# **Message To Our Caribbean Leaders**

By Natalia Green

To the heads of the CARICOM Secretariat, the OECS Commission, and the Caribbean Community Centre for Climate Change. I write to you today to express my disgust and thoughts on the poorly handled situation of climate change within the Caribbean. We are tired of being pushed aside and not included in decisions being made about our countries on the environment, which we will eventually be inheriting.

You have put short-term business prospects above the long-term sustainable development which we were promised. By the time we get these nations to govern, there will be little we can do to make it better for our children and future generations. We are tired of seeing our lands sold for mining, destroying the earth, and displacing the multitude of indigenous plant and animal species, both marine and terrestrial. We can see this in the effluent flow caused by the WILDACO which killed hundreds of fish, halted several jobs dependent on the river, and gave rise to the suffering of residents due to the smell and unfit conditions of the water.

But have no fear. We are here, once again, to give our advice. And for the sake of our nations, I do hope you pay attention and take them into consideration.

Firstly, you need to put your pettiness aside and take heed of the suggestions from us, the young people, because we know what we speak of, and we are the ones who will have to live throughout the crisis, if you continue to sit there and debate about petty matters and are too prideful to take suggestions from “children”. We have a lot of ideas and suggestions, but we cannot move forward because you would rather hear them from an older person.

Secondly, we have to identify the real threats to our nations before the climate crisis gets any worse. Island nations are most vulnerable to these adverse effects due to climate change, and we must do whatever it takes to protect our nations and our people. We are already experiencing the receding coastlines and the ever-increasing temperatures. The coral reefs and marine life are suffering. Droughts have become worse than ever, and the hurricane season is becoming less predictable and more dangerous as the years go by. When we name these potential and existing risks, we can work towards identifying triggers and try to eradicate, reduce, or stop them from causing any further damages and risks to the environment. This can be achieved by working with local universities like the University of the West Indies, among other institutions and bodies, to conduct surveys. We can also use the Departments and Ministries of the Environment to go around, inspect and document the treatment of the environment and try to identify and predict the causes, solutions and other problems that may arise from these activities.

You should stop worrying about the expenses that will come, because our planet is diseased, and when you are sick you find the money to treat yourselves. So why is my world any different? Why is your pocket more important than my health and future and that of the generations that will follow? We need to come together as a region and put our differences aside so that we can take a stand against these larger countries to cut their carbon emissions, because we are the ones who are suffering the most! Apart, we fall but together we can make a big difference. And if it takes you losing all your beaches and resources to see that then you should not be leading choir practice, much less a whole country.

I would also like to add, we should make more efforts in educating our people. I think climate destruction and preservation should be a mandatory part of the syllabus, because as generations go by, we become more intuitive, more creative, and better thinkers. If children are regularly exposed to these problems, they will find some skilful and creative ways to solve them. This is not only targeting the young people, but also the older generations, especially those who believe they know more because they are older. They too are one of the biggest threats to our climate. We should be putting efforts into producing advertisements and flyers targeting their age group so they too can learn, and it’s never too late to make change except when it's too late to heal our world. If our people are not fully educated, then we cannot expect them to do what’s right or even punish them because they have no idea of the magnitude of the crisis, nor what they are contributing to making it worse. And with that being said, we are asking, yet again, for a chance. A chance to be heard and understood and taken seriously. We have the ideas and the solutions, but you will never put your pride aside and listen. We are seeing how selfish you leaders really are and it's not a good look; condemning your future and my earth to burn in the fiery depths of the world you created, while you disregarded ethically developing it for us. But never mind your failures. I have already established many times that you have and will continue to fail us until you give us a chance, but I urge you to make it sooner than later, when the situation can actually be resolved.

I would also like to see more efforts with clean-up measures of our beaches and streets. Not just one day out of the year. We should encourage and form environmental groups in communities to have a better impact and leave politics out of the mix. Once politics is involved it will not work. We need the people to see that it is for their benefit and not politicians trying to look good for votes.

We should also implement stricter laws for the abuse and destruction of our environment and it doesn’t matter by who, because there has been a sickening trend of the socially elite getting away with a lot or simply receiving a slap on the wrist when compared to the common man, who often gets the short end of the stick and worse punishment for trivial acts. If we continue to give them leeway and not properly hold them accountable, they will continue to do what they want without any serious or meaningful repercussions. That is a big no in my book! Hit them hard with something that provides enough damage to their business, so they know not to mess with the law and be better to the environment, instead of charging them with something that’s a drop in the bucket for them.

We should also give companies, whether big or small, local, regional, or foreign the boot if they violate any of these laws and harm ecosystems. They must be solely responsible for any environmental issue, have their licenses/contracts revoked and be the ones to rectify the situation. As seen recently in Trinidad and Tobago, there was a massive oil spill in which the company, instead of cleaning it up, sent boats to cut up the oil and let it sink. This method is dangerous to both humans and marine life as this oil deposit will prevent the fishes and coral from getting enough oxygen and will even stick to their bodies, causing distress, medical issues, and even death. Now when the locals consume these animals, they are at risk of falling gravely ill or even dying, due to the nature and circumstances surrounding the development and death of the animal. When these large companies get away with things like this and are not held accountable, we are the ones who will suffer as they only come to profit from the resources. Once the resources run out, they leave and leave us with the damages they have caused over their tenure. If we enforce extremely strict laws and policies and have these companies regularly inspected, we can protect our land and waters from falling victim to destruction and help our children in the fight against climate change.

However, before giving such companies their licenses, I believe the country should have a say in the matter. Oftentimes, the heads of government only concern themselves with development and do not weigh the risk versus the reward. But the members of the public always do. If we have local consultations and let the people decide whether they want the project to be executed or not, it will give citizens a say in how their country’s resources are used and how we go about development, without sacrificing the only thing that keeps our tourism sector afloat - the exclusive flora and fauna. If you continue to make business deals without consulting the stakeholders - the public, they will always be resentful even if it benefits them. We do not want the benefit; we want to be part of the process and I think it is fair to let us decide as well. If you have nothing to hide, then come with your argument about why your project should be considered, and then let us decide whether it's worth it or not. We do it to select our leaders periodically, so why should this be any different? Let us help our leaders to develop our nations without costing us our natural resources and our indigenous species.

Recycling must also be encouraged. Annually, over 322,745 tonnes of plastic are left uncollected and are released into the sea by the collective “effort” of all the Caribbean countries. Why do we have such a small number of recycling facilities in the region? Why is our waste not being properly separated and disposed of? Why is waste always being tossed into the sea? These are the things that cause our reefs to die and the fish population to decrease. And instead of complaining about the expense of having better and more recycling facilities, use the money to get them now and save money and the region later down the line. We tend to always complain about anything that will benefit us if we believe it is too hard or too expensive. But if it is going to benefit us all, then cuss today and relax tomorrow. You might not see it now, but you will someday. That is if the world doesn't burn before a change is finally made.

Ultimately, our region has a lot to do before we can make a meaningful change towards the healthy state of our environment and mitigating the impact of climate change. Unbiasedly considering and implementing these propositions will contribute immensely to the quick and safe recovery and sustenance of our nations and preserve the land and its resources for our children and upcoming generations.