



Peach Beach, St Ann  
Photo: Jamaica Environment Trust

# BETTER BEACHES FOR JAMAICANS

## Islandwide Beach Survey 2019



### Message from the Jamaica Environment Trust (JET)

There has long been a perception that Jamaicans are being excluded from their own coastline, as tourism development increasingly controls what are considered to be Jamaica's best beaches. Under Jamaican law, there is no general right of access to beaches, and coastal developments often restrict public access to beaches adjacent to their property. Meanwhile, Jamaican beaches which are open to the public often suffer from inadequate sanitation and other environmental threats. Many beach users also demonstrate poor knowledge, attitudes and practices.

The Jamaica Environment Trust (JET) has been working on beach health and beach access issues for over two decades, starting with our involvement in the Government of Jamaica (GOJ) consultation process towards completing a beach

policy in 1997. JET has also worked with communities displaced by various types of coastal development and has educated Jamaicans about good beach stewardship and the laws governing access to beaches. JET has been particularly involved with beaches managed by communities, either formally or informally, conducting workshops and public education projects to improve community management of public beaches.

The most recent of JET's projects on beaches is the Better Beaches for Jamaicans Project (Phase I: 2016-2017; Phase II: 2018-2021), which is funded by the Irwin Andrew Porter Foundation.

Through the Better Beaches for Jamaicans Phase II, between November 2018 and May 2019, JET and its local partners conducted an islandwide survey of 132 publicly accessible beaches in Jamaica to assess their ecological health and management status.

## How we conducted the survey

The objective of JET's beach survey was to determine the status of publicly accessible beaches in Jamaica, including available facilities, management arrangements, existing infrastructure, accessibility and to summarize the environmental and other management challenges.

The survey was developed by JET in October 2018 with technical support from the Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide (ELAW). Ten local partners helped JET conduct the islandwide survey including beach clean-up coordinators, service clubs, academic institutions, NGOs and community-based organisations.

The field work aimed to cover the 86 public beaches designated under Jamaican law as listed by the National Environment and Planning Agency (NEPA) in January 2017<sup>1</sup>, as well as another 40 or more publicly accessible beaches recommended by our survey partners. All parishes were represented in the survey, with Portland having the highest number of publicly accessible beaches (16.7%) and Manchester the lowest (3%).

Three of the 86 designated public beaches listed by NEPA could not be found (Mezgars Run and Cooper's Pen in St. Thomas and Greenwood Beach in St. James), and one did not want to be surveyed (Sailor's Hole in St. Ann). Despite these challenges, at the end of the field work in May 2019, JET and its local partners had surveyed 132 publicly accessible Jamaican beaches.

One limitation of the survey was there was insufficient investigation of Jamaica's fishing beaches. Some of Jamaica's public beaches are designated as both bathing beaches and fishing beaches and the two categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. These beaches tend to present resource conflicts between the activities of fishing and swimming, which can have impacts on access, safety and pollution for bathers. Only 47 of Jamaica's 121 designated fishing beaches were covered by the survey. Additional research is needed to determine the management regime in place for Jamaica's fishing beaches.

At the time of the survey and for purposes of comparison with the number of publicly accessible beaches, there were 275 beaches associated with guest houses and villas and 61 hotel beaches.

### Jamaican Beaches by numbers

132

**Publicly accessible beaches surveyed by JET**  
(including 82 of the 86 designated public beaches)

86

**Public (bathing) beaches designated under Jamaican Law**

121

**Fishing beaches designated under Jamaican Law**

275

**Beaches associated with guest houses and villas**

61

**Hotel beaches**

## A (very brief) summary of beach access, policy and conservation issues in Jamaica

According to NEPA, in 2017 Jamaica had 86 public bathing beaches, designated under law for the use and enjoyment of the Jamaican people. These beaches are (or should be) governed by beach licenses, issued under the Beach Control Act of 1956. There are also several beaches which are regarded as "publicly accessible" but have not been officially designated as public beaches by the Government of Jamaica.

The two principal laws concerning beach access in Jamaica are the Beach Control Act and the Prescription Act.

