



FUTURO DI BONEIRU Future of Bonaire

**Greenpeace review on the impacts
of climate change on the
Dutch Caribbean island Bonaire**

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Content

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO <i>BONEIRU</i>	4
THE FUTURE OF <i>BONEIRU</i>: EXPECTED IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE	6
Rising sea levels, fading coastlines	6
Extinction of the coral reef	7
A changing climate: extreme weather	8
HOW <i>BONEIRU</i> WILL CHANGE, IF WE DON'T ACT NOW	9
Biodiversity, tourism and identity	9
Poverty, a structural problem	11
IT'S TIME TO PROTECT <i>BONEIRU</i>	13
ENDNOTES	14

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO BONEIRU

Bonaire or *Boneiru*, as it is known in Papiamentu, is a Dutch Caribbean island. An island full of heritage, gorgeous sunset views and a place that thousands of people call home.

Bonaire is located in the Leeward Antilles in the Caribbean Sea, 80 kilometers off the coast of Venezuela. The distance between Bonaire and Amsterdam, the capital city of the Netherlands, is roughly 7800 kilometers. Bonaire is 288 square kilometers. If you have never been to Bonaire, imagine an island half the size of the Dutch island of Terschelling or the same size as Ameland.

However, a lot more people live on Bonaire. According to CBS, in 2022, there were almost 23,000 people living on Bonaire¹ - compared to 4,000 on Ameland. This is growing rapidly because Bonaire is becoming increasingly more popular, with tourists and people from the Dutch mainland and the United States moving to the island. When you drive around Bonaire, you experience this immediately. There are lots of construction sites and the roads are busy.

Everywhere you go, you see more houses, hotels and resorts being built.

There are two cities on Bonaire. Kralendijk, which is the capital city, and the village of Rincón. The essential infrastructure of the Island is there to not only support the more than 20,000 people living on the island, but also to accommodate all the tourists coming to the island and enable them to enjoy the beautiful nature of Bonaire. As well as the Flamingo Airport in Kralendijk, there is a large pier that allows cargo ships and cruise ships to dock. The island also has its own waste processing, and energy and water infrastructure. A lot is taking place on this small island.

Nowadays, tourism is a huge part of Bonaire's economy, whereas in the past salt production was elemental to the island. This is a big part of Bonaire's colonial history, and when slavery was prohibited, the salt mining was too. However, the production in the salt pans was started back up again in 1966, when it was sold to an American company. Currently, the salt industry is in the hands of Cargill,



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a Canadian Company. In 2016, over 40 people were working for Cargill on Bonaire².

From 1954 until 2010, Bonaire was part of the Netherlands Antilles, a country in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. In 2010, the Netherlands Antilles were dissolved. Bonaire, together with the islands Saba and Sint Eustatius, became special municipalities of the Netherlands. Since then, the national government of Bonaire has been the Dutch government in the Hague. As a special municipality, there are a number of things that make Bonaire different from an ordinary municipality, let's say like Volendam. The most obvious one is that Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius, nowadays referred to as the Caribbean Netherlands, do not belong to one of the twelve Dutch provinces or to one of the so-called *waterschappen*, the regional authorities in the Netherlands that are in charge of water management.

Even though there might be differences in the way Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius are governed, the inhabitants of the three islands have the same human rights as all Dutch citizens. The Dutch government needs to guarantee and protect, for example, Bonairians' right to life and family life. These rights are defined by the European Convention on Human Rights³.

Climate change is a danger to human rights all over the world. This begs the question: is the Dutch

government taking sufficient action to prevent the worst impacts of climate change on the Caribbean Netherlands? And does it give equal protection from the impacts of global warming to the citizens of the Caribbean Netherlands as it does to the citizens of the European Netherlands?

