

# A Framework for the Equitable Caribbean Blue Economy



Building more diverse and inclusive  
relationships to contribute to the solutions  
for the future of our ocean economy



# Introduction

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## A Framework for the Equitable Caribbean Blue Economy

In the face of inequity and underinvestment, we stand at a unique moment in history, with unparalleled opportunity for redesigning the socio-economic and bluer future for the Caribbean. Never before have conditions been more ripe: there is a rising wave of blue economy opportunities as more people wake up to the fact that the sea is not just a place of breathtaking beauty but it also provides individual and business opportunities. According to the World Bank, the blue economy is the “sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of the ocean ecosystem.”

Success in achieving these outcomes, however, depends on us in the Caribbean working in unison with international partners in a new, collaborative—as opposed to colonial<sup>1</sup>—model. Governments and development organizations must invest in local talent—in science capacity and capability, marine education and outreach, blue business, and a new culture of innovation and outside-the-box-thinking.

Beyond a blue economy, our region needs an Equitable Caribbean Blue Economy (ECBE), a term I coined, which means a model for community-led governance that supports justice and sustainable development for all. An ECBE builds more diverse and inclusive relationships to contribute to the solutions for the future of our ocean economy.

Enabling equitable access to the ocean and ocean opportunities is key. Also, key is preventing the most powerful allies in the ocean economy, ie. small scale fishers and indigenous/native people of the Caribbean, from being squeezed out of ocean spaces. We need the infrastructure for people to raise money domestically and from the diaspora, and not to be competing with big global

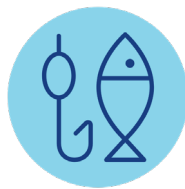
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1 <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-problem-of-colonial-science/>

INGOs in local spaces. What is ultimately needed is to strengthen and scale up Caribbean civil society, so that we are not pushed out of our own communities and markets. Many of our region's NGOs and social enterprises have the skills and capacity to represent our issues on the world stage. What we need is to be given the space and support.

The Equitable Caribbean Blue Economy framework will highlight how international organisations can be supported to work with us and not against us. The framework offers a pathway for how we can get there.

## Established blue economy industries



Capture fisheries



Shipping



Offshore oil and gas



Marine construction & shipbuilding



Marine R&D



Marine transport

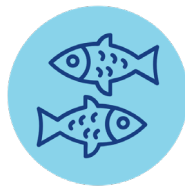


Marine and coastal tourism



Marine business services

## Emerging blue economy opportunity areas



Marine aquaculture



Sustainable tourism



Ocean renewable energy



Offshore wind energy



Safety and surveillance



Protection and conservation



Marine biotech



High-tech marine services

*Diagram based in information from the Caribbean Development Bank's 2018 paper "Financing the Blue Economy: A Caribbean Development Opportunity", and the SIGI 2016 policy brief "Developing the Blue Economy in Caribbean and other Small States."*

## Context

This ECBE framework is based on my expertise as a Blue Economy Diversity & Impact Consultant, owner of Caribbean non-profit [Fish 'N Fins Inc.](#), a single mother, and a concerned citizen of the Caribbean. This analysis is the culmination of more than a decade of active engagement of civil society, supporting scientific teams, and engaging local communities and youth in the sustainable use of our natural resources in the Caribbean region.

## Objective

The intended objective of this framework is to create a pathway that further informs the ECBE through a wider set of values and visions, especially those of the most often excluded groups, when planning for a sustainable ocean economy for the Caribbean's future generation. The framework recognizes that more can be achieved in partnership and that impact can be multiplied through collaboration. With the recommendations below, this framework aims to put native people in charge of their futures by empowering our local communities to support transformational change, in equitable collaboration with international NGOs, academia, and the business sector.

## Recommendation 1:

# Provide access to the ocean and ocean opportunities through education



**O**cean conservation groups working in the Caribbean should play a bigger role in supporting water safety amongst youth and within vulnerable communities. If we want communities to better manage marine resources, we have a duty to help make sure they are safe at sea.

Swim skills and seaworthiness are major barriers to transitioning to a Blue Economy. One would expect Caribbean people to be expert swimmers. They are not. Yet, swimming is critical for access to marine opportunities. We cannot expect this generation of Caribbean people to want to protect and manage these resources (or even confidently design ocean-inspired innovations) if they are unable to observe the marine environment or fear losing their lives to the sea.