The Beach Control Act vests all rights of the foreshore (area between the high and low tide marks) in the Crown (the government) but preserves the rights of those having a registered title over the foreshore prior to 1956 and those of fishermen who acquire rights by prescription. The public has unrestricted access only to those beaches which have been declared to be 'public recreational beaches' pursuant to Section 52 of the Beach Control Act and upon payment of a fee, if a fee has been set. Contrary to common belief, there is no free right of access to Jamaican beaches by the general public. The public may, however, claim the right of unrestricted access under Section 4 of the Prescription Act, where a right of access for twenty years has been established unless that access was granted by deed or in writing by a landowner.

<sup>1</sup> NEPA (2017) Beaches of Jamaica: Access and Rights.

[https://www.nepa.gov.jm/new/media\\_centre/news/articles/Beach\\_Access\\_in\\_Jamaica.pdf](https://www.nepa.gov.jm/new/media_centre/news/articles/Beach_Access_in_Jamaica.pdf)

The Beach Control Authority was established by the 1956 Act, and along with the Fisheries Division, sought to ensure that beach properties were reserved for public recreational and fishing use and properly managed by state agencies or private sector interests. Lack of funding over decades, however, resulted in public beaches falling into a state of disrepair, particularly after Hurricane Gilbert in 1988. A survey of the state of public beaches in 1997/8, concluded that only 17% of Jamaica's public beaches met minimum acceptable safety standards, and the rest were either in a state of disrepair or have no facilities on site. In 1991 the Beach Control Authority was absorbed into Jamaica's statutory authority with responsibility for the environment, the Natural Resources Conservation Authority (NRCA) which currently administers the Beach Control Act.

There is currently no national policy guiding the protection and management of public beaches in Jamaica. A Beach Policy for Jamaica: A policy for the management of the beach, foreshore and floor of the sea was first drafted in 1997 and updated in 2000 but has not been approved by Cabinet. The GOJ's current stated intention is to implement the Beach Access and Management Policy, which was submitted to Cabinet in 2016 and is still awaiting approval.

Despite the absence of an overarching national beach policy, the NRCA is currently guided by the National Coastal Management and Beach Restoration Guidelines (2017), and Jamaica's Ministry of Tourism is embarking on an islandwide programme to upgrade Jamaican public beaches.

Publicly accessible beaches are not only natural assets, but important sources of livelihoods for many Jamaicans, affording communities opportunities for income generation via cook shops, water sports, fishing, vending and other recreational activities.

Threats to Jamaica's beaches include beach erosion, theft of sand, coastal development (both legal and illegal), informal and unregulated settlements, removal or degradation of important natural resources (mangroves, beach vegetation, seagrasses, for example), pollution by solid waste and/or poorly treated sewage, poaching of threatened wildlife, and over-fishing. Jamaican beaches are also increasingly experiencing large influxes of Sargassum seaweed, which poses a significant management and conservation challenge. Many beach users also demonstrate poor knowledge, attitudes and practices. Visitors are careless with solid waste and damage beaches' ecological features by removing coral, destroying mangroves, and harming wildlife, etc. Poor sanitation practices are also common.



Rocky Point, Clarendon  
Photo: Caribbean Coastal Area Management Foundation



Rocky Point, Clarendon  
Photo: Jamaica Environment Trust



Lime Cay, Kingston  
Photo: Jamaica Environment Trust

# The Survey Results

The following section provides a snapshot of our beach survey findings. The complete results, including profiles of each of the 132 beaches we surveyed can be found online at [www.bigupwibeachja.org](http://www.bigupwibeachja.org)

## 1 Publicly accessible beaches provide income generating opportunities for communities

Most beaches had some level of commercial activity – approximately one-third had no evidence of commercial activity. Beaches were most used on Sundays (47%) and less used during the week. Beach parties were an important type of commercial activity with many beaches having events 3-5 times per year, on public holidays or on weekends, as reported by 37% of respondents. The sale of food is also common, especially fish – 41.7% reported fish vending on the beach.

## 2 Licensing, ownership and management arrangements need more transparency and outreach by Authorities

At 50% of the beaches surveyed it was not clear what the licensing, management or ownership arrangements were. 33% of the beaches were identified as being owned by the Jamaican government, most commonly a parish council or the Urban Development Corporation (UDC). Communities were involved in managing almost 29% of beaches and less than half (40%) were thought to have the required beach permits/licenses.

