Joint Statement: Urgent Need for Additional Funding for Nature Conservation in the Caribbean Netherlands

The nature conservation community of the Caribbean Netherlands urgently calls for increased and sustained support and funding to continue the work of the second phase of the Nature and Environment Policy Plan (NEPP) 2020–2030.

The ecological resilience, biodiversity and ecosystems of our islands are under severe, increasing and cumulative pressures, particularly our coral reefs, which are experiencing accelerating deterioration due to climate-related stressors, local pressures, diseases, and invasive species. These ecosystems provide vital provisioning, regulating, and economic ecosystem services to our islands and their inhabitants. Without increased support and financing, we will suffer irreversible losses that will undermine biodiversity, livelihoods, prosperity, self-sufficiency, and climate resilience for future generations.

When Bonaire, Saba, and Sint Eustatius became special municipalities in 2010, the Kingdom of the Netherlands gained a treasure trove of biodiversity and habitats. The islands are home to more than 10,000 species including many that are unique in the world, and unfortunately, also many that are under threat of extinction. They depend upon diverse and interconnected ecosystems both above and below water such as cloud and mangrove forests, seagrass beds and coral reefs. These habitats support incredible biodiversity including sea turtles, parrots, dolphins, flamingos, orchids, seahorses, bats, sharks, and much more.

Studies show that our islands' ecosystems are nearing a critical tipping point.[1] Rising sea temperatures due to climate change have caused increasingly frequent and severe coral bleaching events. When combined with unchecked local pressures such as wastewater, erosion, and run-off, these stressors weaken corals, making them more susceptible to disease and mortality. Meanwhile, terrestrial habitats are also deteriorating due to unsustainable land use and the effects of free-roaming grazers. The damage doesn't stop there, erosion fueled run-off from degraded land flows into the ocean, further harming our already-stressed coastal ecosystems.

If these local pressures are not adequately addressed, ongoing deterioration of our terrestrial and underwater ecosystems would set off a chain reaction of far-reaching and irreversible impacts. Coral reefs and mangroves are not only hosts to incredible biodiversity, but they are also natural barriers that protect our coastlines. Without them, coastal communities become increasingly vulnerable to extreme weather events and rising sea levels. Fisheries that depend on coral reefs for breeding and feeding grounds would suffer severe declines, threatening food security and livelihoods. The tourism industry, which relies heavily on the beauty and biodiversity of our nature, would also face major losses, affecting jobs and local economies. Ultimately, the degradation of our nature undermines the very foundation of our island communities' cultural identity, economic stability, and environmental sustainability.[2] Nature conservation and climate change adaptation are essential to prevent our islands from becoming uninhabitable.

---

[1] https://www.dcnanature.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/BioNews-StateofNature.pdf

[2] "What's Bonaire Nature Worth?" (2013), Instituut voor Milieuvraagstukken/Wolfs Company; "The tourism value of nature on Saba" TEEB Caribbean Netherlands (2014); "Sint Eustatius: Economic Value of Nature: (2017)

The Nature and Environment Policy Plan Caribbean Netherlands 2020-2030[3] was developed together with the Ministries of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature (LVVN), Infrastructure & Water (I&W), and Interior & Kingdom Affairs (BZK), the Public Entities of Bonaire, Saba, and Sint Eustatius, and a wide range of stakeholders in the Caribbean and European parts of the Netherlands. It describes the framework for nature and environment policy and contains goals to support socioeconomic development and cultural identity, while recognizing that each island has unique characteristics and habitats.

The strategic goals of the plan are to invest in a resilient coral reef, restore and conserve unique habitats and species, develop the local economy based on sustainable use of natural capital, and create the enabling conditions for effective nature management and sustainable use. It outlines an integrated and comprehensive strategy that addresses terrestrial and marine ecosystems together, recognizing their mutual dependence. In addition, the plan demonstrates the Kingdom's commitment to fulfilling national and international agreements and legal obligations such as the "*Wet Grondslagen natuurbeheer en -bescherming BES,*" the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Ramsar Treaty, the objectives under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and the Cartagena Convention.

The first phase of the NEPP has been proceeding for the past five years. The initial investment of 35 million euros funded vital preparatory work and research that should now result in ambitious and concrete interventions on the ground. It has supported coral and terrestrial restoration projects on all three islands, in addition to providing essential funds for nature and national park protection in the absence of structural, sustainable revenue streams. Other activities to build ecological and societal resilience have been implemented, including monitoring seawater quality, preparation of wastewater visions, controlling free roaming grazers and invasive species, mangrove restoration, and development and professionalization of the agricultural sector. The foundation has been created for implementation of significant interventions such as wastewater treatment and sustainable coastal development. We are at the halfway point and now is the time to scale up or lose what progress has been made to safeguard our nature and our way of life.

The Netherlands must not only increase financial commitment to the NEPP but also assist in the transition from temporary funding to sustained and structural support. To date, the budget for the period 2025-2030 has yet to be determined. Based on what has been accomplished in the first phase, in combination with projects yet to be implemented and the scale of degradation we are now witnessing, a minimum budget of 150 million Euros is required for infrastructural improvements and an additional budget of 150 million Euros for proactive, ambitious nature conservation and restoration. By investing in protecting our valuable nature from further deterioration, strengthening our infrastructure and economy against climate shocks, and investigating and co-developing structural funding and income streams, we can not only continue the vital work to future-proof our communities and businesses, but we can also ensure the continued availability of resources to sustainably finance it. In addition to conserving our natural

[3] https://english.rijksdienstcn.com/documents/leaflets/agriculture-horticulture-and-livestock/nature-policy-plan/nature-policy-plan/nature-and-environment-policy-plan-caribbean-netherlands-2020-2030

treasures, every Euro provided will also help the islands to adapt to climate change and increase autonomy and self-sufficiency.

If the Netherlands is to fulfill its responsibilities to the Caribbean Netherlands as part of the Kingdom and to global biodiversity treaty obligations, it must act with urgency and ambition. In accordance with the principle of ‘comply or explain’, funding for nature management in the Caribbean Netherlands should be equivalent to funding in the European Netherlands and included structurally and adequately in the national budget. Our biodiversity and ecosystems are essential to the health, safety, and prosperity of our communities, and they are currently under severe threat. This crisis is unfolding now, and it demands bold and immediate financial commitment and action to secure a resilient future for nature and people in the Caribbean Netherlands.