



Small Grants, Big Impact:

Protecting Marine Biodiversity
in the Caribbean



ACP MEAs 3

Strengthening marine conservation, one cleanup at a time: Youths actively remove plastics from the ocean, turning environmental education into action for healthier Marine Protected Areas.



“

We always hear about plastic in the ocean. We hear of Bahamian beaches drowning in plastic. Bahamian fish that have ingested plastic. I think the main thing though is that, in assembling her data and doing her research, Kristal [Ambrose, 2020 Goldman Environmental Prize winner] was able to demonstrate that this problem isn't just out there, it's actually right on our front doors and we need to act now.” - **The Hon. Remauld Ferreira, Former Minister of Environment, The Bahamas**



Cayos Cochinos: Explore the vibrant coral reefs and marine biodiversity of Honduras' Bay Islands.

Background

The Wider Caribbean Region (WCR) faces escalating environmental threats, including marine litter, biodiversity loss, overuse of natural resources, and climate change. Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) have been established as a frontline strategy to safeguard marine and coastal ecosystems. However, the effectiveness of these MPAs has often been constrained by limited institutional capacity, inadequate community engagement, and insufficient funding.

To address these challenges, the Caribbean Marine Protected Area Management Network and Forum (CaMPAM) launched a targeted Small Grants Programme under the umbrella of the African, Caribbean, and Pacific Multilateral Environmental Agreements Phase 3 (ACP MEAs III). This regional initiative was implemented in 2022 through a collaborative framework involving the Cartagena Convention Secretariat, the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute (GCFI), and the Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife Regional Activity Centre (SPAW-RAC).

Serving as a regional hub for marine governance and stakeholder coordination, CaMPAM has long championed capacity building, technical cooperation, and knowledge exchange across the WCR. The small grants initiative built on this legacy by targeting concrete, site-specific actions that simultaneously advanced the implementation of the Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPAW) and Land-Based Sources of Pollution (LBS) Protocols of the Cartagena Convention. The initiative exemplified a systems-thinking approach by focusing on both marine conservation and pollution control to tackle the interlinked drivers of environmental degradation.

This case study explores how the CaMPAM Small Grants Programme operationalized regional commitments through locally driven solutions, demonstrating how targeted investments, strategic partnerships, and systems thinking can enhance MPA effectiveness and advance integrated coastal and marine management in the Wider Caribbean Region.



In Honduras, young environmental champions embark on educational tours, learning about conservation while making a real impact – removing plastics and restoring mangroves and wetlands – under the Bay Islands Conservation Association initiative.

Objectives

The Strengthening Marine Conservation Through Small Grants initiative aimed to achieve the following key objectives:

1. Enhance the capacity and effectiveness of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) across the Wider Caribbean Region by supporting local governance structures and management practices.
2. Promote integrated, community-led actions that address both marine biodiversity protection and the reduction of land-based sources of marine pollution, particularly marine litter.
3. Support the implementation of the SPAW and LBS Protocols of the Cartagena Convention by translating regional environmental goals into actionable, site-level interventions.
4. Encourage innovation and partnerships between local stakeholders, including community groups, NGOs, academia, and government agencies, to strengthen resilience and adaptive management of coastal ecosystems.
5. Foster knowledge sharing and replication of successful conservation and pollution reduction models across the WCR through the CaMPAM platform.

This case study reaffirms that small, targeted funding—when coupled with local leadership and regional technical support—can yield significant gains in marine conservation.

Implementation approach

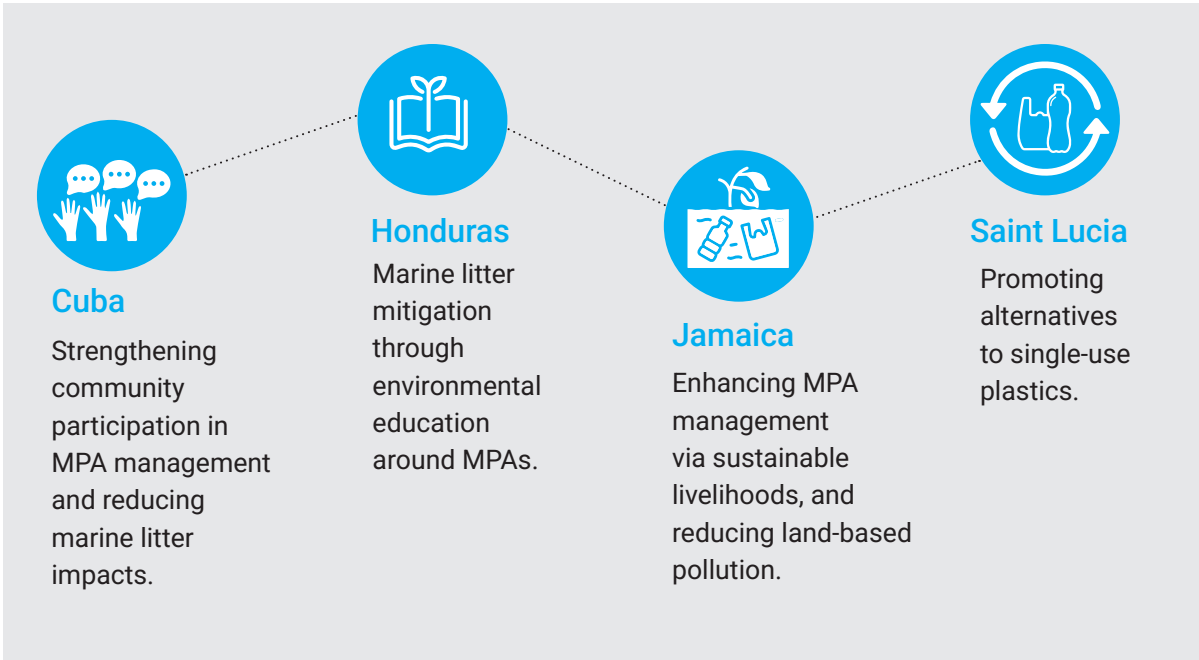
The implementation of the small grants initiative followed a structured and inclusive process, launched in early 2022 and rolled out through 2023. In partnership with GCFI’s MPACONnect and GPML-Caribe, the programme issued a region-wide call for proposals using accessible communication tools such as infographics, social media, and targeted email outreach. Three grant categories were created based on priority themes:



