

What and Where is the Caribbean? A Modern Definition

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ABSTRACT

We present seven legendary origins of the word “Caribbean.” Much confusion exists concerning the definition and use of this term and region. This situation has spawned a number of equally poorly defined and vague replacement terms (e.g., Greater Caribbean Region, Wider Caribbean Region). The term “West Indies” may be the best name for this region, but since World War II it has been largely replaced in the popular lexicon by “Caribbean” due to confusion with the “British West Indies,” colonial connotations, and ambiance. Some of the Caribbean fauna and flora are distributed too widely to be of use in defining the region. We review the major English definitions of the Caribbean (Antillean, Caribbean Basin, Caribbean Proper, Greater Caribbean, West Indies, and Wider Caribbean), discuss their short comings, and present a new definition for what we understand to be the modern term “Caribbean” in order to help resolve geographic confusion. We define an area based on physical geography that is concise and unambiguous, has almost identical physical conditions and biota, possesses interconnectivity, has definable and recognizable borders and physical isolation, and use an inoffensive and appropriate term. Many of the disagreements about what is and is not “Caribbean” have nothing to do with physical geography, but involve a complex mix of cultural, economic, emotional, ethnic, mystical, political, and religious circumstances that no one can fully understand or address. Merely proposing a definition is not the same thing as having it adapted. Even if our definition is not accepted, our effort, at least points out the need for a precise and usable definition for the Caribbean.

Keywords: Antillean, Caribbean Basin, Caribbean Proper, Greater Caribbean, West Indies, Wider Caribbean

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INTRODUCTION

For the last half a century, the authors have lived and pursued scientific research in the Caribbean (more than 500 publications many available online). We have, over the years, searched for a definition of this region that is concise and unambiguous; circumscribes an area with almost identical physical conditions and biota, incorporates interconnectivity and physical isolation, and states definable and recognizable borders, and is inoffensive and appropriate, without success. More recently, we have been asked about the area of coverage of the Caribbean Journal of Science. This turned a mere curiosity into a practical necessity. However, a more concerted effort to locate a definition only turned up incomplete and conflicting terms. The Caribbean definition is also important for other reasons such as highly favorable connotations for many expensive tourist

locations (see “CTO” in Table 1), the locality in which authentic rum may be produced (see “WIRSPA” in Table 1 and “Rum” in the Glossary), and world-class scuba diving sites.

American Mediterranean (e.g., Bonsal, 1912; Malek, 1977)
Antillean-Caribbean Region (Schuchert, 1935)
Antillean sub-region (Wallace, 1876; Antilles in Glossary)
Antilles (e.g., Dunn and Staff, 1964; Freitas et al., 2004; Glossary)
Caribbean (e.g., Colin, 1978; Williams and Bunkley-Williams, 2000)
Caribbean Archipelago (e.g., Terborgh and Faaborg, 1980; Sarangi et al., 2005; Glossary)
Caribbean Area (e.g., Bayer, 1961; Pointer and Jourdane, 2000)
Caribbean Basin (e.g., Long, 1976; Foster et al., 2004; Glossary)
Caribbean Basin Islands (Vázquez-Miranda, 2007)
Caribbean [Biodiversity] Hotspot (Graham, 2003)
Caribbean Island [Biodiversity] Hotspot (Smith et al., 2005)
Caribbean Large Marine Ecosystem (U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, 2004; Glossary)
Caribbean Proper (e.g., Colin, 1978; Corredor and Morell, 2001)
Caribbean Province (e.g., Ekman, 1953; Cerase-Vivas and Gray, 1966; Morato et al., 2004; Glossary)
Caribbean Region (e.g., Sykes and Ewing, 1965; Takhtajan, 1986)
Caribbean Sea and adjacent coral islands of the southern Gulf of Mexico (De León-González et al., 1999)
Caribbean Sea and its watersheds (Rivera-Monroy et al., 2004)
Caribbean Seascape (Rivera-Monroy et al., 2004)
Caribbean subregion [of Latin America] (Schneider and Kingsbury, 1965)
Caribbees (e.g., Bennett, 1967; Algier, 2001; Glossary)
English-speaking Caribbean (e.g., Millett and Will, 1979; Glossary)
Commonwealth Caribbean (e.g., Millett and Will, 1979; Glossary)
Grand Caribbean Region (e.g., Salazar-Silvia, 2003)
Greater Antillean Region (e.g., Darlington, 1938)
Greater Caribbean [or] Greater Caribbean Region (e.g., Cortés, 2003; Lang, 2003)
Indies (Jane, 1929; Columbus in Morison, 1939)
 insular Neotropics (Iturralde-Vinent and MacPhee, 1999)
 insular western Atlantic tropical coral province (e.g., Wilson et al., 2006)
Latin American coral reefs (Cortés, 2003; Williams and Bunkley-Williams, 2004)
New Indies (Marcou, 1875)
*New Spain*¹ (e.g., Díaz del Castillo, 1632, 1963)
Spanish Indies (e.g., Anonymous, 1957; Lockhart, 1976)
 warm midsection of the Western [= western] Atlantic Ocean (Earl, 2004)²
Western Atlantic coral reefs (Lang, 2003; Bunkley-Williams and Williams, 2004)
West Indian Province (e.g., Briggs, 1974, 1995; Morato et al., 2004; Glossary)
West Indies (e.g., Colin, 1978; Terborgh and Faaborg, 1980; Glossary)
Western tropical Atlantic (e.g., Ryther et al., 1967; Cortés, 2003)
Wider Caribbean [or] Wider Caribbean Region (e.g., Bayer, 1961; Anonymous, 2006)

¹included parts of Central and South America and Mexico also

²which more accurately described Brazil, not the Caribbean.

Table 1. Terms Attempting to Completely or Partially Define the Caribbean

The ideal definition of the Caribbean must be concise and unambiguous. It must circumscribe an area with almost identical physical conditions and endemic biota to that found within the Caribbean Sea and Caribbean Sea drainages. It must incorporate interconnectivity within the area encompassed as shown by the relative ease of movement and uniformity of biota within the area; however, it must also have physical isolation at its boundaries that impedes this ease of movement of non-human fauna with the deep ocean, ocean currents, freshwater inflow, or mountains. It must also have definable and recognizable borders. The term or name used for this area must also be inoffensive and appropriate.

