

ONE SEA, ONE PROMISE, YOUR MOVE

The Young Person's Guide to the Cartagena Convention

*How 26 countries teamed up to save the
Caribbean Sea — and why you're in the story*



START HERE

Hey — meet your guides



TÉO

Hi. I'm Téo. I'm 14 and I live on a small island in the Caribbean — the kind of place where the sea is basically your back yard, your fridge, your playground and your alarm clock all at once. I built my first fish pot when I was 10. I've snorkelled reefs that look like cities. And last summer, the beach near my house got buried under stinking brown seaweed for weeks. That's when I started asking questions

MARIANA

And I'm Mariana. I'm 15 and I'm from a big port city on the Caribbean coast of Colombia — not far from Cartagena, the city this whole agreement is named after. My Caribbean isn't a quiet beach. It's cargo cranes, cruise ships, traffic, and a river that carries the whole city's mess straight out to sea. Same sea as Téo's. Very different view.

TÉO

That's kind of the point. I see the sea from a tiny island looking out. Mariana sees it from a giant city looking down a river. Put us together and you get the whole picture — because it's all one connected sea.

This isn't a textbook, and you do not have to read it in order. Here's the map:

Part 1 — My Sea: what the Caribbean actually is, and what's messing with it.

Part 2: The Promise: the deal 26 countries signed, and the wins they've racked up.

Part 3 — The 6 rules that matter most to you. (There are 30; we'll show you the ones with the most direct line to the sea and your life.)

Part 4 — Your move: stuff you can actually do — no permission slip required.

FAIR WARNING

Some of this is heavy. Pollution, dead coral, climate change — it's real and we're not going to lie to you about it.

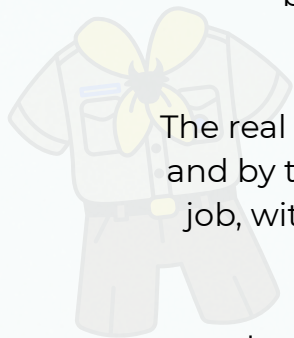
But here's the thing we learned: the Caribbean has been fighting back for 40 years, and it's working in the places people show up.

Stick with us to the end. It's not a sad story.

Before you start



I've worked on the Caribbean Sea for almost forty years — nearly as long as the Cartagena Convention. And before that I was a kid like Téó and Mariana: building fish pots, snorkelling reefs, a Sea Scout treating the sea like it belonged to me. In a way it did. In a way it belongs to you now.



The real work of protecting this sea is done by 26 countries acting together — and by the scientists, fishers, rangers and communities across the region. My job, with a small team in Kingston, is to help them work as one, because the sea is too big for any one island alone.

I won't pretend it's all good news. But I've watched reefs come back and turtles return to beaches we'd nearly given up on.

Forty years in, I'm sure this works where people show up. Soon it's your turn.

So read this. Argue with it. Ask better questions than I did.

Chris Corbin

**Coordinator, UNEP Caribbean Environment Programme
— Cartagena Convention Secretariat, Kingston, Jamaica**

SO WHEN THIS GUIDE SAYS “WE”...

...that's the team in Kingston that helps 26 countries work together for one Caribbean Sea. The countries are the ones who act; we help them do it as one.

My Sea

TÉO

People say 'the Caribbean' like it's a holiday postcard.
To me it's home. And it turns out my back-yard sea is one of the most alive places on the entire planet.



This sea is absolutely loaded

The Caribbean Sea is one of the most alive places on Earth. Beyond the fish and coral: manatees, whales, sharks, the turtles that nest on our beaches — and about one in ten of all the world's coral reefs.



12,000+

kinds of marine life in the Caribbean Sea — 1,500+ found nowhere else on Earth

TÉO

1,500 species that exist ONLY here. If they're gone from the Caribbean, they're gone from the universe.
No pressure.



And it's not just fish and coral

The Caribbean Sea isn't just pretty or full of wildlife. It's the engine of the whole region — it feeds us, employs us, and holds our culture.

THE CARIBBEAN SEA GIVES US

- FOOD — fish, conch and lobster on the table
- JOBS — fishing, diving, boats, ports
- TOURISM — the beaches and reefs the whole economy leans on
- TRADE — the ships that bring almost everything we use
- CULTURE — our music, food, festivals, identity
- PROTECTION — reefs and mangroves that shield the coast
- LIFE — the biodiversity that makes all of the above possible



MARIANA

Where I live, take away the sea and you take away the port, the jobs, the food, the visitors — basically the city.