**Table 1. Ownership and Management of Publicly Accessible Jamaican Beaches\***

No. beaches	OWNED BY	No. beaches	MANAGED BY
10	Unnamed GOJ agency	1	Unnamed GOJ agency
12	Named GOJ Agency	3	Named GOJ Agency
17	Urban Development Corporation	7	Urban Development Corporation
17	Parish Council	9	Parish Council
3	National Land Agency	0	National Land Agency
16	NEPA/NRCA/Beach Control Authority	0	NEPA/NRCA/Beach Control Authority
11	Named NGO**/CBO***	20	Named NGO**/CBO***
15	Named individual	19	Named individual
6	Named private sector company	8	Named private sector company
8	Unknown	21	Unknown/not managed

\*There were several cases where no response was given to this survey question

\*\*NGO – Non-governmental organization

\*\*\*CBO – Community Based Organization

### 3 Most publicly accessible beaches do not charge an entrance fee

A high proportion of the beaches surveyed did not charge an entrance fee, but a few (14%) required payment for the use of facilities – toilets, changing rooms, lockers, showers. Charges for facilities ranged between \$50-\$300, but most beaches reported only basic facilities – more than half had no toilets at all. Some beaches only charged for facilities on public holidays. Most beaches allowed beach visitors to bring their own food, and almost 70% reported cooking being allowed on the beach. Alcohol use and smoking were permitted on most beaches surveyed.

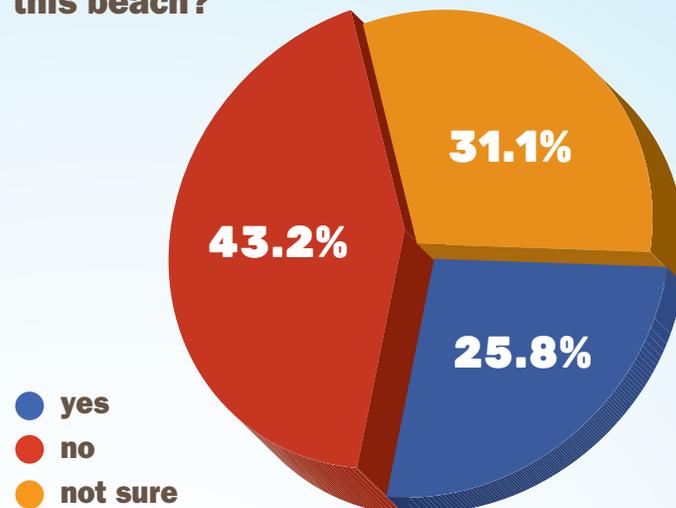
### 4 Safety precautions are inadequate at most publicly accessible beaches

There was no lifeguard station at over 80% of beaches surveyed, and 75% had no warning signs. Some beaches reported having a lifeguard without a station, but this is less than satisfactory, as unless the lifeguard is located in a particular place on the beach, during an emergency he or she may not be easily found. Less than 20% of the beaches surveyed were known to present swimming dangers, however, it is possible that beaches with known swimming dangers are less likely to be declared public bathing beaches.

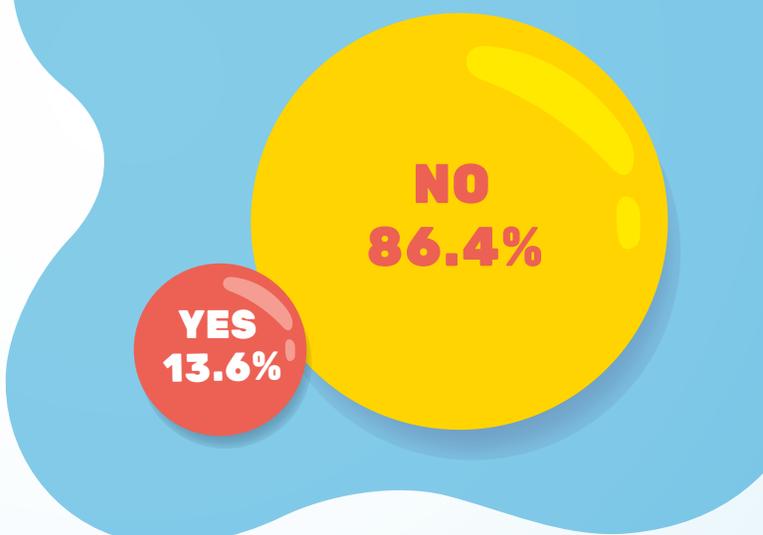
### 5 Informal settlements, harassment and crime

Although the 1997/8 survey identified informal settlement as a problem on Jamaican public beaches, only 28% of the beaches surveyed were reported to have people living on the beach, and almost 70% had no identifiable informal settlements. Harassment was not seen to be an issue, but it is possible that requests to purchase services may not always be considered 'harassment'. Crime was reported as a problem at 18% of the beaches.