HISTORY and DEFINITIONS

The words and phrases used in describing this region have been both confusing and conflicting for a long time. Schneider and Kingsbury (1965) found "... there is no general agreement upon the inclusion in the region of those Caribbean islands often referred to as the West Indies ... the problem of delimitation of the area is becoming increasingly complex ...". Demas (1978) aptly called this a "growing fuzziness as to what constitutes the Caribbean"; Millett and Will (1979) found that "even defining the region has become an increasing problem"; Lewis (1983) "From the very beginnings of its history in the late fifteenth century there has been vexatious confusion concerning the definition, both geographical and cultural, of the Caribbean region."; Algier (2001) "The Caribbean ... a confusion of nomenclature used to identify the area." and "The constant struggle for territorial rights of the Caribbean islands ... set the tone for a region destined to have a confused identity ... And in recent years, the U.S.[A.] has added to the confusing definitions of the area."; CAC (1998-2007) "Defining the extent of the Caribbean has long been a contentious subject." and Wilson et al. (2006) "There is no single term for the islands in this region ... We will refer to this area simply as the West Indies or Caribbean ..." although they admitted that the other authors in their book used these terms differently. The title of Lyons' 1983 book 'Caribbean Confusion' seems apropos. Apparently, no one can agree upon what and where the Caribbean may be and this has spawned a variety of conflicting and odd terms to resolve the confusion.

Somewhere in Area 31 (western central Atlantic) as designated by the *United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization* is the Caribbean; however, its exact definition is as ephemeral as the space aliens in the U.S. Air Force's Area 51. This "Area" has been called many things (Table 1). A number of these terms have been defined by disciplines or agencies with some authority (Table 2). Most of these names are so vague, variable, all encompassing, or imprecise that many books and articles concerning the region must redefine Caribbean with every use (e.g., Bond, 1936; Raffaele et al., 1998; Cortés, 2003; Smith et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 2006), or even in different chapters in the same book (e.g., Wilson et al., 2006).

<u>Discipline/Agency</u>	<u>Name for Region</u>	<u>Result</u>
AAGRA	Western Atlantic Coral Reefs	Too Broad
ACP	Caribbean	Too Broad
ACS	Caribbean	Too Broad
	Greater Caribbean	Too Broad
Biogeography	West Indies	Incomplete
Botany	XIII. Caribbean Region	Too Broad
CAC	Caribbean	I & TB
CAIS	Caribbean	I & TB
Caribbean Council	Caribbean	Too Broad
Caribbean Geography (journal)	Caribbean	I & TB
Caribbean Geography (book)	Caribbean	Incomplete
CARICOM	Caribbean	Too Broad
CARICOMP	Caribbean	Too Broad
CARIFORUM	Caribbean	Too Broad
CBIP	Caribbean	Too Broad
CCA	Caribbean	Open Ended
Columbus	Indies	Wrong
World Conservation International	Caribbean Islands	Incomplete
CTO	Caribbean	I & TB
FAO/UN	Area 31	Too Broad
FAO/UN, WIDECAST	Wider Caribbean	Too Broad
Geophysical Regions	Caribbean	Incomplete
Geography	Rimland of Middle America	Incomplete
IUCN/SSC	Caribbean Fisheries Species	Too Broad
JCA	Caribbean	Incomplete
Library of Congress ¹	Caribbean Area	Too Broad
	West Indies	Incomplete
National Geographic Society	West Indies	Incomplete
Ornithology ²	West Indies	Incomplete
Plate Tectonics	Caribbean Plate	I & TB
UNEP	Grand Caribbean Region	Too Broad
UN Geoscheme	Caribbean	I & TB
UNIC	Caribbean Area	Too Broad
USA	Caribbean Basin	Too Broad
USBGN	West Indies	Incomplete
U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy	Caribbean Large Marine Ecosystem	Incomplete
WIDECAST	Wider Caribbean	Too Broad
WIRSPA	Greater Caribbean	Too Broad
	West Indies	I & TB
Zoogeography	Caribbean Faunal Province	Too Broad

¹Algier (2001); ²Bond (1936) through Raffaele et al. (1998).

Table 2. Academic Disciplines and Government Agencies Attempting to Define the Caribbean Area.

The original indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, who gradually populated the insular Caribbean beginning around 5500 to 6000 years ago, apparently had no word or phrase for the whole region, or at least none that has survived (e.g., Breton, 1665). Christopher Columbus (Cristoforo Colombo, 1451-1506) in 1492 or 1493 called this area “the Indies” because he thought he had sailed around the world to what would later be called the East Indies. When this “slight navigational error” was realized, the area was renamed the West Indies. After World War II the term “Caribbean” became more popular. This term is from the Caribbean Sea (Glossary), which received its name after the European-assigned name for Carib aboriginals (Lenik, 2012; Glossary) who occupied some of the area at the time of Columbus’ arrival.

A concise definition of the Caribbean must be based on physical geography. No satisfactory cultural, economic, ethnic, mystical, political, or religious one can ever be created. Consider the following: “the Caribbean can be regarded as a cultural sea without boundaries.” (Benitez-Rojo, 1992; Honychurch, 2004). “It is my view that this ‘culture-area’ is the ‘true’ Caribbean.” (Millett and Will, 1979). “The Caribbean is not so much a place as it is a feeling.” (Breedon, 1980). A microcosm of Caribbean confusion is further illustrated in the conflicting political vs. geographical definitions of the Leeward and Windward Islands (Glossary). And this is only one Caribbean example of the myriad that are available.

The Caribbean is part of North America, not Central America (Glossary), as some authors state. That is because Central America is also a subunit of North America. We all know and understand the possible geographic components of the Caribbean. The problem is that no one can agree how to combine and/or exclude them to make a logical region.

The *Journal Caribbean Geography* first defines the Caribbean as “... the countries bordering the Caribbean Basin and the Guianas” ([//cgi.uwimona.edu.jm/welcome.htm](http://cgi.uwimona.edu.jm/welcome.htm)), but later as “... including all the islands in the Caribbean Basin, territories which border the Caribbean Sea (including The Bahamas), and the Guianas.” ([//cgi.uwimona.edu.jm/manuscripts.htm](http://cgi.uwimona.edu.jm/manuscripts.htm)). However, the Guianas are only connected to the Caribbean by colonial history. They are isolated from and have differences in physical geography from the Caribbean (Glossary). The first definition of “Caribbean Geography” also inadvertently excludes Barbados (Glossary), the Cayman Islands, Jamaica, and the Turks and Caicos (Glossary) since none of these are on the border and both definitions are too broad because they include large continental areas that do not drain into the Caribbean Sea.

In geographical terms, most but not all of what we are calling the Caribbean is in the Rimland subdivision of Middle America (Augelli, 1962: p. 119; De Blij and Muller, 1994: p. 5; Nijman et al., 2020: p. 97; Glossary). The exact definition of these areas varies among experts and sometimes even in the same textbook (De Blij and Muller, 1994). It excludes the Bahamas, Turks and Caicos, part of the Caribbean coasts and most of the Caribbean islands of South America and Yucatan (Glossary), Mexico. Thus, a purely geographical term cannot adequately define the Caribbean, nor could “Rimland of Middle America” ever offer the ambiance of “the Caribbean.”