It's not a backdrop. It's the foundation.

So 40 years ago, the region made a promise

TÉO

Here's where the story really starts. With a sea this important, shared by so many countries, somebody had to protect it.
And the countries decided to do it together.



Forty years ago, the countries of the Wider Caribbean made a shared promise to protect the sea they all depend on. That promise became the Cartagena Convention — the region's answer to everything in the next few pages.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Cartagena Convention is the **ONLY** legally binding regional agreement dedicated to protecting the Caribbean Sea and its coasts.

There is nothing else like it for our sea — 26 countries, one rulebook, for 40 years.

MARIANA

One sea. One legally binding promise. Twenty-six countries. That's genuinely rare anywhere in the world.



First, though — what the promise is up against

TÉO

We'll come back to how that promise works. But a promise only matters once you know what it's fighting. So, the honest part: what's hurting my sea?



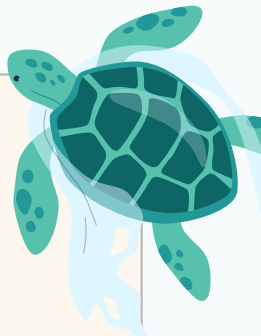
The plastic problem (it's personal)

Plastic is everywhere in our sea. On a Caribbean beach you'll find around 2,000 pieces of litter for every kilometre — more than three times the world average. And a plastic bag underwater looks exactly like a jellyfish — a turtle's favourite snack. You see the problem.



80%

of the litter in our sea didn't start in the sea — it came from land, washed down drains and rivers and gullies



MARIANA

That last one is my whole world. I live where the trash actually starts. My city's river is brown with it. Most ocean trash never came from a boat — it came from a street. Maybe my street, maybe yours. Which means stopping it is partly on us, on land. Hold that thought — we'll talk about a whole rule for this later.





The seaweed that ate my summer

Let's talk about sargassum — the brown seaweed swamping Caribbean beaches in giant rafts since 2011. A little bit of it is natural and even useful out at sea. But these mega-blooms pile up onshore, rot, and release a gas that smells like rotten eggs and gives people headaches. It's wrecked tourism, tangled fishing boats, and even clogged the machines that make fresh water on some islands.

TÉO

THIS is the one that made me care. You can't ignore a problem you can literally smell from your bedroom. Sargassum is fed partly by pollution and warming water — so it's connected to everything else in this guide.



WHY IT MATTERS

Sargassum isn't just gross — it's a transboundary problem. It drifts across borders on the currents, so NO single country can solve it alone. That's exactly the kind of problem the Cartagena Convention exists for: things too big for one island to fix.

The gathering storm

The Caribbean sits on the front line of climate change. The sea is heating up, which makes coral 'bleach' — the coral turns ghost-white and can die. Hurricanes are getting stronger.

The sea is slowly turning more acidic, which makes it harder for coral, conch and lobster to build their shells and skeletons. And rising seas threaten the low coasts where most of us live.

But here's the thing that surprised me most: the reef is also our best defence.

PART 1 - THE BIG IDEA

This is the fact that genuinely changed how I see the ocean.

A healthy coral reef breaks the power of waves before they reach the shore — it soaks up about 97% of a wave's energy

It does the job of a giant concrete sea-wall, except it builds itself, repairs itself, and is full of fish.



97%

of a wave's energy is absorbed by a healthy reef before it hits the beach — a self-building, self-repairing sea-wall

MARIANA

Wait — the reef does all that for free? My city spends a fortune on concrete sea defences and yours just... grows one?



TÉO

Pretty much. That's why losing it would cost us twice — the wildlife AND the wall.



Building an artificial breakwater can cost many times more than helping a reef recover. And reefs shield roughly a fifth of the entire Caribbean coastline — homes, roads, beaches, hotels, all of it.

TÉO

So when someone says 'why spend money protecting coral?' — the answer is: because it's already protecting YOU, for free, right now. Killing it means paying for walls later. The reef is infrastructure. It's just alive.



REMEMBER THIS ONE



A reef isn't decoration. It's a sea-wall, a fish farm, a tourist magnet and a storm shield rolled into one living thing. Protecting it isn't 'nice' — it's smart economics.

The Promise

MARIANA

Okay, this is my part. The agreement is literally named after a city in MY country — Cartagena de Indias, Colombia. Back in the 1980s the countries around this sea had a choice: blame each other, or team up. They chose to team up. Right here.



