

# Sargassum crisis worries Tobago hotel stakeholders



Tour boats docked near the seaweed line off Speyside, Tobago. The sargassum stretches from the shoreline deep into the water. PHOTO BY ELIZABETH GONZALES

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Tobago Hotel and Tourism Association president Reginald MacLean says despite spending over a quarter million dollars last year to fight sargassum, the crisis is only getting worse.

And he is now calling on the Tobago House of Assembly (THA) and Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar to step in, as his association joins a multi-million-dollar United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) partnership to combat the problem.

MacLean says the seaweed is not just an eyesore but is driving visitors away, narrowing beaches and draining business owners who are forced to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to keep shorelines clean. He is asking for greater partnership and faster intervention before Tobago's tourism reputation is damaged beyond repair.

He said yesterday that he was grateful for the UNDP assistance through US\$25 million in funding via Japan, which will provide some ease to affected countries.

“Speyside, Tobago, to be exact, is where part of that funding will be spent, which is where we are located. Part of that is 1,000 metres of sargassum boom. It is an aluminium barge with a conveyor belt, baskets to put it (collected seaweed) into trucks to offload the baskets, to dump the stuff. And again, a maintenance programme to keep all the equipment running,” MacLean explained.

The funding forms part of a broader regional initiative that aims to help island states improve their capacity to manage the growing sargassum threat.

The mats of seaweed drifting in from the Atlantic are no longer considered seasonal. It is reported that this event now forms part of a year-round phenomenon, driven by climate change, warming seas and shifts in ocean currents.

But MacLean said the UNDP support will not be enough unless it is backed by a co-ordinated national plan. Stakeholders in tourism have been raising the alarm for years, he said, but continue to feel sidelined. The association believes a centralised action plan across government, the private sector and communities is needed, if Tobago is to manage what is now considered both an economic and environmental emergency.

While hotels may be on the frontlines of the visitor experience, MacLean said the impact is being felt far beyond the tourism industry.

He said, “What we’re seeing is that the sand on the beach is actually disappearing because of the sargassum. So, we’re losing the beach—physically losing it. If you compare what the beach looked like five years ago to now, it’s night and day.”

MacLean said the association is hoping to work with the THA and the central government but warned time was running out. He also raised concerns about proposals to repurpose the seaweed for agriculture.

He referenced studies that warned against using sargassum as fertiliser because of its potential to absorb harmful substances like arsenic and cadmium from polluted waters. He said if not properly treated, the seaweed could contaminate crops and pose health risks to consumers.

Also contacted, All Tobago Fisherfolk Association president Curtis Douglas said the seaweed was damaging vessels and affecting the island’s food supply.

“So, it damages your fishing equipment and it’s very difficult to catch fish around because sometimes your lines and other stuff picks up with the feed so you can’t get as much [fish] as you would like to earn. It lessens down on your profit when the day come. It’s high risk when it (sargassum seaweed) comes in large portions like this,” Douglas said.

The issue is not limited to shorelines, as Douglas explained floating mats of sargassum can clog propellers, overheat engines and force fishermen to spend more time and fuel avoiding dense patches in open water.

Tobago’s fisherfolk have been calling for additional equipment and a more consistent clean-up and disposal strategy.

Guardian Media also noted that some communities have been stockpiling the collected sargassum but are unsure about how to safely dispose of it, or whether it can be repurposed.