In geological terms, much but not all of what we are calling the Caribbean is on the Caribbean Tectonic Plate. The location of this plate fulfills many of our criteria for a Caribbean definition. However, it is too broad (extending into the Eastern Pacific) and incomplete (most of Cuba and Yucatan are on the North American Plate and the north coast of South America is on the South American Plate).

As biologists, we are more concerned with fauna and flora than with physical landscapes. Possibly the presence of Caribbean fauna and flora alone could define the Caribbean. However, some largely Caribbean animals range into the Gulf of Mexico up to the northern Gulf (e.g., Phelps and Williams, 1995), around Florida, and all the way to Cape Hatteras, and sometimes beyond. To the south they range from northeastern South America through Brazil. Also, pre-Columbian groups frequently imported non-endemic fauna throughout the region, expanding their native habitats, and complicating this issue further. Thus, the use of the presence of Caribbean fauna to designate the Caribbean would encompass too large of an area to be useful. The broader area defined by this fauna is sometimes called the Caribbean Region (e.g., Ekman, 1953; Briggs, 1974; Glossary) a part of the Neotropics.

On the contrary, the continental (Glossary) Caribbean Sea coasts of Mexico, Central and South America, Trinidad, and the north coast of Cuba possess many continental species that do not occur in the insular (Glossary) Caribbean. On that basis, these coastal areas could be excluded from the Caribbean. However, excluding anything from the Caribbean Sea in a Caribbean definition would be illogical.

Lamarck and Candolle (1805) published the first biogeographical map (illustrating plant distributions) just before Humboldt (1805) established the fields of biogeography, geobotany, physical geography, and probably ecology. Later, the world was divided into 25 Kingdoms, named for their characteristic plants whenever possible, by Schouw (1823). This system separated “19. Kingdom of the West Indies” from “5. Kingdom of the Magnolias. Southern North America” but also from “15. Kingdom of the Cactaceae and Piperaceae. Central America and Northern Tropical South America”. Delpino (1898) employed a dichotomous system to divide the Caribbean from Florida and Guiana, but also from Colombia and Mexico. Wulff (1943) included the Caribbean somewhere in “8. Tropical Category (d.) Africa-America.” Good (1947, 1953, 1964) divided the world into 6 kingdoms and 37 floristic regions. The “24. Caribbean Region” was in the “Neotropical Kingdom” (and contained “a. Mexican lowlands and coast [actually parts of all 3 coasts]; b. South Florida, West Indies, Bahamas [unclear why the Bahamas were not a part of the West Indies?], Bermudas; c. Guatemala-Panama; d. North Colombia and North Venezuela” [and also the eastern Pacific off Central America]). Takhtajan (1986) similarly divided the world into six floristic provinces. In this system, the “XIII. Caribbean Region” was a subunit of the “Neotropical Kingdom” and contained “117. Central America, 118. West Indies, and 119. Galapagos Islands.” This, oddly, made the “Caribbean” larger than the “West Indies.” Review of these major faunal unit definitions shows them to be too broad and/or incomplete in their physical geographic coverage to provide a satisfactory term for the Caribbean.

If we defined the Caribbean as the areas possessing true coral reefs (Cortés, 2003; Lang, 2003; Bunkley-Williams and Williams, 2004; Williams and Bunkley-Williams, 2004; Glossary), this would solve some problems, but create new ones. Barbados, the Bahamas, and the Turks and Caicos would be included, but so would Bermuda, the Florida Keys (Glossary), the Flower Garden Banks (Glossary) off Texas, and parts of Brazil. Also, several areas along the Central American coast would be omitted. Besides with coral reefs rapidly deteriorating (Williams and Bunkley-Williams, 2000), we might be quickly left with a very small Caribbean, indeed.

The older or more limited definitions only included the Caribbean Sea and the countries and islands in or touching the Caribbean Sea. This is usually called the “Caribbean Basin” (Glossary) or the “Caribbean Proper.” This is a sound definition based on physical geography, is concise and unambiguous, and has definable and recognizable borders, and is inoffensive. However, it fails to

incorporate some areas with almost identical physical conditions and biota and lacks interconnectivity because Atlantic and Pacific drainages of Central and South American countries are included that are unrelated to the Caribbean Sea. This strict interpretation is also incomplete omitting Barbados and the Turks and Caicos since they do not touch the Caribbean Sea and thus cannot be included. Also, it leaves out the Bahamas that are essentially identical and interconnected. It is unnecessary because these can simply be called “the Caribbean Sea countries” with no need for a “Caribbean definition.” And finally, it ignores the problem of an adequate Caribbean definition by isolating one part of a system and ignoring the rest. These shortcomings have encouraged various authors to include additional countries as far afield as Bermuda and the Guianas (e.g., Knight and Palmer, 1989; Wilson et al., 2006). Even El Salvador, with no Caribbean Sea coast, miraculously became “Caribbean Basin” in some of these treatments (e.g., Anonymous, 2000; Clinton, 2000). Such modifications undermined rather than improved the definition.

A few strict designations included only the Islands of the Caribbean Sea (Glossary). Sometimes only the Greater Antilles (Glossary) and the Lesser Antilles (Glossary) were included. This is often called the “Antillean Definition” or “Antilles.” This is a sound definition based on physical geography, is concise and unambiguous, incorporates almost identical physical conditions and biota, has interconnectivity and usually has definable and recognizable borders (some versions incorporate different South American islands), and is inoffensive. However, it excludes the Bahamas, Central and South American coasts, and most of the Caribbean Sea. This strict interpretation is also incomplete omitting most of the Caribbean Sea and most Caribbean Sea countries. It is unnecessary because these islands can simply be called “the Antilles” with no need for a “Caribbean definition.” And finally, it ignores the problem of an adequate Caribbean definition by isolating one part of a system and ignoring the rest. This definition also has the peculiar effect of giving continental countries Caribbean beaches while they are not otherwise in the Caribbean. Various definitions ignore or exclude islands and atolls off Mexico, Central America, and sometimes even South America that are clearly in the Caribbean Sea. Some definitions tag former or current British, Dutch, and French colonial possessions [Bahamas, Belize, Bermuda, French Guiana, Guyana, Suriname] onto the Antillean Definition as if politics could make up for mangled geography (e.g., Lewis, 1983; Knight and Palmer, 1989; Bandara, 1994).