**Making water safety and swim skills a top support priority is a chance for blue economy stakeholders to create lasting social impact.**

The blue economy is just starting to get mentioned in some curriculums, but the majority of Caribbean youth still don't consider this multi-trillion dollar industry worth studying. Many students are leaving schools and colleges desperately looking for jobs and unaware that this growing sector is in need of new, diverse talent. Learning to swim, ocean ecology, and blue economy sit hand in hand, and as such there should be a more intentional and urgent focus in aligning these skills to our youth.

Two groups of blue economy stakeholders that could play a greater role in the solutions are the international NGOs working to support the creation of marine-protected areas and participants in the UN Decade of Ocean Science. Transforming ocean science to target action and solutions means linking the UN Decade of Ocean Science to users of the knowledge we need, i.e Caribbean youth. Unlocking blue economy potentials means empowering our next generations of ocean

leaders to sustainably manage our marine resources. Fundamental to creating long-term connections to ‘the science we need, for the ocean we want,’ means endorsing and supporting ocean literacy projects that focus on teaching young people to swim.

One such model of community engagement and outreach rests in [Fish ‘N Fins Inc.](#) a pioneering effort to build an ocean conservation ethos on the Caribbean island of Montserrat, with a focus on hands-on education for youth. Fish ‘N Fins has taught many of the island’s children to swim and snorkel and has introduced them to marine ecology, conservation and the blue economy. This work has had beautiful ripple effects throughout the community and is building the next generation of ocean stewards across the region. Fish ‘N Fins plans to not only have a youth committee on every Caribbean island to improve the sustainable use of ocean resources, but also aims for at least half of Caribbean children to be able to swim by 2030.



*Photos from Fish ‘N Fins and Ocean Leaders programs.*

## Recommendation 2:

# Make social impact a strategic business priority of funders and industry



**M**ost funders do not currently consider social impact in their list of priorities, and this is an issue because we often do not see home communities being left financially or socially better off by investment, research or innovation. Native communities must be put in a position to capitalise on the benefits of their backyard or face another generation filling entry-level or hard labour jobs that provide no route to upward mobility.

Funders need to determine their impact metrics, and embed them in grants and contracts. One idea is to include agreed-upon metrics and reviews that 'every project' must adhere to in order to qualify under a blue economy strategy for the Caribbean.

Funders can also engage the local community in independent reviews of their agents and assess local government performance. If the feedback shows that they cannot produce meaningful results with long-term potential impact, then funding would necessarily stop.

Social and economic impact should be measurable metrics for successful collaboration. If industry is transparent and open about what their impact is, and why they do the work they do, we will all benefit. Another best practice is to share this learning openly with stakeholders, employees, suppliers and communities.

There is also unconscious bias, not just amongst international conservation groups, but within funding agencies. There is a real need to rethink ingrained practices like only collaborating with or funding groups of a certain size or expertise; this can lead to discrimination against smaller native groups led by people of colour.

Black people, indigenous people, and people of colour (BIPOC) have been traditionally excluded from participating in marine sectors, through [the structures that](#)

[existed to exclude Blacks from the water](#) and the [post-slavery slave syndrome](#) that followed created a fear and apprehension around the sea and within communities. Overcoming this barrier requires actively making space for the employment of such individuals in an existing organization, and even setting up specific equity-funding instruments targeted to include and strengthen ocean awareness amongst BIPOC.

“Our methods and work are always based on our beliefs and assumptions; understanding and interrogating your beliefs can help you work towards methods that will lead to a more diverse and inclusive community. Be transparent and honest about your assumptions with the people you are working with - this will lead towards the most productive outcomes. Above all, learn to take ownership of and work to change misguided beliefs they hold about others.”

*Finding Your 'North Star' — Principles adapted for the MIT Open Ocean Initiative by Alexis Hope*

Finally, grantmakers, conservation groups, and hedge funders would benefit from hiring and highlighting more people of colour and fast-tracking them into leadership positions. Personal relationships matter, and a diverse staff is more likely to build relationships with those grassroots individuals and local stakeholders), with less chance of creating suspicion of exploitation.





## Recommendation 3:

# Modernize the academic science research model and invest in local science talent



**W**e are on the cusp of the [UN's Decade of Ocean Science: 2021-2030](#). This is perhaps our last chance to ensure that ocean science can fully support small islands' actions to sustainably manage our oceans, and more particularly to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

To do so requires broadening the knowledge base for innovative solutions for restoring our oceans. This would involve creating stronger collaborations between foreign and local scientists, through (1) aligning priorities, (2) building long-term relationships, (3) enhancing local capacity, and (4) sharing research/ scoping products.<sup>1</sup>

Some specific actions that can be considered include:

- Increase education investment to build the scientific research/ knowledge industry, with Caribbean-based educational institutions being fully integrated into leading research in the region.
- Prioritize funding for small island opportunities in technical training, field study, equipment, and professional development towards leadership.