ONE SEA, ONE RULEBOOK

Because the Caribbean is one connected sea, pollution, oil spills, sargassum and even fish don't care about borders. A problem dumped by one country drifts straight to the next.

So in 1983, in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, the region signed a shared agreement to protect the sea together: the Cartagena Convention. It became law in 1986 — the 40-year anniversary we're celebrating now.

THE BASICS, FAST

- **WHAT:** A promise (a treaty) to protect and look after the Caribbean Sea.
- **WHO:** 26 countries — from the USA and Mexico, across all the islands, to Central and South America. They're called the 'Contracting Parties.'
- **WHEN:** Signed 1983 · became law 1986 · turns 40 in 2026.
- **WHERE'S HQ:** Right here in the Caribbean — Kingston, Jamaica.
- **WHY IT'S A BIG DEAL:** It's the only agreement that treats the WHOLE Caribbean Sea as one thing worth protecting.

TÉO

26 countries that don't always agree on anything, agreeing on THIS. That's how you know the sea matters.



IF YOU REMEMBER ONE THING

The Caribbean Sea connects our countries, supports our economies, sustains our cultures — and doesn't recognise borders.

The Cartagena Convention helps countries work together to protect that shared sea, through common rules, shared science and coordinated action.

That's it. That's the whole idea.

THE CONVENTION'S THREE SIDEKICKS (THE PROTOCOLS)

The main Convention is the captain. But it's backed up by three more detailed agreements called Protocols — and each one is basically a superhero with a different power.

Meet the crew:

OIL SPILLS PROTOCOL — “The Emergency Responder” (since 1983)

Job: rapid response when oil spills threaten the sea.



Why: the Caribbean is one of the busiest shipping seas on Earth. One big tanker spill could wreck reefs, mangroves, beaches and fishing for years. This Protocol means countries pre-plan and rush to help each other — like a fire brigade for the sea. Backed by a regional centre called REMPEITC-Caribe.

SPAW PROTOCOL — “The Wildlife Guardian” (since 1990)

Job: protect Caribbean wildlife and set up marine protected areas — ‘national parks’ in the sea where nature gets to recover.



Why: turtles, manatees, coral and seagrass have taken hits. SPAW is one of the strongest wildlife-protection treaties anywhere. Backed by SPAW-RAC in Guadeloupe.

Bonus fact: reefs connected to mangroves can hold more than DOUBLE the fish. Protect the nursery, feed the sea.

LBS PROTOCOL — “The Pollution Preventer” (since 1999)

Job: stop pollution at its source — on land — before it reaches the sea.

Why: remember that 80% of sea litter comes from land? Plus about 85% of the region's wastewater (yes, that wastewater) flows into the sea untreated. This is the hardest, most important fight. Backed by CIMAB in Cuba and

IMA in Trinidad & Tobago.



TÉO

Notice how the three heroes match the three things wrecking my sea: oil, lost wildlife, and land pollution. The plan literally targets the problems. It's not random.



MARIANA

And number 3 — LBS, pollution from land — is basically about my city and that river. The hardest one to fix, because it means changing how millions of people on land live. But it's the one that would help my bay the most.

FORTY YEARS OF ACTION

Okay but... did it actually work?

TÉO

Fair question. A promise is just words until somebody keeps it. So I went looking for proof. Turns out — yeah. It did.



WINS ON THE CARTAGENA CONVENTION SCOREBOARD

- A network of protected areas. Dozens of special marine sites — 38 of them, across 15 countries — are officially listed and protected together under SPAW.
- Wildlife gets backup. Sea turtles, whales, dolphins, corals and more are protected region-wide — not just in one country's patch.
- Nobody fights an oil spill alone. Countries pre-plan and respond together through a shared emergency system.
- Rules for the stuff that wrecks the sea. The region agreed shared standards for wastewater and a regional plan to fight marine litter.
- Taking on sargassum together. The countries agreed a shared regional plan to manage the seaweed crisis as one — a problem no island could ever solve alone.
- Measuring the sea. Through region-wide science and reef monitoring, the Caribbean tracks the health of its own sea — so decisions rest on evidence, not guesses.

MARIANA

This is the part that flipped it for me. My whole life I've heard 'the Caribbean Sea is in trouble.' True.

But 'the Caribbean is one of the few regions on Earth where 26 countries actually team up and fix things together'? Nobody told me THAT. That's the real story.



TÉO

Cooperation isn't a nice idea here. It's a track record.