No future without history

From 1623 onwards, shortly after the Dutch West India Company was founded, Dutch ships went to Bonaire for meat, water, and food. This is after the Spanish had colonized Bonaire. Bonaire was occupied by the Netherlands in 1636 and became a plantation of the Dutch West India Company. People from the African continent were enslaved and brought to work, not only on the fields but also in the salt pans. The Netherlands enriched itself by exploiting Bonaire and exploiting its people. Remains of this painful exploitation are still everywhere to be found on Bonaire. For example in the buildings that are known as the 'slave huts', close to the salt pans. These are very, very small huts where enslaved people would sleep while recovering from forced labor in the salt pans.

THE FUTURE OF BONEIRU: EXPECTED IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

In 2015, all countries came to a historic climate agreement in Paris. During yearly global conventions, hosted under the auspices of UNFCCC, world leaders agreed to tackle climate change. They promised each other to do their utmost best “to limit global warming to well below 2, preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels.”⁴ This might sound abstract to most people: 2 degrees, 1.5 degrees, what does it matter? But the impact of climate change will be enormous, and 1.5 degrees is not even considered a safe limit anymore. This has been concluded again and again in recent reports from IPCC, the scientific climate panel from the United Nations. And often, the most vulnerable, the least protected areas in the world, will be hit the hardest. Which is incredibly unjust, considering the fact that these countries generally emitted far less greenhouse gas emissions than the countries of the world that keep themselves better protected⁵.

Islands and coastal communities are the most vulnerable areas for climate change impacts.

Bonaire, just like the other Caribbean islands in the Dutch kingdom, is one of the islands which we should be increasingly worried about. Bonaire is a low-lying island, this means sea level rise can have an enormous impact. The island has a unique coral fringe, circling the island. The importance of the coral reef for Bonaire is often emphasized, with regard to its local biodiversity, cultural identity and its economy. But if we discuss the future of Bonaire, we should underline that the coral also acts as a protective buffer against increasingly higher storm waves due to rising sea level. The coral is a living breakwater, and of utmost importance in protecting Bonaire. Yet sadly, it is well known that climate change is a big threat to coral reefs around the world, and Bonaire is no exception.

Rising sea levels, fading coastlines

IPCC reports have been very clear about the threat sea level rise presents to low lying islands and coastal communities: “At centennial timescales, projected sea level rise represents an existential threat for island nations, low-lying coastal zones,



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and the communities, infrastructure, and cultural heritage therein.”⁶

IPCC has stated in the intermediate greenhouse gas emission scenario (SSP2-4.5), global mean sea level rise by 2100 is likely to be 0.44-0.76 meters⁷. By 2150, it will be 0,55-1.33 meters. In the upcoming 2000 years, the global sea level is likely to rise accordingly:

Global warming limited to	Global mean sea level rise
1.5 degrees	2-3 meters
2 degrees	3-6 meters
5 degrees	19-22 meters

Global mean sea level rise over the next 2000 years⁸

IPCC has stated: “Without a strengthening of policies beyond those that are implemented by the end of 2020, GHG emissions are projected to rise beyond 2025, leading to a median global warming of 3.2°C by 2100.”⁹

In the same intermediate greenhouse gas emission scenario (SSP2-4.5) the sea level rise in the Caribbean

area is projected to rise by 0-0.25 meters by 2040 and by 0,20-1,05 meters by 2100¹⁰. Sea level rise will not stop in 2100. It will continue to rise because of our carbon emissions today.

The Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute (the Dutch national weather service, KNMI) found in May 2022 that the sea level will rise quicker around Bonaire and neighboring islands, than on average in the rest of the world. This will lead to more frequent extreme water levels, for example if a storm passes by. Inhabitants could then experience flooding, saltwater intrusion and coastal erosion further inland. As a result, some parts of the islands will become uninhabitable. Beaches will also disappear under water, which has a big impact on tourism too. ‘The next generation of islanders will end up in a completely different landscape’, the KNMI states.¹¹

We can however decide how fast and how high the sea level will rise and what policies are taken to protect us against the impact of climate change. The policies made at this moment by governments worldwide will determine our futures.

