

# Caribbean seeks to sell itself as one

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SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico --

Caribbean islands, separated by diverse languages and cultures, are developing a single regional brand to promote the tourism industry that drives most of their economies.

The new campaign, whose logo presents the word "Caribbean" in a rainbow of colors, aims to reverse a decade-long decline in the region's share of international tourism, said Allen Chastanet, chairman of the Caribbean Trade Organization.

"Whether we like it or not, we're all intrinsically tied," Chastanet said Saturday in an interview at the trade organization's 30th annual conference in San Juan. "If you can create more awareness of the Caribbean, then all the destinations in the region will benefit."

The trade group plans to replace the government tourism ministers who now sit on its board with marketing professionals - an overhaul that Chastanet said would likely win board approval at a meeting Sunday and will allow for a broader regional emphasis.

"It's very difficult for a minister not to represent his country," said Chastanet, who is also St. Lucia's minister of tourism and civil aviation.

Caribbean tourism, which drives most of the region's economies, grew at an average annual rate of less than 3.5 percent over the past 10 years, compared with 4.5 percent around the world, the trade group's statistics show.

Efforts to promote the region gained urgency earlier this year, after many countries reported declines in visitors from the United States, which began requiring travelers to carry passports on trips to the Caribbean, Mexico and Canada.

"We are in a position where we have to emphasize globally the things that make us outstanding, our environment, our cuisine, our culture," said Noel Lynch, tourism minister of Barbados.

The publicity campaign has already begun in New York City and Toronto, where billboards for individual Caribbean islands were recently replaced with ads for the region.

At least twice before, the region has tried to market itself as a whole.

A 1991 tourism summit led to a collaboration with the Beach Boys, who modified the lyrics of their song "Kokomo" to mention a host of Caribbean islands in a version played in radio and television spots. A decade later, the private sector financed a campaign known for the slogan: "Life needs the Caribbean."

While previous efforts collapsed over financing disputes, Chastanet said the current push has the support of the cruise industry and the Caribbean Hotel Association. A meeting of government leaders is being planned for May or June to further discuss funding, he said.

The campaign will not require any island to sacrifice its individual identity, Chastanet said. The more than 30 countries that belong to his trade group will in fact be asked highlight their heritage, he said, describing plans to refurbish St. Lucia's main port and convert old fishing villages into tourist havens.

"We've got to embrace our cultural past," he said.