Possibly out of frustration of not being able to adequately define the Caribbean, some broader definitions throw everything in the mix from the Gulf of Mexico and south Florida through the Bahamas and the Caribbean Sea, Central and northern South America including the Guianas. This hodgepodge is usually called the “Greater Caribbean” or “Wider Caribbean.” The Cartagena Convention (Anonymous, 1983) defined this region:

“The ‘Convention area’ means the marine environment of the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea and the areas of the Atlantic Ocean adjacent thereto, south of 30 deg north latitude and within 200 nautical miles of the Atlantic coasts of the States referred to in article 25 of the Convention.” (Paragraph 1, Article 2), but Paragraph 25 limits these states to those “... States invited to participate in the Conference ... any regional economic integration organization exercising competence in fields covered by the Convention and that Protocol and having at least one member State which belongs to the wider Caribbean region, provided that such regional organization has been invited to participate in the Conference ...”

Such rationalization reduces their definition into politics or at least into an amusing form of physical geography. Not to be out done in incomprehension, authors use these terms to mean many different things. Spalding (2004: 27) defines the terms “Caribbean” and “Wider Caribbean” to mean the same thing interchangeably, just in case his readers were not confused enough already. Cortés (2003) used “Caribbean,” “Greater Caribbean,” and “western tropical Atlantic” to mean the same. Salazar-Vallejo (2000) leaves the Bahamas, Barbados, and the Turks and Caicos out of the “Greater Caribbean,” but includes Brazil and Bermuda. There is no need to otherwise evaluate all of these definitions since they include the Gulf of Mexico and are thus too broad.

A less ambitious expanded “Caribbean” combined the Caribbean (without exactly explaining what it was) with the Bahamas, but often forgot about Barbados and the Turks and Caicos. This was called the “West Indies” (Table 2). With proper defining, this term could have resolved the issue of a “Caribbean definition.” It is based on physical geography, is concise and unambiguous, includes almost identical physical conditions and biota, has interconnectivity, has definable and recognizable borders, and has physical isolation. However, the term parallels the old “British West Indies” (Glossary) or sometimes also called just the “West Indies,” which caused some confusion. Various authors included Bermuda and Guyana in this area for no good reason other than old-times-sake. Another short coming of this term is that many people in the area in question consider it to have colonial connotations. Lastly, sometime after World War II, the term “West Indies” was abandoned in the popular lexicon for a “Caribbean” meaning essentially the same. Possibly it has come time to formalize this popularization. A number of authors already use “West Indies” and “Caribbean” interchangeably (e.g., Wilson et al., 2006).

If we disavow the term “West Indies” because it is archaic, confusing, and distasteful, then the new “Caribbean” definition should encompass most of what was previously called the “West Indies.” There would be some value in including all areas with similar conditions and fauna but stretching this concept too far would defeat the purpose and significance of the term and eliminate any logical geographic boundaries. Spalding (2004) apparently calls all localities in the western Atlantic with coral reefs “Caribbean;” however, just as Earl (2004) in the same book, he forgets about Brazil. Cortés (2003) similarly forgot about Brazil in his “western tropical Atlantic” synonymous with “Caribbean.” Bermuda is simply too far (~1400 km) from the Caribbean Sea (Glossary). The Flower Garden Banks in the Gulf of Mexico, Dry Tortugas, Florida Keys, south Florida, and the Guianas are not Caribbean (see “Bahamas”, “Florida Keys”, “Guianas”, and “Yucatán Peninsula” in Glossary). The northwest coast of Cuba and all the coasts of Trinidad except the north are probably not really Caribbean, either, but would have to be encompassed to keep the definition simple.

CONCLUSION and DEFINITION

If we could avoid politics and emotions and apply a strictly physical geographic analysis, there might be some hope of a definition that makes some sense. First and foremost, anything in or touching the Caribbean Sea is Caribbean. Further, if we adapt the old “West Indies” definition, no one will object to the incorporation of the Bahamas, Barbados, and the Turks and Caicos. They are clearly not in the Caribbean Sea, but equally as clearly adjacent and almost physically identical to many of the islands in the Caribbean Sea. Now that we have invaded the continental areas of Mexico, Central and South America, we must find some way to limit our conquest to those parts affected by the Caribbean Sea, or more precisely, areas affecting the Caribbean Sea. The only logical way would be to consider the river drainage basins on these lands that enter the Caribbean Sea to be Caribbean

and those basins that enter the Atlantic south of the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, or the Pacific to not be Caribbean.

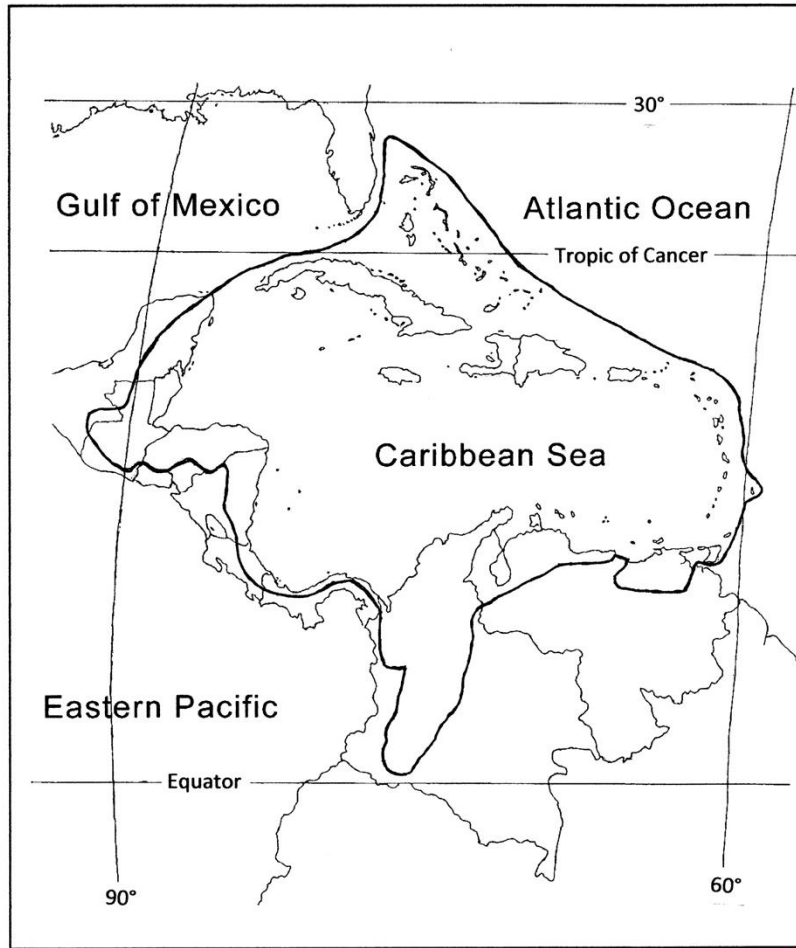


Figure 1. A line-drawing map of the Caribbean.

What we define as the Caribbean is enclosed within the heavier line. The area is completely enclosed in 30 degrees of latitude from the equator to 30°N, and almost completely circumscribed in 30 degrees of longitude from 60 to 90°W, as shown by the straight and curved lines near the margins. The Tropic of Cancer is the straight line passing through the Bahamas at 23° 26.4'N.