All the numbers and scenarios above do not completely take into account tipping points. Tipping points are points of no return, events that take place that accelerate climate change even more. A well-known example is the Greenland ice sheet. If that melts, global sea levels would rise increasingly due to the enormous amount of water that is now contained in the ice sheet. Another example would be the loss of the Amazon forest, since unimaginable amounts of carbon emissions are now stored in the trees of the famous rainforest. If we lose vital parts of the forest, emissions would rise and global warming would be accelerated.

Extinction of the coral reef

Climate change is a problem for coral reefs in three ways: through acidification, heating and ‘drowning’. Oceans absorb a lot of the excess global greenhouse gas emissions and as a result oceans are acidifying. This ocean acidification is disastrous for many forms of marine life, coral reefs included. Added to this is the global temperature rise of the seas. Coral reefs are very temperature sensitive and increase in temperature will increase the amount of mass

'bleaching events' in which coral dies off. Sea level rise is also a big risk for many of the current coral reefs, as most can only survive just below sea level.

Scientists have been very clear: there will be a mass extinction of coral reefs worldwide if we do not halt climate change. **Coral reefs are projected to decline by 70-90% if global warming is limited to 1.5 degrees, and more than 99% of coral reefs will be lost if global warming is limited to 2 degrees.**¹²

As stated before, coral reefs are of utmost importance for the protection of Bonaire. That's due to the fact that they function as a living breakwater. With sea level rising and the loss of the coral reef, climate change is an increasing threat for the future of Bonaire.

A changing climate: extreme weather

Besides the sea level rise and the decline of the coral reef, Bonaire can also expect a changing climate with more extreme weather. Droughts will be a serious issue. If global warming is limited to 2 degrees, it is projected that there will be a declining trend in the coming decades in rainfall in the Caribbean region in the months June, July and August. In addition, there will be more severe agricultural and ecological droughts in the region¹³. The combination of less rainfall, more droughts and an ever warmer climate on Bonaire, will mean the biodiversity on the island will also change. Bonaire will become more and more like a desert.

In the Caribbean region, more frequent and stronger heatwaves are expected. There is no data available on this specifically for Bonaire, but there is a clear trend taking place in the region. In Grenada, "projections indicate that 'hot' days will occur on 33-66% of days by the 2060s, and 41-89% of days by the 2090s."¹⁴ In Trinidad and Tobago, projections indicate "that 'hot' days will occur on 33-66% of days by the 2060s, and 41-94% of days by the 2090s."¹⁵ And in Saint Lucia, "annually, projections indicate that 'hot' days will occur on 28-67% of days by the 2060s, and 37-100% of days by the 2090s."¹⁶

Increasing heat will have enormous impacts. The World Health Organization states: "Heatwaves are among the most dangerous of natural hazards,

but rarely receive adequate attention because their death tolls and destruction are not always immediately obvious. From 1998-2017, more than 166,000 people worldwide died due to heatwaves, including more than 70,000 who died during the 2003 heatwave in Europe."¹⁷ Population exposure to heat is increasing due to climate change. Concerning Bonaire, the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment wrote in 2019: "Heatwaves can lead to higher mortality rates, especially amongst vulnerable groups such as the elderly and people with severe obesity. This last group is relatively big on the BES-islands."¹⁸

Storms and hurricanes

Climate change causes worldwide disruption in weather systems. The effects on the Caribbean are currently being investigated. We know that storms already have a big impact on Bonaire. For example in 2008, when hurricane Omar reached Bonaire and caused a lot of damage. Waves, meters high, flooded the boulevard of Kralendijk. Guests at a hotel had to be evacuated and a pier was destroyed¹⁹. And even when storms that have already weakened pass through Bonaire, such as Hurricane Gonzalo in August 2021, they impact the daily lives of the people of Bonaire. The already damaged roads of Bonaire overflow with flood water and are damaged further and houses are flooded²⁰.