OLDER THAN THE TREATY

What the first Caribbean people already knew

TÉO

And none of this — 'protect the sea, take only what you need' — is a new idea. The first peoples of the Caribbean were living it thousands of years before anyone wrote a treaty.



Long before the Cartagena Convention, the Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean — among them the Taíno, Kalinago and Garifuna — understood the sea as something to live with, not just take from.

ANCIENT OCEAN SCIENCE

- Reading the currents, winds and stars to navigate between islands.
- Fishing in ways that let stocks recover — taking enough, not everything.
- Harvesting with the seasons, so nothing was wiped out.
- Treating the reef, the mangrove and the sea as part of the community, owed respect.



Today, this is called 'traditional knowledge,' and ocean scientists and the UN increasingly recognise it as something modern conservation can learn from. In a real sense, the Convention is a very old Caribbean idea in legal language.

PART 3

The 6 rules that actually matter to you

TÉO

The Convention has 30 rules ('articles'). We read all of them so you don't have to. A lot of them shape how the Convention runs behind the scenes — the voting, the meetings, who keeps the official copy. All important; just not the part that'll grab you first.



MARIANA

These six are the ones with the most direct line to the sea — and to your life. Get these, and you've got the heart of it. (The rest? One quick box at the end.)



RULE

4

Everyone has to actually DO something

This is the heart of the whole deal. Every country promises to take real action to stop pollution and look after the sea — and crucially, you can't 'clean' your patch by shoving the mess onto your neighbour. (That's Article 4.)

In one line: no passing the trash.



RULE

7

Stop pollution on land

Most pollution starts on land, so countries agree to control it at the source — the drains, farms, factories and pipes. This idea grew into the whole LBS Protocol. (Article 7.)

In one line: fix it before it reaches the water.



RULE

10

Protect the wild places

Countries promise to protect rare and fragile habitats and the homes of endangered species — and to set up protected areas where nature can heal. This grew into the SPAW Protocol. (Article 10.)

In one line: give nature a safe room to recover.



RULE

11

Sound the alarm together

When pollution disaster strikes — like an oil spill — countries must jump in together AND immediately warn the neighbours in the spill's path. (Article 11.)

In one line: see something, say something, fast.



RULE

12

Look before you build

Before a big project goes up on the coast, a country has to study how it'll affect the sea first — that's an Environmental Impact Assessment — and warn neighbours who might be affected. (Article 12.)

In one line: think first, bulldoze never (well... carefully).



RULE

13

Share the science and help the small islands

Countries share research and data, and — this part matters — the bigger countries help the small island states, which have the most coastline to protect and the least cash to do it. (Article 13.)

In one line: teamwork, with backup for the little guys.

TÉO

Rule 13 means a lot when you live on a small island. We didn't cause most of this, we've got the most to lose, and this rule says help is part of the deal.
Respect.



MARIANA

And from the mainland side: my country is bigger, so part of the deal is that we help out too. A shared sea means shared homework.
That's fair.



THE OTHER 24 RULES, IN ONE BOX

The remaining articles are how the machine runs: how countries join (and leave), how they vote, how they hold meetings every 2 years, how they update the rules, who settles arguments (peacefully), and who keeps the official copy safe (the government of Colombia). Important? Yes. Thrilling? Not unless you're really into paperwork. Now you know they exist — moving on.

Your move

MARIANA

Here's where most guides go 'ask an adult for permission to care about the planet.' Nah. You've got more power than that. Some of this you can do today — some need backup.



STUFF YOU CAN DO RIGHT NOW (NO PERMISSION NEEDED)

- ▶ Ditch single-use plastic where you can: straws, cups, cutlery, the lot. Carry a refillable bottle and a bag. Boring? Maybe. But remember — 80% of sea trash comes from land, and that includes yours.
- ▶ Do the 2-minute beach pickup. Every time you leave a beach, take 5 pieces of trash with you. That's it. If everyone did it, the math is unreal.
- ▶ Pick the reef-friendly stuff: sunscreen and products without microplastics. Check the label. Your skin and the coral both win.
- ▶ Become the friend who knows things. Tell people the reef-is-a-sea-wall fact. Tell them where ocean trash really comes from. Sharing what you know IS action.

LEVEL UP (GRAB SOME BACKUP)

- ▶ Run a beach clean-up with your friends or class — the perfect way to mark the Convention's 40th birthday in 2026. Take photos. Tag UNEP-CEP. Make it loud.
- ▶ Find your nearest marine protected area and go see it. Ask who runs it. These are the SPAW Protocol in real life.
- ▶ Try citizen science — real projects where ordinary people log turtle nests, reef health or beach litter. Ask a teacher to help you find one near you.
- ▶ Found a stranded turtle, dolphin or injured sea creature? Don't grab it — get an adult to call the local marine experts. Knowing who to call is a skill.

