

UNSPOILED SPECK OF GREEN IN THE OCEAN

Saba, the Unspoiled Queen

Windward, volcanic, wild, mysterious and clean. An emerald of 13 square kilometres, a green speck in an aquamarine sea. The Unspoiled Queen is still untouched by the 21st century. It is not inhabited, but it is populated. And this means it is high time for regulation.

BY BAUD SCHOENMAECKERS



Mount Scenery / PHOTO CHRISTIAN KONIG

Landing at the world's smallest international airport is quite an adventure. The summit of the Netherlands' highest mountain, Mount Scenery (872 metres), is mysteriously veiled in clouds but still visible from a distance. Approaching the island your eyes are pulled downward to a strip of asphalt on a flattened bump in the landscape. To reach the runway, the 22-passenger, twin-engine plane flies low alongside rugged cliffs. If the wind is not right, the plane cannot land. Soon another stretch of asphalt will be added to solve this problem. But the airport will not be made bigger, even though Saba is working hard to make an increase in tourism possible.



Street view, windward side, Saba / PHOTO SABA TOURIST BUREAU

No casinos or fast-food stands

With 27 diving spots in its exceptional marine environment, Saba is in the top five of the world's best diving locations. For hikers, there are 28 trails through five unspoiled vegetation zones – from cloud forest to steppe-like bush. “Saba is focused on quality not quantity”, says Glenn Holm, director of the tourism bureau. There is no mass tourism, there are no boulevards or casinos. We are one with nature and that gives us plenty of opportunities.” But this purity is vulnerable. Holm: “A paradise is attractive. Current regulation prohibits building anything taller than 500 metres, but what if you want to build something smaller than that? This is why the Spatial Development Plan has to be adopted quickly.

Contributing to Holm's concern is the fact that 90 percent of the land on Saba is privately owned. Money can buy anything, and a zoning plan is a sensitive topic for private landowners who see it as a curtailment. But fragmented ownership can also work the other way around. Tom van 't Hof, the founder of nature conservation on Saba, explains: “A few years ago a project developer came up with plans to construct a golf course, yacht harbour, country club and beach on an area of rolling hills that stretches to the coast. Many people liked the idea, but one of the family members who owned the property didn't want to sell so the plan was shelved. It could have turned out differently. That's why it is so important that regulations are established and why I am glad with the changes of 10-10-10.”

Building on cliffs

Sabavilla began enthusiastically on a project encompassing 24 luxurious villas. “One was built fifteen years ago and it has been for sale ever since. Saba is not an island for the rich. The jet set can't land their airplanes or moor their yachts here. Plus, it is expensive to build and the landscape doesn't help: it is rocky and steep.”

Tom van 't Hof was asked in 1986 by the Saba governing council to make a plan for the promotion of dive tourism on the island. “One condition was that the ecological balance in the marine environment would not be disturbed. I was very impressed: for once a forward-looking politician.”

In 1987 Van 't Hof became the first director of the Saba Conservation Foundation, which manages both the park on land and in the ocean. Twenty-five years later the Saba Marine Park was declared a national park. The current director of the foundation is Kai Wulff: “The pressure on the sea is building. The number of fishermen may be small, but a few of them are large in scale, and it is not clear how they impact the fish population: how many fish are left, what is the by-catch, which species are left? We don't have the right up-to-date data; and no monitoring is taking place. So we can't manage the catch based on accurate data, and very little is being regulated.” These issues are high on Wulff's priority list. “With the right tools we could ensure sustainable fishing, which would benefit the fish population, biodiversity and tourism.”

Adaptation

Research is needed to understand climate change, and Saba will have to adapt substantially to its consequences. Much is known about what climate change will mean for small island nations in general, but not for Saba in particular. The island has a high elevation and is therefore not directly threatened by the increasing sea level; but the impact is already noticeable: bleached and dying coral, unexplained dying off of fish, warmer seawater, shifting vegetation zones, extremes in temperature and rainfall. The increasing number and intensity of hurricanes is also causing more damage to the coral.

To come up with a strategic adaptation plan, more research-based data is needed. Wulff would therefore like to have a laboratory for land- and sea-based research. “We don't know which species we currently have! I hope the Netherlands will support us with expertise, educational opportunities and money, of course. We have to make sure that we don't reinvent the wheel.”

The transition following 10-10-10 offers opportunities. In accordance with international law, an Exclusive Economic Zone has been established, whereby an area stretching 200 miles off the coast has come under Dutch control and management. A management plan for this marine area has been set up that includes monitoring and research.