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HOW BONEIRU WILL CHANGE, IF WE DON'T ACT NOW



Considering all the threats that will be aggravated by climate change on Bonaire, we know the impact on the island will be serious. Wageningen University summarized some conclusions:

“Climate change is expected to impact both the natural and socio-economic situation on Bonaire. For example, the lower lying and coastal areas that host many of the resorts, residential areas, salt ponds, mangroves and turtle nesting beaches are likely to become subjected to more frequent damage from sea storms, and sea level rise will cause permanent flooding. In addition, sea water temperature rise is already weakening corals’ resistance against diseases making these reefs less attractive for dive tourism.”²¹

The Advisory Council on International Affairs, an independent body which advises the Dutch government and parliament on foreign policy, has similar concerns. “The far-reaching consequences

of climate change pose (in time) a major threat to the well-being of citizens of the Kingdom. Not only as an accelerator of existing insecurity, but also as an independent cause of human suffering. The Caribbean part of the Kingdom is much more vulnerable to this than the European part of the Kingdom. **According to recent climate security studies, the region is one of the most vulnerable in the world.”²²**

Biodiversity, tourism and identity

An essential part of the Bonairian economy is driven by tourism. In the current situation, if tourism declines, so will the economy. Many hotels and resorts are built close to or on the shoreline, and are therefore very vulnerable to rising sea levels²³. In 2021, a total of 111,000 tourists came to Bonaire by airplane²⁴. Cruise ship tourism is also starting back up again, after a long hiatus due to the coronavirus. Before the pandemic tens of thousands of additional tourists would visit Bonaire on cruise ships. For an island with almost 23,000 inhabitants, these tourist numbers are enormous and therefore an extremely vital part of the economy. However, many tourists



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are attracted to the island because of the coral reefs. Approximately 70% of these travelers visiting Bonaire are divers. They feel a strong connection to the island, 55% of the tourists visit the island more than once, because they want to spend more time experiencing Bonaire’s unique marine life²⁵. In 2005, researchers conducted a survey that showed that 80% of Bonaire’s visitors would not return to the island if the corals and beaches were degraded²⁶. As the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy states: “The islands are economically highly dependent on their coral sand beaches, clear ocean waters, coral reefs, natural landscapes and scenic beauty: flora ranging from cacti to orchids, and fauna ranging from ancient coral colonies and fluorescent sponges to hummingbirds and iguanas.”²⁷”

The biodiversity of Bonaire also has a big cultural importance for its inhabitants. **Nature is an important part of Bonaire’s identity, in addition to being a driver of employment and economic development on the island**²⁸. An example of this is the lively fishing tradition. Fishing is one of the oldest professions in the Dutch Caribbean. Many



families who live from fishing pass the tradition on to their children²⁹. However, due to climate change, pollution and overfishing, it is becoming more and more difficult for many fishermen to earn a decent living.

Poverty, a structural problem

Tourism might be flourishing on Bonaire at the moment, but poverty remains a serious problem on the island and is a daily reality for most Bonairians.

According to research, 40 percent of households have an income that is lower than is necessary for the average cost of living³⁰. Many have to work at least two jobs to sustain their families, often working during office hours but also in the evenings and weekends. And yet, their income level is not sufficient, because essential costs, such as housing, energy, water and food are extremely high and keep rising on a yearly basis. Poverty levels have only increased since 2010, when Bonaire became a special municipality of the Netherlands.

The official minimum wage on Bonaire in 2022 for everyone 21 years and older is 6,03 US dollars³¹, compared to €11,06 in the European Netherlands³². In addition, there is no so-called 'social minimum', also known as a poverty threshold, established for Bonaire. This is the minimal amount of money that an individual or a family needs to be able to afford the cost of living. **There is a poverty threshold for the European part of the Netherlands, but not for the Caribbean part.** This leads to many problems on the island, for example with the minimum wage and with social benefits. Because in order to reduce poverty, it is essential to first establish the poverty threshold, so that all policies can be made accordingly. In 2016, the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights called upon the Dutch government in a report to "establish with the greatest urgency a social minimum and to realize this for every inhabitant of the Dutch Caribbean."³³