We suggest the following definition: The Caribbean consists of the Caribbean Sea and all the immediately adjacent and almost physically and biologically identical areas [short version]. A longer version of this definition is as follows: The Caribbean consists of the Caribbean Sea and all its bordering or included islands; the Bahamas, Barbados, and the Turks and Caicos and the seas among these islands and the Caribbean Sea, and their territorial seas (22.2 km), shallow (≤ 200 m) submerged platforms, or insular shelves (Glossary); the Caribbean Sea coasts and drainage areas of Mexico and Central and South America (Fig. 1). Bermuda, Brazil, the Florida Keys and the Dry Tortugas, the Flower Garden Banks, French Guiana, the Gulf of Mexico, Guyana, south Florida, and Suriname are excluded.

This Caribbean definition is concise and unambiguous; circumscribes an area with almost identical physical conditions and biota; has interconnectivity and physical isolation; states definable and recognizable borders; and uses an inoffensive and appropriate name. The only short coming in our Caribbean definition is the lack of specificity in the Yucatan Passage (between Cuba and the Yucatan Peninsula) between the Caribbean Sea and the southern Gulf of Mexico. Everywhere else this Caribbean is isolated by the Florida Current (in the northwest), oceanic depths (NE and E), freshwater inflow (SE), and mountains (S and W, Fig. 1).

All but one river drainages included in our definition are rather limited. The exception is the Magdalena River in Colombia, which runs practically the length of western Colombia, is 1528 km long, and has a drainage area of 273,000 km². Nevertheless, it is a Caribbean river by our definition and has a great effect on the southwestern Caribbean Sea.

Few definitions include south Florida, the Dry Tortugas, and the Florida Keys in the Caribbean. They are part of North America proper not the Caribbean. An argument could be made that their reefs are little different, and the northern Bahamas lie to their north. However, their reefs are somewhat different and influenced by continental fauna, their designation and limitation remain a problem, and they are little different from the Flower Garden Banks of Texas and Bermuda.

Establishing as correct as possible a name and definition for the Caribbean is not necessarily the same as having it accepted by everyone. Many people have quite strong opinions about what should and should not be included in the definition of “Caribbean” and thus no definition will please everyone (e.g., one of our pre-reviewers insisted that the Florida Keys must be included and the other was equally adamant that the Bahamas must be excluded!). Even if our definition is not accepted, our effort, at least points out the need for a precise and usable definition for the Caribbean.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS USED IN TABLE 2

AAGRA = Atlantic and Gulf [of Mexico] Rapid Reef Assessment Program; ACP = African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States; ACS = Association of Caribbean States; CAC = Caribbean Amerindian Centrelink; CAIS = Caribbean Agricultural Information Service; CARICOM = Caribbean Community and Common Market; CARICOMP = Caribbean Coastal Marine Productivity Program; CARIFORUM = Fifteen Caribbean countries that make up the Caribbean Forum of ACP States: Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago; CBIP = Caribbean Books in Print, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions; CCA = Caribbean Conservation Association; CAIS = Caribbean Agricultural Information Service; CTO = Caribbean Tourism Organization; FAO/UN = Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; I & TB = Incomplete and Too Broad; IUCN/SSC = International Union for the Conservation of Nature/Species Survival Commission; JCA = Journal of Caribbean Archaeology; UN = United Nations; UNEP = United Nations Environmental Program; UNIC = United Nations Information Center; U.S. = United States of America; U.S.A. = United States of America [Here referring to the Caribbean Basin Initiative of the Regan Administration]; USBGN = U.S. Board on Geographic Names; WIDECAST = Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network; WIRSPA = West Indies Rum and Spirits Producers Association.

GLOSSARY

America – the New World. As with most New World word origins this is multiple choice: Named after [1] the region of Amerrique [also called “Americ” or “Amerique”] in Nicaragua, which was so famous for gold that it was practically a synonym for the precious metal and known to Columbus, Vespucci (see #2 below) and other Europeans. Some authors have suggested that the word “America” was in common usage prior to the famous map first publishing this term (Waldseemüller, 1507b) and that the map makers stretched an incorrect translation of the wrong name of Vespucci only because they were desperate to find some explanation for justifying the established name. Others suggest that Vespucci changed his first name to Amerigo after learning about Amerrique to commemorate his discoveries, not vice versa (Marcou, 1875; Carew, 1978; Cohen, 1988). Certainly this is the most pleasing of the theories: A Native-American word becoming the name of the New World. [2] from Columbus’ rival, Amerigo Vespucci (1451-1512) (Latinized first name “*Americus*”), an Italian merchant and cartographer who explored South America and the Caribbean in the early 1500s and was a bit quicker to realize they were in a new world [not exactly clear that Columbus ever knew]. Why name it after his first name and not “Vespuccus” or “Vespucciland” since this was contrary to the norms of the time (e.g., Marcou, 1875)? However, this remains the most popular and best documented (Waldseemüller, 1507a,b) theory (also see #1 above). [3] derivation from the name of Richard Amerike (1445-1503) of Bristol in England, financier of John Cabot's (Giovanni Caboto 1450-1499) expedition in 1497 (Hudd, 1910; Broome, 2001). [4] a number of more fanciful and less likely theories abound.

America should have been named “Columbia” (perhaps Colombia) for the discoverer instead of the whim of some map-maker who could not make up his mind (Martin Waldseemüller 1470-1521/22 Latin name *Hylacomylus*). However, considering Columbus’s later crimes against humanity, perhaps it was just as well to withhold the honor.

Antilles – usually refers to the Greater and Lesser Antilles, but sometimes confusingly used to indicate all Caribbean Islands. Possibly from [1] semimythical “Antilia,” which appeared as an island or archipelago on pre-Columbian maps sometimes in approximately the correct position; [2] Spanish term “Antillas” assigned to new lands. Adverbs “Antillan” or “Antillean” or “Antillian” used almost equally as often.

The Antillean sub-region was the fourth division of the Neotropical Region of Wallace (1876). It consisted “of the West Indian Islands (except Trinidad and Tobago...”, including the Bahamas, and the Greater and Lesser Antilles, but not the coastal islands of Mexico and Central and South America, and most of the Caribbean Sea. He also called this the Antilles.

Anglophone Caribbean – historic British West Indies.

Bahama Archipelago – Bahamas and Turks and Caicos Islands; AKA Lucayan Archipelago

Bahamas – A group of ~3000 low coralline islands and cays arranged largely on four broad shallow submerged banks (Acklin Island, Cay Sal, Great, and Little Bahama Banks). With almost identical conditions as found in the Caribbean Sea, they could have been considered a Caribbean Annex even under the old Antillean and Caribbean Proper definitions. The northern Bahamas are further north than south Florida and the Florida Keys, but are still more similar in physical geography and biota to the islands in the Caribbean Sea than Florida.