### Are there any licenses/permits associated with this beach?



### Is there an entrance fee to access the beach?



## 6 Sanitation inadequate on most public beaches

Although over 70% of respondents reported garbage collection by either the National Solid Waste Management Authority (NSWMA) or a private contractor, 45% said there were no garbage bins on the beach. This suggests that storage arrangements for garbage were inadequate. This notwithstanding, few beaches were scored as “Very Dirty” and just over 33% were assessed as “Very Clean”. Burning of garbage was the method of waste disposal on 18% of the beaches surveyed. Once there is some management in place, beaches are regularly cleared of solid waste, so despite less than optimal garbage collection and infrastructure, public beaches are not typically dirty. Over half of beaches had either no wastewater management at all or soakaway pits.

Despite the less than satisfactory sanitation infrastructure and services at public beaches, the most common use of the beach was for bathing (75%) and at most beaches (77%) there was no reported evidence of marine pollution near to the shore. At the beaches where there was a concern about water pollution (21%) the main evidence was algae blooms and garbage. Water quality monitoring was reported to be taking place at only 25% of the beaches surveyed.

## 7 Moderate awareness of natural features, beach erosion is most noticeable

Very few beaches (4%) were reported to have abundant beach vegetation – almost half of the surveyed beaches (45%) reported less than 30% coverage. Evidence of the vegetation being cleared regularly was only observed at 9% of the beaches, so it is likely that beach vegetation was removed in the past. Dogs were the most common animals seen on beaches. Turtle nesting was reported at 24% of the beaches, and of that figure, 51% reportedly had no poaching of turtles. Most beaches were reported to have fine sand texture (71%), some seagrass visible in the nearshore (39%), but no easily identifiable sand dunes (67%). Evidence of beach erosion was reported at 40% of the beaches, assessed by exposed tree roots or a building being closer to the sea than it used to be.

**Table 2. Existing Sewage/Wastewater Management at Publicly Accessible Jamaican Beaches**

On-site sewage/wastewater treatment plant which discharges into the environment	2.3%
On-site sewage/wastewater treatment plant which discharges into a central sewage line	8.3%
Soak-away pit	28%
Septic tank	3%
Raw sewage/wastewater discharged directly into the environment	2.3%
No sewage/wastewater management necessary	26.5%
Not sure	24.2%
Other	5.4%