Poverty has an impact on every Bonairian, no matter the generation. The National Ombudsman worries about young people, since they "not only suffer from poverty now, but this poverty greatly influences their chances for the future."³⁴ At the same time, the situation for elderly people is also extremely distressing. The state pension they

receive is about the same as for elderly people in the European Netherlands, whereas the average cost of living is almost two times higher. The Ombudsman stated: "Elderly people in the Caribbean Netherlands often lead an undignified existence. Policies that guarantee their livelihood must therefore now really be given priority."³⁵ It is very understandable that Unkobon - one of the consumer associations on Bonaire - is planning to sue the Dutch state for not sufficiently combating poverty on the Caribbean island. Their statement: "We believe that the state does not comply with its constitutional human rights obligations to take care of their inhabitants."³⁶

The climate crisis is expected to aggravate all existing issues of inequality, including the structural problem of poverty. In August 2021, Bonaire's island council passed a motion that urged the Dutch government to establish, as soon as possible, a social minimum that is a proper reflection of the actual cost of living on the island. In support of their call to the government, they also underlined how climate change will further challenge the economic situation on Bonaire. They stated the following:

“Considering that the IPCC (AR6 2021) finds that small islands in the Caribbean are faced with climate changes that will result in more drought, heat, water scarcity and coastal violence. That this will further test the socio-economic resilience of the island populations and in particular the most vulnerable groups, given the implications for the agricultural and tourism sectors, among others. That this prospect should be considered rather today than tomorrow, with the improvement of the current socio-economic situation as a starting point so that the islands become better positioned to face the expected social risks.”³⁷



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Cultural heritage

Bonaire is filled with cultural heritage. It dates back to the Caquetio, the indigenous inhabitants of the island. Their inscriptions can be found in several caves on Bonaire, most notably at Boca Onima, not far from Rincón. While temporal estimations lack, it is believed they were created in the period 500-1500 AD.³⁸ Scattered around the island, there are many reminders of the period when the Dutch colonized Bonaire, exploiting the island and bringing enslaved people to work on the fields and in the salt pans. In Kralendijk, right on the boulevard, there is Fort Oranje. Built in 1639, it is a fortress that was never used for its intended military purposes. In 1932, the lighthouse was added. Perhaps the most well-known reminders of the colonial history, are the the buildings that are known as the 'slave huts' in the Southern part of Bonaire (see above under 'No future without history'). This is the most low-lying part of Bonaire and the little huts are built very close to the shoreline. It is daunting to realize that these important remnants of a painful and incredibly unjust history could be lost due to the effects of climate change.



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IT'S TIME TO PROTECT BONEIRU



It is painfully clear that the future of Bonaire is on the line. The impacts of global warming will change the identity of Bonaire. Sea level rise, the vanishing coral, extreme droughts, storms: the island will be facing many challenges. It is incredibly unjust that the people who live on Bonaire never had big industries, never emitted immense amounts of greenhouse gas emissions, but still have to prepare for this enormous existential threat.

The Dutch government has the duty and responsibility to do its part to prevent the worst impacts of climate change and to protect all its citizens against the impact of climate change. Whether it is Volendam, Ameland or Bonaire. However, compared to the European part of the Netherlands, climate policy for the Caribbean municipalities are far behind. They are left out of most, if not all, national water safety and climate adaptation plans. Combined with the already structural socio-economic disadvantages of Bonairians due to a lack of government policies,

Bonairans are left with very little means to prepare the island for the impact of climate change.

The Dutch government has done very little basic research on the impacts of climate change and the measures needed to protect communities in the Caribbean Netherlands. There is far too little urgency amongst politicians and policymakers. This needs to change. Greenpeace therefore asked the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam to start a research study so that we can learn more about the impacts of climate change on Bonaire. The Caribbean Netherlands needs to be treated with the same urgency when it comes to the climate crisis as any other municipality in the European Netherlands.

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