Outside scrutiny works best

Many fishermen adhere to self-established rules. However there are also laws, but

Columns and cloud forest

The volcanic island of Saba lies mostly underwater. The volcanic underground in the sea is a food source for pinnacles. These are columns thickly covered in coral, sponges, shells and other organisms. The density and number of these pinnacles around Saba is exceptional. New fish species were recently discovered in the Saba Bank marine area, as well as new coral ecosystems dominated by unique algae communities. The Saba Bank is assumed to be both a birthing area and 'nursery' for whales. Within the framework of international treaties, such as the EEZ, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation has made 100,000 euros available for a surveillance boat to help protect the Saba Bank.

Above water Mount Scenery dominates the scenery of the island. Parts of the cloud forest near the top of the mountain are unique in the world. The unusual conditions have brought forth a large number of special plant and animal species. One road crosses the island from the airport to the harbour. For their water supply, the people of Saba make use of desalinated seawater as well as underground cisterns that catch rainwater.

violations are difficult to prosecute. "The people know each other. They are friends or family. This makes it difficult to enforce the rules and hand out penalties. Once Saba is a Dutch municipality this will change, especially if people are brought in for this purpose from elsewhere. Outside scrutiny works best. There is some informal cooperation among and with the fishermen. Wulff: "They inform us if there is a tanker in the area or fishermen from other islands. We then contact the Coast Guard. Other than that there is little solidarity among them." For this reason Wulff was recently asked by the fishermen to represent them in the process of implementing the EEZ (see page 20).

A lot can be achieved through regulations. But this doesn't apply to the lionfish. Wulff: "That animal is disastrous for the local fishermen and for the fish population: crab, wawoe, red snapper and the reef fish.



The cloud forest on Mount Scenery / PHOTO HENKJAN KIEVIT

All of these species suffer from the presence of the lionfish.” The animal is difficult to combat. More than 80 percent of its eggs hatch, it has no natural enemies and it eats everything. Reports of lionfish sightings are coming in from all of the islands. Eradication is not possible. Wulff: “The only thing we can do to keep the numbers in check is to catch as many of them as possible. Divers have been specially trained for this and a campaign called “Wanted” has been initiated in all of the parks. But even catching them isn’t easy. The fish has 18 spines with which it can cause painful stings that can also lead to breathing problems in humans. This carnivorous animal can grow to 40 cm long and live for 15 years. Diving schools are also worried because if nothing is done, there will be no other fish left to look at. Van ’t Hof has a more relaxed attitude when it comes to the lionfish problem: “From an evolutionary perspective, enemies will show up. Who are we, by the way, to say that this fish doesn’t belong here? We still know so little about the ocean.” The lionfish has in any case one thing working against it: it tastes good.

Intruders

Climate change, travellers, tankers that discharge water – all of these offer ways for non-native species to invade Saba and its waters. “On land we have the suffocating Coralita plant, snake species that did not originate here, plants we have never seen before and of course the goats”, says Kai Wulff. Although some goats appear indigenous since they have been here on the islands for decades. Just like on the other islands, solving the problem appears to be a purely political issue, reflected in the commonly heard slogan: ‘one goat, one vote’. Wulff: “This is not a problem for conservationists to solve, but we are active in the discussion and can report that the goats are a threat to our biodiversity. And that brings us to our most important source of income: tourism.” Here too, enforcing regulations is a problem because of the close ties among the islanders, who would gladly look the other way when it comes to violations committed by a friend or family member.

Sorting

At the harbour an excavation is underway. Stones are being pulverized into unique black sand. “The best sand in the Carib-



Diving off Saba / PHOTO HANS LEIJNSE

Saba is not an island for the jet set. A jet can't land here and there is no fancy harbour.

bean”, according to one of the workers. Strolling away from the harbour one soon arrives at the rubbish tip. “I know something is being done about this”, says Wulff, “but at the moment it is terrible. There is no sorting of waste, so everything is simply dumped here. Even oil, which can be brought to the electricity company GeBe for recycling. But not everyone knows that.” The black clouds of smoke emitting from the row of pipes along the pier give away the secret of what GeBe runs its generators on.

Just like on St Eustatius and Bonaire, the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment is working on a master plan for the collection, sorting and processing of waste.

On the way back we drive to The Ladder: an historical staircase that the people of Saba used to haul goods from the ships to the towns located far above. The engine of the Winair airplane rumbles softly. Twenty-two people depart from the smallest airport in the world. ■

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