Focusing international conservation efforts on developing long-term research programs on islands remains critical for supporting an equitable blue economy.

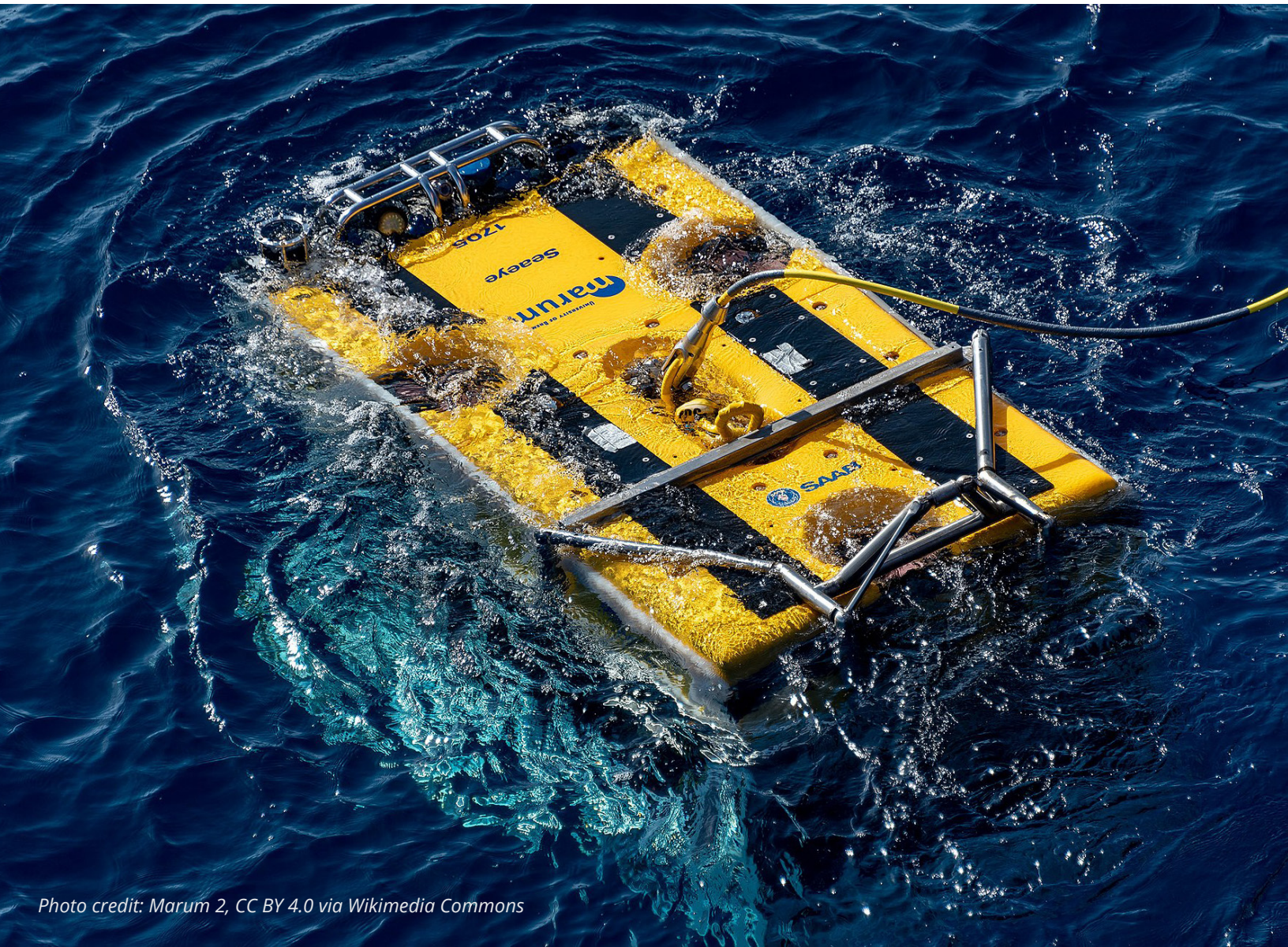
The [Wieters Lab](#) in Chile and the Fulbright Program, that partners students from the USA with mentor scientists in small island states who help them integrate into

