

# EAG TALK

THE ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS GROUP

## Crochet for a Cause - Ridge to Reef Project



By Natalya Lawrence – GEF Small Grants Programme National Coordinator

The art of crocheting, generally passed down by grandmothers to their children and grandchildren, has seen a recent resurgence in popularity. From exquisite dresses, to stuffed toys, the skill has become quite creative in its product offerings.

Through the “Crochet for a Cause – Ridge to Reef” project, funded by GEF Small Grants Programme UNDP (GEF SGP-UNDP) – Barbados, the passion for crocheting was harnessed for a unique and noteworthy cause – Coral Reef Conservation. How? The project, led by Mrs Nikisha Toppin of Elaine’s Caribbean Crochet,



and with the support of BYBT, engages a team of crochet artists to create pieces, replicating coral reef ecosystems. These are all put together and displayed for

educational purposes, as people learn about the reef systems and their importance to humans for health, recreation, livelihood, and overall well-being.

Antigua and Barbuda was one of two countries selected as part of a South-South Cooperation, where a team of crocheters from Barbados would mentor local persons to create their own replica coral reef ecosystem. On April 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, a two-day workshop was held at, and with the support of the National Public Library. This workshop saw the participation from both Antigua and Barbuda of 40 local crochet artists with a range of experience.

As I stepped into the room, a wave of awe, intimidation, and sadness momentarily swept over me. Awe by the talent that had gathered in the conference room. Intimidation, because, like Nikisha, my grandmother

had taught me the skill when I was much younger. Unlike Nikisha and many others in the room, I had not crocheted in a long while and was uncertain of my capabilities. Sadness, because my grandmother passed away earlier this year. The last thing she gifted me was a crocheted coaster, that she deftly put together as we sat watching her favourite television show. Often as we sat and I listened to her talk, she would be crocheting, just as fast as she was talking.

The workshop began with a warm welcome from Nikisha, who explained the motivation for the entire initiative, and the inspiration behind Elaine's Caribbean Crochet, her late grandmother, Elaine. I was pleased to give a brief address on GEF SGP – UNDP in Antigua and Barbuda and thanked the visiting team for bringing the initiative to our shores. Mr. Ruleo Camacho, Marine Ecologist at the National Parks Authority, gave a detailed and interesting presentation on coral reef systems in Antigua and Barbuda. He covered topics such as what exactly is coral, the species of coral found here, the distribution of coral reefs, threats to coral reef systems, including coral bleaching due to global warming, overfishing, and the introduction of invasive alien species. He also spoke about fish and other sea creatures that were found on the reef, and very importantly, he linked the health of coral reef ecosystems to human well-being. To wrap up the opening ceremony, there was also an address from the National Public Library representative Ms Maleyny Dessi of MelzCrochet.

With hooks and yarn collected, the participants were paired with mentors from Barbados, the youngest mentor being only eleven years old! Expert crocheters swept through the first as-





signment of creating pieces of lettuce coral, and even crocheted additional pieces. Not to be left behind, the newer crocheters and rusty ones like me, were guided patiently through several re-dos until we too, had successfully completed our first coral piece. Over the two days of the workshop, the replica reef system came to life as other pieces to include other coral species, fish, shells, turtles, and sea stars (starfish) were craftily stitched.

As I sat and tried my hand at the task before me, I



listened contentedly to the soft chatter among the participants. "I've been crocheting for years, and I never thought about doing anything like

this. This is amazing!" "I crochet dresses, but this is surely something I would like to take up." "The presentation on coral reefs was very in-

formative. I never knew just how important they were. I am very glad that through this, I can help raise awareness." It was all positive. The participants were simultaneously learning about reef conservation and contributing to it through their art. Additionally, participants were equipped with the skills and tools to create a variety of items, gaining new possibilities of economic empowerment through the sale of the items.

On 13<sup>th</sup> April, a presentation was made at the Living Hope Christian Union Church on Wireless Road, and church members were treated to a view of the Barbados crochet exhibit, which the team had on display at the Antigua Public Library. The crocheted coral reef created by Antigua and Barbuda crocheters was handed over to the Department of Culture and will be displayed at other sites soon.

The GEF SGP UNDP is conducting this project in partnership with the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Community Empowerment, and Ministry of Environment and National Beautification, Green and Blue Economy Barbados. The project facilitated by Elaine's Caribbean Crochet, in collaboration with BYBT is in its second year of implementation.