Barbados – A small (440 Km²) island 160 km east of the Caribbean Sea. This Island is definitely out of the Caribbean Sea and completely separated from it, but has always been considered “Caribbean.” The Bahamas and Turks and Caicos are also out of the Caribbean Sea and usually not considered Caribbean.

Bermuda – a small group of 150 islands in the North Atlantic east of South Carolina (USA). Supposedly they have the northernmost true coral reefs compliments of the Gulf Stream; however, some of the islands off Japan might dispute the claim (Bunkley-Williams and Williams, 2000). These islands are often included in the Caribbean or West Indies; however, they have less right to this designation than the Flower Garden Banks or Florida Keys. Spalding (2004) considers Bermuda part of the Northern Caribbean.

British West Indies – in recent times referred to all British Overseas Territories or colonies in the area (Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Montserrat, and Turks and Caicos). Historically it also included Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago, as well as British Honduras (now Belize) and sometimes British Guiana (now Guyana) and the Mosquito Coast (later Miskito Coast, then Mosquito Kingdom, until taken over by Nicaragua and later divided with Honduras). Confusingly “West Indies” is sometimes used in place of British West Indies. The University of the West Indies still exists in the Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad, as well as a West Indian Cricket Team. Also called the “Anglophone Caribbean”, “Commonwealth Caribbean”, or “English-speaking Caribbean”. This term was purely geographical and indicated no political conformity (Caldecott, 1898: p.13).

Carib – Also Cariban, Karaban, Kareban. At the time of Columbus’ arrival, most of the Caribbean was peopled by three groups we now call the Ciboney or Guanahatebey [western Cuba?], the Taino or Arawak [Bahamas, Greater Antilles], and the Caribs [Central and South America] or Island Caribs [Lesser Antilles]. The Caribs had no single name for themselves. They called their males “Kalingo” and their females “Karifuna.”

A number of legends exist concerning the origin of this European name, e.g., [1] When they were first encountered by Europeans they were trading legumes that looked like a Mediterranean bean called “carob” [from Carob Tree, *Ceratonia siliqua* Linnaeus] hence Carib, although they were really cocoa beans [from Cacao Tree, *Theobroma cacao* Linnaeus] (McCullough, undated); [2] Tainos or Arawaks told the Europeans about a fierce group of Native Americans who periodically raided their islands that they called Galibi, which was corrupted to “Carib” by the Europeans; [3] A word of the same people meaning warlike or fierce people; [4] Also a word of the same people, but they were attempting to describe one marauding band, not a whole people; [5] The same people described these fierce ones as having faces with long snouts like dogs, hence Caribe from a corruption of the Latin *canis* since Columbus was somewhat fixated on Latin (e.g., Lestringant, 1997); [6] from the native word for the root crop manioc or cassava (*Manihot esculenta* Linnaeus); [7] Survivors from Atlantis (Plato, -360) sailed west to occupy an island they called Caraiba. Later they sailed further west into a sea they named the Caribbean after their island (Hansen, 1969). One of the many problems with this theory is that there were no Native Americans 10,000-12,000 years ago in the Caribbean to hear this tale. There is no evidence of pre-pottery, pre-agriculture archaic people in the insular Caribbean, except in southern Trinidad.

Somewhere in this mythology, the Caribs became so monstrous as to eat their captives and the word “cannibal” entered our vocabulary (e.g., Lestringant, 1997). However, the present-day descendants of the Caribs dispute this claim, no sound evidence appears to support it, and most damning of all was a European proclamation that only New World Natives who were cannibals could be enslaved. Therefore, Europeans quickly labeled them all as such. With Columbus’ men hunting native people for sport, it is quite clear who the savages were.

Caribbean – the Caribbean consists of the Caribbean Sea and all its bordering or included islands; the Bahamas, Barbados, and the Turks and Caicos and the seas among these islands and the Caribbean Sea, and their territorial seas (22.2 km), shallow (≤ 200 m) submerged platforms, or insular shelves; the Caribbean Sea coasts and drainage areas of Mexico and the Central and South America.

Caribbean Archipelago – sometimes all the islands of the Caribbean, but usually considered as just the Greater and Lesser Antilles; however, some authors included Belize, French Guiana, Guyana, Suriname (e.g., Millett and Will, 1979),

Caribbean Area – All the islands in the Bahamas, Barbados, Bermuda, Caribbean Sea, Turks and Caicos, except those off Mexico and the northern half of Central America. The coastal areas of central and South America are also omitted (Anonymous, 1997-2007), see “Northeast West Indies,” and “Southern Coastal Caribbean;” not as more broadly and generally defined in Bayer, 1961; Pointer and Jourdan, 2000; and Tables 1-2).

Caribbean Basin – All countries and islands within or touching the Caribbean Sea and Caribbean Sea drainages. Many authors give a broader definition to include the Bahamas, Barbados, Turks and

Caicos, all of any Central America countries, and even sometimes Bermuda. Also called “Caribbean Proper.”

Caribbean Geography – A bibliography book of bare citations (Rumney, 2012) and a journal based in Jamaica in recent turmoil.

Caribbean Large Marine Ecosystem – contains most of the marine areas we included in our Caribbean definition, but oddly excluded the Caribbean Sea coast of Yucatan, Isle of Pines, western Cuba, and possibly Bimini (U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, 2004: 64, Fig. 3.1)

Caribbean Proper – see “Caribbean Basin.”

Caribbean Providence – As with so many other Caribbean definitions, the reader may select from multiple choice of an area in the western North Atlantic: [1] where minimal seawater temperatures are either 18° or 20°C; [2] defined by a group of species that live at 20°C seawater temperature for six months or more, with no months cooler than 18°C; [3] from Cape Hatteras (35° 15’N) to Cape Santa Marta Grande (28° 28’S); [4] or Rio de Janeiro (22° 54.5’S) as the southern limit; [5] where mangroves exist; or [6] should be divided into smaller provinces (Floeter and Soares-Gomes, 1999). [7] southern Florida, the southern Gulf of Mexico, and the coasts of Central America and northern South America (Briggs, 1995). Sometimes called the “Tropical Province.”

Caribbean Sea – waters bound by Central America, northern South America, and the Greater and Lesser Antilles (Fig. 1). Part of the Atlantic Ocean. Covers an area of 2,754,000 km². Spalding (2004: 27) uses the term “Caribbean Sea” to mean Caribbean Basin, just in case his readers were not confused enough already.

Caribbees – see “Lesser Antilles”.

