

The View from Europe
By David Jessop

Time to consider the spaces in between

Has the time come to give greater consideration to the opportunity presented by what might be described as the space in between: the millions of square miles of ocean and sea bed that lie between the islands and countries of the Caribbean? Largely unmapped, scarcely considered and vastly greater in promise than what, for the most part is possible onshore, it offers a new frontier.

This is the implication of the progress now being made by Jamaica's Minister of Industry, Investment and Commerce, Anthony Hylton, in encouraging investors to turn Jamaica into a logistics hub for the Caribbean Basin and by others in CARIFORUM nations promoting the prospects for offshore oil and gas.

What by now should be self-evident is that the seas that surround the Caribbean can provide new opportunities for much needed growth.

The Caribbean commands access to the widened Panama Canal and is at a north-south, east-west intersection for international shipping. As such, the region offers multiple opportunities for the creation of transshipment ports linked to development zones for manufacturing, the assembly of finished items and other services for nations like China and Brazil, which are seeking new tariff-free ways to access markets in the Americas and the Europe.

It is the sea too that offers the potential to develop new ports and industries linked to the road and rail routes that may open up areas within Brazil and the Amazon Basin or help facilitate links across the Central American Isthmus to the Pacific; and which is the space that enables not just the regional and international movement of goods and services – legal and illegal – but also provides the access that brings the largest number of visitors to the region, the cruise ships.

Potentially beneath the sea's surface there lies great wealth in the form of oil and gas, minerals, possibly rare earths and stocks of fish.

Despite all of this, there has been no holistic accounting or mapping of the economic and physical resource that exists within the Caribbean Basin's economic zones or that may exist in the seas beyond. Instead individual nations – Jamaica, Cuba, the Bahamas and the Dominican Republic – have only recently turned to face the sea, recognising it as an economic opportunity that has the potential to bring investment and long term growth.

Up to now and Trinidad apart, almost all Caribbean economic thinking has been focussed onshore, with the emphasis on commodities, manufacturing, tourism, financial services and artisanal fisheries. This is both understandable and correct as it is where immediate opportunity lies; but ignoring the spaces in between when technology is changing rapidly carries with it the danger of missing the possibility to explore and exploit the growing interest of major global companies to partner offshore with countries and local business.

The technology to drill and recover oil and gas from huge depths now exists. Energy prices are expected to remain at levels that make the cost of deep sea recovery viable. Demand for energy has surged and will continue to expand as the industrialisation and wealth of advanced economies continues to grow.

At the same time there is a growing global interest in the challenging opportunity of seabed mining.

Although attention is focussed on the Pacific, there are indications that in the long term it may be possible to exploit submerged ocean ridges, undersea plate junctions and undersea thermal vents either in mid Atlantic areas. These lie between the Caribbean and Africa and off Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana and may be resource rich in iron-manganese nodules, polymetallic sulphides and cobalt-rich polymetallic crusts. Some scientists also suggest that rare earths contained in deepsea muds in concentrated and extractable forms may lie beneath the oceans, although the viability and challenges of recovery presently makes this seem remote.

The level of exploration now taking place in the region makes it quite possible to imagine a Caribbean, a decade from now, where some nations are energy rich, net exporters of oil and gas and in some cases trying to address the problems associated with wealth that hardly anybody is thinking about.

Some may say this is fanciful as the US and other nations are beginning to supply an ever greater amount of their energy needs from shale gas. However, the pace at which an ever increasing number of global oil corporations have begun to invest huge sums in prospecting for oil and gas in the Caribbean Basin suggests that before long more than one Caribbean nation other than Trinidad will become an oil or gas producer.

As matters stand there is oil exploration underway, planned or licensing being considered in blocks off the coasts of French Guiana, Suriname, Guyana, Belize, Barbados, the Bahamas, Cuba, Jamaica, and Grenada, and it seems in other islands in the Windward chain.

However, as recent developments in Belize indicate, the opportunity is not without significant challenges. There, environmental groups have in the last week mounted a successful legal campaign that resulted in all offshore oil drilling contracts between 2004 and 2007 becoming void. The potential contradictions between tourism, fisheries and oil and gas recovery make clear the need for sound legal and regulatory frameworks in all nations in or bordering the Caribbean Sea and for civil society to be more closely engaged in the process.

Making greater use of the Caribbean Sea is an issue that requires national, regional and international consideration as it touches issues that include physical security, policing, the environment, food and energy security, sovereignty, defence, sea level change and issues from maritime security to traditional notions of sovereignty and the environmental interdependence of Caribbean ecosystems. It also encompasses changing inter-regional and geopolitical relationships if recovery of offshore oil or gas were to occur in the three Guianas, the Bahamas or Cuba.

As the Caribbean struggles to find new ways to generate growth and greater consideration is given to making use of the seas, there is strong case for reorienting thinking to recognise that the seas too are the Caribbean's resource, heritage and future.

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