contributes to the development and to the well-being of the host society. The model is fragile and the local reasoning behind these strategies is uncertain: ecotourism can help countries move away from underdevelopment or it can also be used by policy makers as an excuse to close sites and therefore exclude certain population categories (local or tourist).

Resource problems are many in the Caribbean area where the potential of each island, large or small, has been assessed and future uses have been planned. Outside of simple ecotourism practices, as of now, the pivotal issue concerns the management of, the access to and the control of resources, especially vulnerable resources.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup>The Caribbean area describes the islands and shores that are in contact with the Caribbean Sea, i.e. a region with a population of more than 300 million spread over approximately 4 million square kilometres and consisting of countries with differing political regimes and very contrasting living standards (the difference in revenue per inhabitant goes from 1 to 42)