Proposals were rigorously assessed for strategic alignment with SPAW and LBS objectives. Out of 26 submissions, nine (9) projects were selected—three from each category. Technical oversight was provided by SPAW-RAC, with GCFI ensuring administrative coordination and reporting.

Project overview

The selected projects represented a geographically diverse mix of countries and focus areas:



Key achievements

The project achieved significant results despite the modest size of the grants, illustrating how targeted local initiatives can drive grassroots behaviour change and advance broader regional environmental objectives. Key achievements included:

- Community-driven interventions in Cuba, Jamaica, Honduras and Saint Lucia, directly addressing critical threats to marine ecosystems.
- Development and promotion of eco-friendly alternatives to single-use plastics.
- Implementation of citizen science models, clean-up campaigns, and environmental education.
- Strengthened partnerships among NGOs, academia, community groups, and national agencies.
- Enhanced visibility and operational effectiveness of SPAW-listed MPAs.
- Reinforced the bottom-up governance approach championed by CaMPAM, proving its effectiveness in mobilising local action.

Strategic innovation

One of the most innovative aspects of the initiative was its integrated programming model, which deliberately supported projects addressing both biodiversity protection and pollution reduction. This dual focus encouraged grantees to adopt holistic strategies tailored to local contexts, recognising the interconnected nature of environmental challenges.

By funding hybrid proposals—such as those in Honduras — the initiative demonstrated the potential of systems-thinking approaches to generate sustainable outcomes. These projects exemplified how limited funding, when deployed strategically, can catalyse multi-objective environmental impacts.

The initiative aligned with global shifts in environmental financing, such as those recommended in the UNEP study on integrated finance for the WCR, which advocates for blended and pooled funding mechanisms supporting climate, pollution, and biodiversity goals simultaneously.



Challenges and mitigation

The implementation process encountered several challenges:

- Limited funding constrained the number of projects that could be supported.
- Tight timelines affected the ability of some stakeholders to engage effectively during the proposal stage.
- Logistical constraints emerged due to the geographic dispersion of MPA sites



These challenges were mitigated through:

- Deadline extensions for proposal submissions.
- Virtual coordination tools to bridge distance barriers and enhance collaboration.
- Ongoing technical support from SPAW-RAC and GCFI to navigate implementation bottlenecks.

Lessons learnt

What worked well

- The hybrid grant model attracted innovative, integrated project proposals.
- Effective communication materials (infographics, user-friendly guides) boosted proposal quality and reach.
- Projects rooted in the understanding of interlinked environmental problems yielded more sustainable, community-owned outcomes.

Areas for improvement

- Extending the proposal window could allow for deeper community engagement during the design phase.
- Securing multi-year funding would enhance project sustainability and allow for broader impact scaling.



In Cuba's Marine Protected Areas, water-based patrolling plays a vital role in safeguarding marine ecosystems—preventing illegal activities like littering while closely monitoring biodiversity.



Every souvenir purchase at the BICA Ecostores helps fund marine conservation projects, supports sustainable tourism, and strengthens the island's ecosystem.

Conclusion and recommendations

This case study reaffirms that small, targeted funding—when coupled with local leadership and regional technical support—can yield significant gains in marine conservation. The initiative strengthened institutional frameworks, catalysed behaviour change at the local level, and directly supported the SPAW and LBS Protocols under the Cartagena Convention.

Key recommendations going forward include:

- Establishing a Transitional Coordination Unit for CaMPAM to institutionalise programme governance.
- Mobilising core funding from regional partnerships to ensure continuity of grant cycles.
- Investing in digital tools and platforms to improve outreach, monitoring, and knowledge sharing. For more information, visit: <https://campam.gcfi.org/>

Supporting Documents

The following documents provide detailed background and additional visual/technical materials:

1. CaMPAM Small Grants Summary Document (Activity 1 – GCFI ACP-MEA): Pages 5–7 for project summaries and statistics.
2. CaMPAM Options Paper – Final Nov 2022:
3. UNEP Consultancy Report: Achieving Environmental Goals through Integrated Financing in the Wider Caribbean Region – Background on blended finance mechanisms and policy recommendations for integrated funding frameworks across pollution, biodiversity, and climate (UNEP Law Division, 2023).

Acronyms

ACP MEAs	African, Caribbean and Pacific Multilateral Environmental Agreements
CaMPAM	Caribbean Marine Protected Area Management Network and Forum
GCFI	Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute
GPML	Caribe: Global Partnership on Marine Litter – Caribbean Node
LBS: Land	Based Sources of Pollution.
MPA	Marine Protected Area
SPAW	Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife Protocol
SPAW-RAC	Regional Activity Centre for the SPAW Protocol
UNEP/CEP	United Nations Environment Programme – Caribbean Environment Programme