USE YOUR VOICE (THIS IS THE BIG ONE)

- ▶ Ask the awkward question: what is MY country doing to keep its Cartagena Convention promises? Ask teachers, local officials, your representatives. You're allowed.
- ▶ Speak up for the small islands and the sea at school debates, Model UN, assemblies. Now you've got the facts to win the argument.
- ▶ Vote with your future self in mind — and until you can vote, make noise. The next 40 years of this sea belong to your generation, not the people who signed the original deal.

For 40 years the Caribbean has shared one tide and one promise. The next 40 years are yours. So — what's your move?



Passing you the tide

If you've read this far — thank you. When the Convention was signed, the sea felt endless to me. Forty years on I know two things: the Caribbean Sea is in real trouble, and it is absolutely worth fighting for — the fight is winnable wherever people show up. I've seen it with my own eyes.

My generation carried this promise for forty years. Now it's yours. You won't do it alone — that was never the deal. But the sea will need people like Téó, like Mariana, like you, to keep the tide turning the right way. I'm handing it over with a full heart and a lot of hope. Go on — it's your sea now.

Chris Corbin

**Coordinator, UNEP Caribbean Environment Programme
— Cartagena Convention Secretariat, Kingston, Jamaica**



Words to Know

Convention	A formal, written agreement between countries – basically a serious promise they all sign and agree to keep. Same thing as a ‘treaty.’
Cartagena Convention	The agreement 26 countries signed to protect the Caribbean Sea. Named after the city where it was signed: Cartagena de Indias, Colombia.
Protocol	A smaller, more detailed agreement attached to the main Convention, each one focused on a specific problem (oil spills, wildlife, land pollution).
Contracting Parties	The official name for the 26 countries that signed up and agreed to follow the rules.
Secretariat	The team that runs the day-to-day work of the Convention – based in Kingston, Jamaica. (That’s the ‘we’ in this guide.)
UNEP-CEP	The UN Environment Programme’s Caribbean Environment Programme – the part of the United Nations that looks after this sea.
Transboundary	A problem that crosses borders – like pollution or sargassum that drifts from one country’s waters into another’s.
Ecosystem	A community of living things (plants, animals, coral) and their environment, all connected and depending on each other.
Marine Protected Area	A part of the sea where human activity is limited so nature can rest and recover – like a national park, but underwater.
Blue economy	Making a living from the ocean – fishing, tourism, shipping – in a way that keeps the sea healthy for the future.
Wastewater	Used water from sinks, showers, kitchens and toilets. If it isn’t cleaned before it reaches the sea, it pollutes the water.
Sargassum	A brown seaweed that floats in the open ocean. In huge amounts it piles up on beaches, rots, and causes problems.
Coral bleaching	When the sea gets too warm, coral turns ghost-white and can die. A warning sign of a reef in trouble.
Ratify	When a country makes a signed agreement official and legally binding on itself.

Want the real thing?

TÉO

Everything in this guide is the simple version. If you want the actual treaty — all 30 rules and the 3 Protocols in full legal language — it's online and it's free. Reading the real thing is genuinely impressive.



The Cartagena Convention HQ — the UNEP Caribbean Environment Programme — is in Kingston, Jamaica.

Read the official text and explore the work at: www.unep.org/cep

REAL CREWS YOU CAN ACTUALLY JOIN



MARIANA

You don't have to start from scratch — there are already youth networks across the region doing this.
Find your people:

FIND YOUR PEOPLE

- Caribbean Youth Environment Network (CYEN) — a youth-led network with chapters across the Caribbean, running clean-ups, climate action and more. cyen.org
- UNEP Clean Seas — the global campaign to beat plastic pollution; take the pledge and join in. unep.org/beatpollution/clean-seas #BeatPlasticPollution

Got questions? Email the team at unep-cartagenaconvention@un.org and put “The Young Person’s Guide” in the subject line. They actually answer.

A SHARED TIDE FOR 40 YEARS

1986 – 2026

For four decades, the countries and territories of the Wider Caribbean have worked together, through the Cartagena Convention, to protect the sea they share.

It still matters today for the simplest reason: the sea is still shared.
The next chapter belongs to your generation.
One sea. One promise. Your move.