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmars.2015.00086/full>

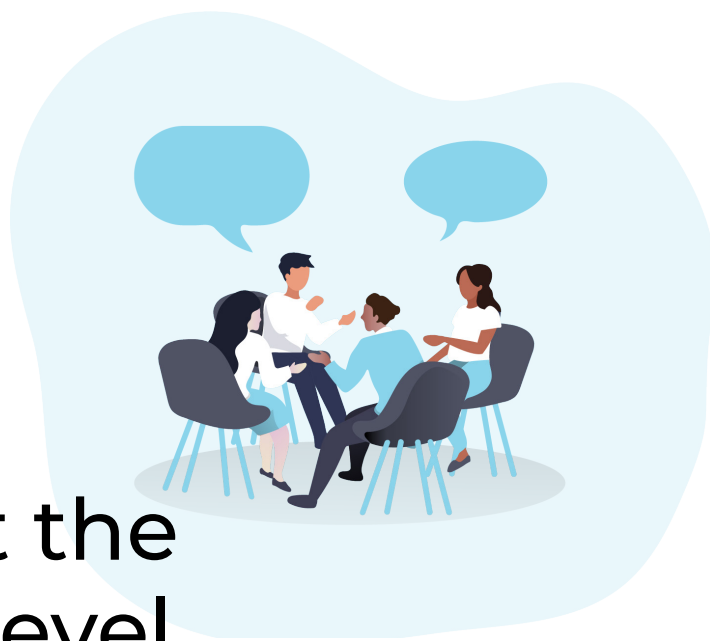
local networks, are both excellent examples of how meaningful long-term capacity can be built, in particular, in accessing quality research and policy networks as early-career scientists of colour.

As Caribbean nationals, we must challenge innovative organisations to listen to and empower people from disadvantaged backgrounds in the region. And collectively, we must break down the barriers for aspiring young entrepreneurs and explorers by encouraging more supportive mentor relationships.

Environmental organizations working in equity and impact investing in the Caribbean need to transfer knowledge and skills to islands, so our islands and territories can retain intellectual property and build expertise locally. This is the only way to ensure long-term continuity.



## Recommendation 4: Empower local nonprofits and strengthen collaboration at the organizational level



It was [Dr. Asha DeVos](#), Ph.D., marine biologist, ocean educator, and pioneering blue whale researcher, who said, “I believe that if we want to save our oceans, every coastline needs a LOCAL hero – someone who speaks the language, can see the problems and can help to address the solutions – someone who is invested in the long-term”.

There is a need for development of functional, robust, local NGOs to support science and conservation work on the ground in the Caribbean. In order to achieve this, significant action is needed, such as:

1. Improving funding mechanisms so that they are less heavily bureaucratic in labour and technical requirements, making them more accessible to NGOs already struggling with economic and human resource constraints.
2. Attracting international collaborators. In order to carry out the innovative work of the blue economy, international collaborators are needed to provide technical assistance. For the greatest impact, they must work to ensure that experience and skills are passed on to local work partners, the best possible local information is used, and capacity is raised for future work.
3. Increasing development funds dramatically to support local NGOs. As our civil society remains largely under-resourced and disempowered, there is a real need for funders to improve access pathways so small organizations can qualify. There is an urgent need for developmental agencies to significantly increase financial support for local NGOs, and to make this support ongoing. (Two to three years is not sufficient to manage biodiversity, ocean technology, or aquaculture—it needs to be a continuing process after project implementation.)

We can strengthen collaboration through business development, by adding a package of business consulting support to conservation work. This will provide the skills needed to grow initiatives long after the overseas funding support has dried up and the program is no longer 'sexy.' Partnering with local entities helps to foster ocean-based private sector growth and economic development.