Central America – a narrow isthmus of land extending between North and South America (Fig. 1). It only completely formed as a land bridge around 3 million years ago. Usually considered a southern subunit of North America, but sometimes considered a region separate from North America. It is delineated by the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Mexico to the north and the Isthmus of Panama in the south. Some authors consider that the Trans-Mexican Volcanic Belt delimits the region on the north, or the southern boundary of Mexico, and include the Atrato River valley in Colombia to the south. Politically, Belize, the southern parts of Mexico, and Panama are sometimes excluded. The isthmus separates the Caribbean Sea from the eastern Pacific.

Commonwealth Caribbean – see “British West Indies”.

Continental Caribbean – areas around the Mexican, Central and South American Caribbean coasts excluding areas around the Caribbean Islands.

Continental Distribution – see “Continental Caribbean”.

English-speaking Caribbean – see “British West Indies”.

Florida Keys and Dry Tortugas – an archipelago or “string” of approximately 1700 islands extending from the southeastern tip of Florida along the Florida Straights separating the Gulf of

Mexico from Atlantic Ocean. These numerous islands or cays possess true coral reefs and much of the Caribbean fauna and flora. They are further south than parts of the Bahamas. However, they should be excluded from the Caribbean because they and south Florida are more influenced by continental North America, geographically separated by the Florida Straights, and isolated by the Florida Current. The Florida current is also an effective barrier. The Dry Tortugas is in the Gulf of Mexico. Geologically the Keys share the continental shelf with the mainland of Florida, but the Dry Tortugas occupy a separate small insular shelf. A definable geographic and geological boundary exists between the Florida Keys and the Caribbean Sea to the south and the Bahamas to the west, but none exists between the Keys and the mainland of Florida. Spalding (2004) considers these keys and part of the mainland shelf of southeastern Florida to be Northern Caribbean.

Flower Garden Banks – Two very small areas of true coral reefs on a salt dome in the northern Gulf of Mexico approximately 189 and 207 km south of the Texas-Louisiana border. The Stetson Bank 126 km south of Galveston, Texas, another salt dome, supports a small area of coral and coral-reef animals, but no true coral reefs. It has also been incorporated into the U.S. Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary. The fauna and flora of these areas is mostly Caribbean, if however, a bit depauperate. Spalding (2004) considers these parks part of the Northern Caribbean. However, if the Stetson Bank qualifies, then almost every oil rig in the Gulf would also have to be included.

Greater Antilles – Cayman Islands, Cuba, Hispaniola (Dominican Republic and Haiti), Jamaica, and Puerto Rico. Most definitions forget about the Cayman Islands (e.g., Raffaele et al., 1998), since they are not so great, at least size-wise. However, they are included due entirely to proximity. The Cayman Islands and Jamaica are entirely in the Caribbean Sea, while the three larger islands only have their south coasts bathed by these waters. Spalding (2004) places the British and U.S. Virgin Islands in the Greater Antilles. This makes some sense since they share the submerged Puerto Rico Plateau (with the exception of St. Croix), but most authors disagree.

Guianas – the countries of French Guiana (part of France), Guyana (Co-operative Republic of Guyana, formerly British Guiana), and Suriname (Republiek Suriname, formerly Dutch or Netherlands Guiana, also called “Surinam” or “Sranang”) occupying the northeast coast of South America between Venezuela and Brazil. A broader definition can encompass Guayana, an administrative region of Venezuela west of Guiana, which is also called “Venezuelan Guiana” or “Spanish Guiana,” and Brazilian Guiana formerly known as “Portuguese Guiana” south of French Guiana to encompass an even million square kilometers. Geologically these occupy much of the Guiana Shield. They are geographically distinct from the Caribbean Sea and isolated from its influence by massive freshwater flows from the Orinoco and Amazon Rivers. They also lack a key physical geographic character of what we consider Caribbean by having no coral reefs. Sometimes spelled “Guyanas.”

Gulf of Mexico – An ocean basin circumscribed by the Florida Keys, the north coast of Cuba, the northern coast of the Yucatan Peninsula, and part of the east coast of Mexico and the south coast of the USA (Fig. 1). Part of the Atlantic Ocean. Covering a surface area of 1.6 million km². The physical geography of the Gulf coast of Cuba is essentially the same as her Caribbean coast and is therefore included in our definition of “Caribbean.” Other parts of the southern Gulf of Mexico possess coral reefs, but are physically different from Caribbean Sea coral reefs (Cortés, 2003) (also see “Flower Garden Banks” and “Yucatan Peninsula”).

Island Caribbean – see “Insular Caribbean”.

Insular Caribbean – areas around the Caribbean Islands excluding areas around Mexican, Central and South American Caribbean coasts. Also called “Island Caribbean.”

Insular Distribution – see “Insular Caribbean”.

Insular Shelf – submerged platform extending out from the emergent land of an island usually gently sloping downward until reaching the steeply descending insular slope. The insular shelf edge begins at various depths around Caribbean islands (10 m off the south coast of Mona Island, and often at 30 m or less), but is generally marked on maps at a depth of 200 m (near the old 100 fathom line). This depth also largely separates the shallow and deep faunas. Continental Slopes extend from continental areas and tend to be broader and deeper than insular ones.

Leeward Islands – Again multiple choice: [1] Spanish, Old, or Nautical Term – the islands west of Puerto Rico (Greater Antilles). Although this term has fallen into disfavor; it does make a lot more nautical sense than #2. [2] English, New or Common, Political or Administrative Term that became a Geographic Term – Lesser Antilles north of St. Lucia. Supposedly more protected from the northeast trade winds, but we never understood why these islands were any way out-of-the-winds. The term is more historic than logical. It was stolen from the Spanish and misused by the English. The English redefined the term as it is used today as a political term independent of any nautical wind condition. Dominica “jumped ship” at some point politically from the Leewards to the Windwards, if Aves Island is involved is unclear in most definitions, the affinity of the former Netherlands Antilles islands is either ignored or confused (further so in # 3 below), the U.S. and sometimes the British Virgin Islands are either included or excluded in various definitions, and most references and maps disagree on the boundary between the Leeward and Windward Islands. Just in case this is not confusing enough, [3] Dutch Caribbean, Confusing, Modern Inverted Term – The Dutch in the Caribbean decided to retain the old Spanish definition and place all of the northern Netherlands Antilles in the Windward Islands (St. Eustatius or Statia, St. Maarten, Saba), even though the English system placed the northern ones in the Leeward Islands and ignored the southern ones altogether. They also placed the southern Netherlands Antilles or ABCs (Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao) in the Leeward Islands (Brooks, 1987), although no system did before, and thus they completely inverted the commonly accepted geographic usage. We listed Aruba above as if it were still in the Netherlands Antilles (NA) for convenience; however, it split from the NA in 1986, but more confusingly not from the Netherlands, had planned total independence in 1996, but now, in the typical Caribbean-Dissociative-Identities Disorder, cannot decide. They also toyed with the idea of joining Venezuela, which would at least make some physical geographic sense, as they are the only former ABC on the South American continental shelf. Authors still refer to “St. Martin” as one of the remaining five NA islands (e.g., Algier, 2001), but that name refers to the French half of the island shared by the NA St. Maarten, so there are really only four and a half.