### Is water quality being monitored at this beach?

- yes
- no
- not sure

25%

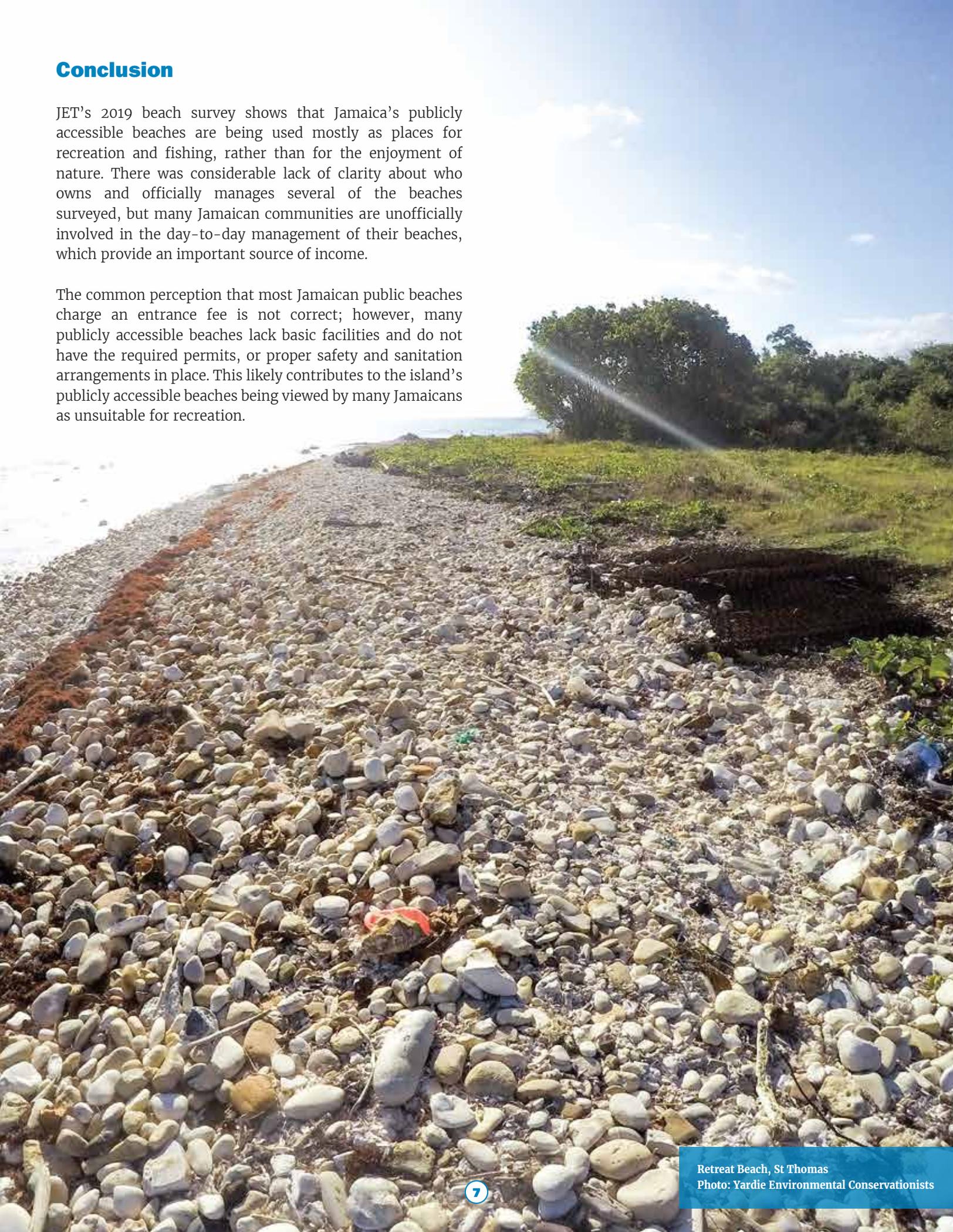
27.3%

47.7%

## Conclusion

JET's 2019 beach survey shows that Jamaica's publicly accessible beaches are being used mostly as places for recreation and fishing, rather than for the enjoyment of nature. There was considerable lack of clarity about who owns and officially manages several of the beaches surveyed, but many Jamaican communities are unofficially involved in the day-to-day management of their beaches, which provide an important source of income.

The common perception that most Jamaican public beaches charge an entrance fee is not correct; however, many publicly accessible beaches lack basic facilities and do not have the required permits, or proper safety and sanitation arrangements in place. This likely contributes to the island's publicly accessible beaches being viewed by many Jamaicans as unsuitable for recreation.



## Thanks to our survey partners!

- Alligator Head Foundation, Portland
- Bluefields Bay Fishermen's Friendly Society, Westmoreland
- Caribbean Coastal Area Management Foundation, Clarendon
- Duncans Bay Citizens Association, Trelawny
- Maryland All Age and Infant School, Hanover
- Montego Bay Marine Park Trust, St. James
- Oracabessa Marine Trust, St. Mary
- St. Elizabeth Parish Development Committee, St. Elizabeth
- Treasure Beach Women's Group Benevolent Society, St. Elizabeth
- Yardie Environmental Conservationists

Duncans Bay, Trelawny  
Photo: Duncans Bay Citizens Association

**The Better Beaches for  
Jamaicans Islandwide  
Beach Survey was  
spearheaded by JET with  
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**Jamaica  
Environment  
Trust**

Jamaica Environment Trust is a non-profit, non-governmental (NGO) membership organization and registered charity which focuses on environmental education and advocacy.



**The Irwin  
Andrew Porter  
Foundation**

The Irwin Andrew Porter Foundation is a US family foundation with a mission to fund innovative projects that foster connections between individuals, communities, the environment and the world at large.



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