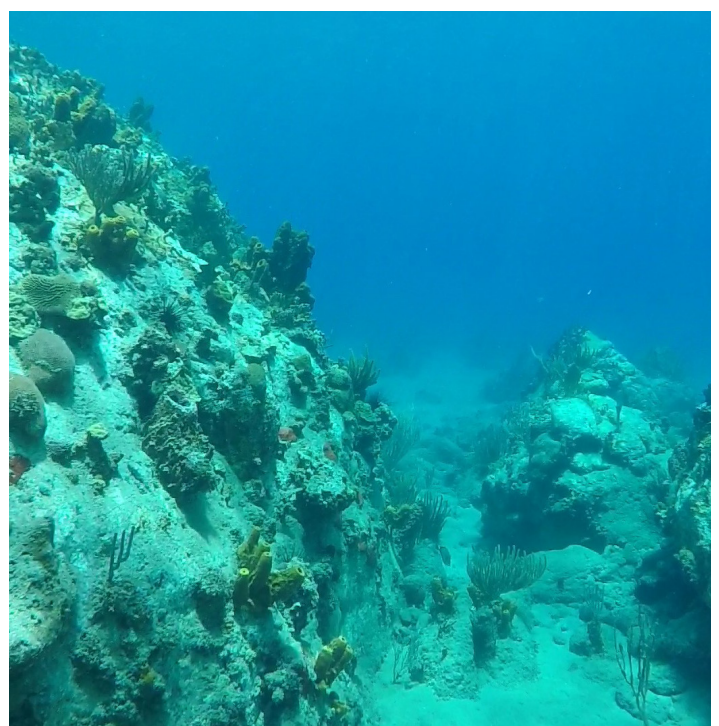
Furthermore, international research or conservation agencies should not just be satisfied with collaborations with local entities. To ensure continuity, there is a need to look further at natives and indigenous groups as equal project leaders. When we find local heroes, we must collaborate with them as 'equal partners' so that they can be exemplars in the community for mobilizing collective action in favour of conservation. To understand more about '[the problem of colonial science](#)', Dr. De Vos' op-ed in *Scientific American* makes for impactful reading.

Projects coming into the region should be intentional in aligning with community groups and local champions working on other types of projects around policy, advocacy, etc. For example, are there local NGOs working on clean water or safe water access that could be linked into efforts to address coastal pollution? Or local organizations interested in nutrition and food security that could be part of work on sustainable fisheries or aquaculture?

Strengthening resources for local nonprofits and aligning objectives collaboratively will be key to fostering a healthy and equitable Caribbean blue economy.



Photo credit: Reefmaker, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons



## Recommendation 5: Create legacy projects



**T**he mission of legacy projects is to support sustainable activities that increase skills, knowledge, and access in local communities. These projects will further local employment opportunities (for entrepreneurs as well as employees of larger organisations), creating leaders who can transmit expertise to multiple generations of Caribbeans to come. They will also focus resources into long-term social and environmental solutions.

Equitable Caribbean Blue Economy legacy projects should engage in succession planning so projects can transition smoothly to the local community, and so collaborators can step away without disconnecting – playing the part both partners agree on, for as long as they want to, knowing their legacy will live on for generations.

This type of relationship-building may mean that work takes longer than might be otherwise expected, but if local personnel are not integral to the projects, then long-term legacies will be jeopardised. Funders need to be aware and supportive of this in making grant decisions.



# Conclusion

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Our current conditions are ripe for change. This moment in history is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for us to create a purpose-driven movement from within the Caribbean for the rest of the world to support, a movement where local agencies and entities can unite around the equitable blue economy and provide pathways for international partners to engage more effectively.

This is a time to rethink and rebuild relationships around innovations that will help restore our oceans. The time is now to build the equitable collaborations needed to develop a sustainable ocean economy in the Caribbean, built on diverse relationships and values, in ways that encourage equity and inclusion and recognise the non-material aspects of human well-being and happiness.

The Equitable Blue Economy for the Caribbean is a powerful conduit for realizing the full potential of the region. An equitable framework is necessary to reduce our vulnerabilities, invest in local scientific talent and infrastructure, and manage our valuable marine resources. The byproduct of this could make the Caribbean a global exemplar this decade for elevating the social well-being of a region that has been disenfranchised for centuries.

Please consider joining the [AQUA Caribbean Blue Economy Conference](#) on November 14th in support of the Equitable Caribbean Blue Economy. This will be a live example of what an equitable collaboration for the Caribbean Blue Economy can look like.

## Meet the author



[Veta Wade](#) is an award-winning Caribbean-based ocean advocate, recognized by the Ocean Awards 2020 as a leader on [marine conservation](#) issues within the Caribbean through her non-profit organization [Fish 'N Fins Inc.](#) Veta is an Equitable Blue Economy Consultant and thought leader whose vision is to enable inclusive growth in the capacity, diversity, capability and resilience of small island communities and territories. Her works support the design and implementation of projects that place innovation, community well-being, and climate resilience at their core. Find her on [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#), or get in contact at [veta@vetawade.com](mailto:veta@vetawade.com), or + 1 664 392 9255.



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