Lesser Antilles – the many small islands bordering the eastern side of the Caribbean Sea from east of Puerto Rico down to northern South America, and including the few islands off northern South America, but none of those off Central America and Mexico. Some definitions omit the Virgin Islands (e.g., Raffaele et al., 1998); others Trinidad and Tobago (e.g., Armstrong, 2021). Often divided into the Leeward and Windward Islands. Current atlases and references do not agree upon the localities and designations of the Leeward and Windward Islands (Tuchman, 1988). Also called “Caribbees” (e.g., Bennett, 1967; Algier, 2001).

Leeward Antilles – Some references thus separate the islands in the Caribbean Sea off South America (except Trinidad and Tobago). The islands off Central America and the Mexican Caribbean appear to have no group name.

Lucayan Archipelago – see Bahama Archipelago

Middle America – one of 13 world geographic realms consisting of Mexico and Central America; the eastern Pacific, the Caribbean Sea, the southern half of the Gulf of Mexico, and the central Atlantic almost to the western bulge of Africa; but excluding the Caribbean Sea coast of South America and its near-shore islands (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Margarita Island, Trinidad, Tobago, etc.) (De Blij and Muller, 1994: p. 4-5; Nijman et al., 2020: p. 72). Cutting the bottom off the Caribbean seems a bit drastic, if not illogical physical geography. The inhabitants of the Cape Verde Islands must be surprised to learn that they are in Middle America. Some definitions omit the Caribbean.

Neotropical Ecozone – [1] a terrestrial ecoregion that includes South America, Central America, the Mexican lowlands, and southern Florida. The exact boundary in Mexico is disputed as is the inclusion of south Florida. The Caribbean is often either excluded or omitted. Sometimes it is shortened to the “Neotropics.” Often used to represent tropical America, but the coverage is more extensive, particularly to the south. Sometimes defined as [2] The New World between the Tropic of Cancer (23.5°N) and Tropic of Capricorn (23.5°S).

Northeast West Indies – Bahamas, Bermuda, and the Turks and Caicos. A subunit of the Caribbean Area (Anonymous, 1997-2007).

Rimland – a subdivision of Middle America containing most of the Caribbean Sea and its islands, most of the Caribbean coast of Central America, and Trinidad and Tobago, but excluding the Bahamas, Turks and Caicos, part of the Caribbean coasts and most of the Caribbean islands off South America and Yucatan, Mexico (Augelli, 1962: p. 119; De Blij and Muller, 1994: p. 5; Nijman et al., 2020: p. 97).

Rum – An alcoholic spirit made of sugar production byproducts (molasses or sugarcane juice) through a process of fermentation and distillation that originated in the Caribbean. The Island Caribbean and the Continental Caribbean rum producers were recently invited to a meeting by the West Indies Rum and Spirits Producers Association (WIRSPA) to resolve their differences but failed to even agree upon the definition of Rum (Madriz Fornos, 2006). Should WIRSPA decide that REAL RUM can only be produced in the Caribbean, just as Champaign can only be made in one province of France, then the definition of the Caribbean may become of particular importance to the producers of “non-rum-sugar-cane spirits” in other regions, such as the Bacardi Corporation in south Florida. Rum was formerly called “kill-devil” or “rumbullion” in the early days before the industry began aging rum to keep it from being almost lethal. Rum must be aged at least one year by law in most countries.

South Coastal Caribbean – Includes the Caribbean islands off the southern half of Central America and South America, but not the coastal continental areas. A subunit of the Caribbean Area (Anonymous, 1997-2007).

Tropical Province – see “Caribbean Province”.

True Coral Reef – there is little agreement among coral experts as to what exactly constitutes a coral reef or when a deteriorating reef ceases to be a “coral reef.” It is a bit like the judge’s designation of pornography “I know it when I see it.” We suggest it is safe to say that any structure with more than 20% stony or hermatypic live coral cover that is accruing a cemented consolidated substructure of coral fragments, sand, etc. is a “true” or “real” coral reef.

Turks and Caicos – A group of 87 islands mostly southeast of the Bahamas (Great Inagua Island, Bahamas, is further south) and northeast of the Christmas and Silver Banks north of the Dominican Republic arranged on the Caicos and Turks Banks. Although they are a natural geological continuation of the series of banks that comprise the Bahamas, they are separate politically (Turks and Caicos Overseas British Territory). They have typically been difficult to characterize geographically since they do not fit in the Caribbean Basin or the Bahamas.

United Nations Geoscheme (UN M.⁴⁹) for the Americas (#019) – makes the Caribbean (#029) an Intermediate Region of North America. It includes the Antilles, Lucayan Archipelago, and the continental coasts and islands.

West Indian Province – The islands from Cuba and the Bahamas to Grenada and the isolated northern island of Bermuda (Briggs, 1995). Other authors use a variety of other definitions.

West Indies – Although this seemed like a useful term, it has fallen out of favor lately, and been replaced with a broader, ill defined, Caribbean. It is defined as the Caribbean and the Bahamas, and probably should include the Turks and Caicos as well (Colin, 1978). Some biogeographical definitions omit the coastal islands and coastal areas of Central and South America (e.g., Bond, 1936; Raffaele et al., 1998; Smith et al., 2005). Hedges’ (1996) definition omits the coastal areas, the southern Netherlands Antilles, Trinidad, and Tobago. The term originated from the British West Indies. A representative at an international meeting once asked us not to use the term “West Indies” because it had colonial connotations. We were too polite to remind them that they worked for the University of the West Indies. Possibly this is another reason to avoid this term.

Windward Islands – Again multiple choice: [1] Spanish, Old, or Nautical Term – the Virgin Islands to Grenada (most of the Lesser Antilles). Although this term has fallen into disfavor; it does make a lot more nautical sense than #2. [2] English, New or Common, Political or Administrative Term that became a Geographic Term – St. Lucia and the more southern Lesser Antilles (see more details in “Leeward Islands” above). [3] Dutch Caribbean, Confusing, Inverted Term – see “Leeward Islands” above.

Yucatán Peninsula – A part of Mexico that separates the Caribbean Sea from the Gulf of Mexico (Fig. 1). Coral reefs exist off the Gulf of Mexico coast of Yucatan, but these are smaller and more isolated than those off the Caribbean Sea coast (Cortés, 2003). These and other physical differences justify our Caribbean border at the boundary between the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico in the Yucatán Peninsula.

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