INTRODUCTION

Tourism is the fastest growing sector of the global economy, and in most countries, coastal tourism is widely recognized as the largest growing area of contemporary tourism. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) world tourism has quadrupled in the last decade, and grown from 687.3 million tourist arrivals in 2000 to over 700 million in 2002. These figures are self-explanatory and provide an idea of the magnitude of this industry.

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According to Góssling three basic trends characterize the current global development of tourism. Firstly, ecotourism, namely responsible travel to natural areas seeking to maximize economic and social benefits to tourists and locals, is expected to outpace the growth of conventional tourism. Ecotourism enjoys a steady growth rate of up to 15 percent per year and developing countries are becoming more attractive destinations for it. Secondly, with the growth of this kind of tourism, it is expected that public interest for undisturbed natural areas will increase. Therefore, more pressure will be exerted on unspoiled areas. Thirdly, more and more countries are turning to tourism to multiply economic benefits without adequate planning, thereby compromising long-term sustainability.

As with many other aspects of tourism, concerns over the impacts of tourism on the physical and social environment are of substantial interest, influencing research on ocean and marine tourism. Improvements in technology (e.g., faster boats and modern SCUBA gear) have also made the oceans more accessible to tourists that ever before. For example, Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and other natural areas have come to be widely regarded by governments and the private sector as significant natural resources that can be economically exploited through tourism.

Decades of wrong-oriented and poorly managed tourism have had extensive environmental and social impacts in the Caribbean nations. Despite regional concern and commitment to developing a tourism industry that protects the environment and, at the same time, yields large economic benefits, tourism's negative impacts on the environment still outweigh positive ones. The main reason behind this deficit is the crucial need to gain economic revenues, particularly in small Caribbean island countries where poverty is an issue. As a result, governments and/or decision-making agencies are faced with a huge dilemma: how to achieve economic development and, at the same time, protect the fragile natural resources on which economic development is based. There is no simple answer to this and many experts around the world have advocated the use of more

6. Góssling, n. 4 above.